

Report on Participation in [Overseas Field Research]

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This is my first time to Thailand. I think it is a great experience, as Thailand is a very comfortable country and the lectures, field trips and workshops in Thailand provide us with a good opportunity not only to gain the basic knowledge of Thailand and other ASEAN countries, but also to explore more about the cultures and society of Thailand.

The content of this field trip is abundant and fruitful. During this 10-day field trip, we visited Chiang Mai and Bangkok, two major cities in Thailand and enjoy the historical and natural views; we also visited international organizations and Thai local companies and farms, knowing the main challenges and opportunities that ASEAN region is facing; we also visited Chiang Mai University, Thammasat University and Chulalongkorn University, three top universities in Thailand, communicated with students there and had very impressive lectures and workshops at these universities.

I really benefited a lot from this trip. First, I learned the overall of current Thai economy. Second, I gained a comparative perspective of economic development between China and Thailand. Lastly, the field trip also provided me with some fruitful insights and new prospective for my research proposal.

1. Understanding Thai economy

In our field trip to Thammasat University, Professor Chanin Mephokee provided an excellent lecture about Thai Economic Outlook, through which I gained a deep understanding of Thai economy. Thailand is a newly industrialized country and is the biggest economy in the Great Mekong sub-region. Thailand is heavily dependent on exports and tourism. The main exports include agricultural goods (such as rice and corn), latex, manufacturing goods (such as electrical appliances and automotive).

However, Thailand is predicted to have a low GDP growth rate of 3.5%¹ in 2018. Due to uncertainties over trade policy and political risks, Thai private investment is very low and domestic consumption also grows at a low rate. Further, there exists an excess supply in real estate sector in Thailand, which poses a huge potential risk of financial crisis for Thai economy if the real estate sector collapse. Moreover, the most serious risk in Thailand is political risk, which could be regarded as the fundamental determinants of the relative poor performance of Thai economy and low level of income per capita of Thai people. Corruption is pervasive and democracy level is low in Thailand, which caused serious inequality problems in Thailand. Inequality exists in income distribution, education, land distribution and other aspects of lives. It is astonishing to see that only 10% of Thai elite classes possess 90% of land in Thailand.

In China, corruption is also a serious problem and democracy level is also low. However, China experienced rapid economic growth in recent decades. My master's thesis also focuses on China's institutional quality, human capital and economic development. China and Thailand both have a relatively low level of institutional quality, but why China achieved great success rather than Thailand? This is an interesting question to be explored in the future research. From my point of view, compared with China, low level of human capital is a possible explanation for Thai and other ASEAN countries' poor economic performances.

2. The sustainability of Thai and the Great Mekong sub-region economy.

On the first day of our field trip, we visited Chiang Mai University, where we were given a lecture about

“Sustainability issues on the Mekong River” from Dr. Chayan Vaddhanaphuti, a famous expert on sustainable development problems of the ASEAN region.

Thailand is also experiencing transitions and changes in economy since the emergence of Great Mekong Sub-region. The transitions and changes include agricultural transformation, regional integration, urbanization and even family structure. Through this lecture, I learned that connectivity and economic cooperation play a vital role in promoting sustainable development in the Greater Mekong region. Meanwhile, China is also exposing more influence on promoting economic development in the region since the “One Belt One Road” initiative and the establishment of Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.

In order to promote economic cooperation and sustainable development in the region, trade & investment and regional integration are also of great significance. Our visit to the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) clearly gave us a comprehensive understanding of the importance of trade and investment in the region and how to make most use of FDI during the integration for the ASEAN region. International organizations like ESCAP will definitely play a more important role in promoting economic development and economic integration in the region, as they can provide suggestions for foreign investors about the business and trade environment of the country. In addition, they may offer trainings for local low-skilled labor force and advice for local government’s policy makers.

Another potential source of sustainability in the Mekong region lies in the tourism. Apart from famous historical and natural tourism sites in Thailand, our visit to the Tribal museum and Wynyard Winery Valley made me realize that Thailand also has so many agri-tourism resources. Nevertheless, Thailand must improve the quality of infrastructure and service in the tourism sector in order to explore its maximal potential for promoting economic development.

4. The impact of the program on my career plan.

As I have always been interested in the developing countries and sustainable development issues, it is my dream to work in an international organization such as ESCAP. Our visit to the ESCAP provided me with a good opportunity to understand daily work of ESCAP staffs and the basic requirements to work at such an organization. In addition to academic knowledge, a willing heart and devotion to improving welfare of poor people are more important factors to work in an international organization to fight with poverty and discrimination.

5. Conclusion

Overall, this is an excellent field trip, from which I gained not only academic perspective for Thai economy and my own research, but also a valuable experience to make a presentation at foreign university. My horizon has been broadened through this international field trip experience. Thanks for East Asia Economic Sustainable Development program and Kyoto University for organizing such a field trip.

¹ Based on lecture notes of Professor Mephokee.