Designated Project Leader Name: Kyle Greenspan
Sponsoring College: Pitzer College
Country Where Project Will Take Place: Thailand
Date Range of Project Execution: May 24th to August 6th, 2022
Project Title: Linking the Chain of Upward Mobility: Reducing Political Conflict in Thailand by Teaching Students How to Read Thai

Background and Need

Isaan is Thailand's poorest, most populous, and largest region. During my time spent as an English teacher in one Isaan village, I observed a vicious cycle of poverty. My primary objective was to impart some of my English language skills, but these efforts were undermined by a more fundamental language barrier. According to Kittichai, the director of Kamplapha Natawee School where I volunteered, 28% of my elementary school students could not read Thai, a figure that is relatively low compared to Isaan as a whole. Furthermore, if a student still cannot read Thai after three out of six years of high school, they stop attending. Allegedly half of all students in Isaan do not graduate from high school because they cannot read Thai. In noticing these local economic challenges, I also identified attainable solutions. In my view and the view of those who I taught with in Isaan, the linchpin of upward mobility is teaching these elementary school students how to read Thai so they can graduate from high school. There is no existing infrastructure in the elementary school system to teach students how to read Thai if they haven't learned in their families.

Three types of division distinguish Isaan from the rest of Thailand: persistent socioeconomic division, historical ethnic division, and emerging political division. First, the socioeconomic divide between Isaan and the other regions of Thailand is evident in figures of income inequality. The average per capita monthly income of a Bangkok resident is more than double an Isaan resident's income. This is the result of disproportionate investment in the industrialization of Bangkok and the central regions of Thailand. Second, historical ethnic divisions still divide Isaan from the rest of Thailand. In 1893, the Franco-Siamese War split the Laos people along the boundary of the Mekong River, creating the Khon Isaan ethno-regional identity. This ethnic group bears anti-Bangkok sentiment due to socioeconomic division and numerous removals of their elected officials from office. This animosity has stoked a belief amongst some Bangkok and central Thailand residents that they are superior Thais or more sophisticated than rural-dwelling Isaan people. Finally, the people of Isaan have developed a political consciousness resulting from migratory labor and a pro-democracy movement. While Isaan contains the largest group of eligible voters in Thailand, continuous political turmoil has victimized their chosen leadership. In 15 years, the country saw three constitutions, two military coups, and seven changes of government due to the conflict between Yellow Shirt royalists and Red Shirt pro-democracy protestors.

Future political conflict and bloodshed in Thailand can be prevented by supporting the people of Isaan in transitioning their perceived identity from unsophisticated peasants to cosmopolitan villagers. This goal will be most successfully achieved by teaching as many Isaan elementary students as possible to read Thai in order to link the chain of upward mobility.

Strategy Overview

Linking the Chain of Upward Mobility will establish a prototypical model for the project at Kamplapha Natawee School, which can then be implemented at schools throughout Isaan. In order to do so, the Davis Projects for Peace funds will be used to pay existing teachers and community members. The annual salary for a teacher at this school is approximately $2,300 USD. Based on this information and the share of students who cannot read Thai, I will recommend that two teachers are hired for the job. One teacher for grades 1-3 and another teacher for grades 4-6. The cost of this portion of the project will be approximately $960 (further enumerated in the budget).

Shortly after my arrival in May, Kittichai and I will gather teachers and community members for a weekend-long workshop to brainstorm ideas for the Thai literacy program. The folks at the workshop will know the needs of their kids far better than I, and this is where I will make the recommendation above. The primary objectives of this workshop will be to develop a curriculum for both age groups, identify individuals to hire for the teaching positions, and identify the students who need the Thai literacy course included in their enrollment. The responsibility to bring the process from workshop ideation to students learning in the classroom will be held by myself, Kittichai, and our two newly hired teachers.

After the Thai literacy classes have started at Kamplapha Natawee School, Kittichai and I will turn the focus of the project to other schools in Isaan. Through his contacts, we will reach out to the community of educators in the region. I expect this will involve a combination phone calls and in-person visits, with broader outreach done by social media and email campaigns. Over the weekends, we will host short conferences for interested administrators, teachers, and community members to share the progress of the pilot school and offer support to start their own programs following the Kamplapha model. These open forum conferences will be followed by additional workshops like the original for specific schools and villages interested in starting a program, dedicated to fact-finding and tailoring the model for each school and community. I will work with English-speaking administrators at each interested school until their students are in the classroom learning how to read Thai. I intend to initiate the program at a total of seven schools this summer.

Feasibility and Continuity

The most difficult part of this project will be the fact that I do not possess the language skills that the students need to learn. Instead, my connections and relationships with community members will be my project's greatest strength. I have obtained pre-approval for this summer from Kittichai, the director of Kamplapha's school. I have also enlisted the support of Mundo Exchange, the stateside-based nonprofit that connected me to my initial volunteering opportunity, which can provide further connections in the community through their local base of operations.

The continuity of this project will be ensured twofold. First, I believe the success of these traditionally disadvantaged students will generate further community support. I hope to inspire volunteer teachers with the necessary language skills, who could each donate a day per week. Second, I will attract new funding from government programs, NGOs, and individuals through my outreach including written posts and photography on the project's website. Davis Projects for Peace can provide the necessary catalyst to demonstrate the success of teaching these students how to read Thai.

Linking the Chain of Upward Mobility: Preliminary Budget

Expenses (*all costs converted from Thai Baht to USD*) (*all salary items are best available estimates based on information from school director*)	Amount
Teacher Salaries	
Annual teacher's salary	$2300
Monthly salary for one teacher	$192
x2 teachers for 2.5 months (*i.e. cost for one school for the summer*)	$960
Total cost for teacher salaries at <u>seven</u> target schools (*all schools receive 10 weeks of funding regardless of start date during the summer*)	**+$6,720**
Transportation	**+$1,419**
Round trip international airfare: PDX ←→ BKK	$1352
Round trip domestic airfare: DMK ←→ UTH	$49
Round trip ground transportation: Udon Thani ←→ Bueng Kan	$18
Personal Expenses	**+947**
Travel health insurance through World Nomads	$467
Living expenses (primarily room and board) *I will pay myself according to the teacher's salary, using this as a measure of the cost of living in the region.*	$480
Total Projected Expenses	**=$9,086**
Remaining funds available *The remaining funds will be used for educational supplies required by the students and teachers. For example, when I taught at Kamplapha Natawee School, every student had their own vocabulary and phrase book. Any remaining balance at the conclusion of the summer will be given to Kittchai for the continuity of the project.*	$914