

Thailand Ties

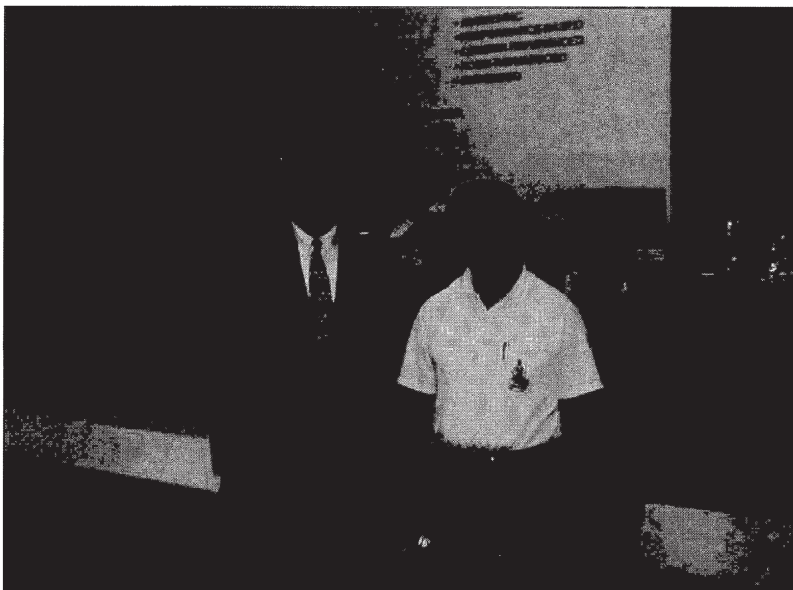
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One of the resolutions I witnessed moving forward at the Summer 2006 National Congress on Science Education in Toronto, Canada involved expanding our learning through international collaborations. The Congress encouraged National Science Teacher Association affiliates to make an effort to connect with educators in other countries in order to both learn and share ideas and issues facing the science education community. With the already large numbers of students from other cultures in many school systems in the United States and the increasing quality of students coming out of science programs in other countries, it has become imperative that we better understand other approaches to science education as well as share our best practices with others striving to improve their science education programs.

So, as president of the Illinois Science Teachers Association, in August 2006, at the invitation of the U.S. Department of State, I agreed to travel to Thailand to learn about Thai culture and their educational system, and to share some ideas and approaches that are proving worthwhile here in the United States. The trip was coordinated through the U.S. Embassy in Bangkok. While it was an exciting proposal, I also wanted to know what was expected of me. My first questions were:

- What is the length of stay in Thailand?
- What does the agenda look like?
- What do you expect me to do during this trip?

The plan was for me to arrive in Bangkok on Sunday, August 20, 2006 and to return to the United States on Sunday, August 27. After a 20 hour plus airplane flight that included a stop in Anchorage, Alaska to take on more fuel because of a heavier than expected load and stronger than expected headwinds, and a change of planes in Hong Kong, I arrived at the hotel in Bangkok at 12:30 AM on



Ray with his interpreter after one of his talks in Bangkok.

Sunday morning. Trying to sleep on an airplane during such a long flight proved difficult, but I must have gotten enough rest to sustain me because I was able to see a bit of Bangkok later that day before going over my presentations for the upcoming week.

The agenda for the trip included presentations at three universities/schools across Thailand and meal functions with science educators and government ministry of education officials. My guides and travel planners were Dr. Anne Cunningham and Ann Preeyawan Sakornyen of the U.S. Embassy in Bangkok. They graciously informed me of cultural

proprieties, accompanied me on my travels throughout the country, acted as interpreters, and insured my psychological comfort during my stay in Thailand.

Early Monday morning, accompanied by my embassy colleagues, I flew out of Bangkok to Chiang Mai in northern Thailand. The agenda for the day included three different ninety minute presentations to university professors of science and science education, administrators, and some graduate students at Chiang Mai University. The first two presentations, “How to identify gifted students in science and math” and “Assessment of student performance in science and mathematics,” were delivered in the morning to the audience of seventy-five respectful listeners. Questions posed included:

- What criteria does the Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy use to admit its student body?
- What are some examples of performance demonstrations of student understanding?

During the morning break and a special luncheon, I had the chance to talk with university participants. They shared the history and background of Chiang Mai University and stories of dedication and persistence of their students. The afternoon presentation focused on “Science and mathematics curriculum: structures and development.”

A short plane ride back to Bangkok allowed me to prepare for the two days of similar presentations on Tuesday and Wednesday to audiences of 200-plus attendees at the Mahidol Wittayanusorn School in Bangkok. These presentations also included, “The big pictures of science and math education of gifted students both at the national and state (Illinois) levels and administration and support from federal and state governments,” “Academic standards for science and mathematics,” and “Professional development in science and mathematics.”

That Wednesday evening we flew to southern Thailand to Prince of Songkla University in Hat Yai where I once again made three ninety minute presentations on Thursday to one hundred participants on some of the previous topics. As much of the week was filled with preparation and presentation, I took full advantage of peering out of the airplane window to view the long stretch of eastern coastline on the Thailand peninsula along the Gulf of Thailand on the way to Hat Yai. I was pretty well exhausted upon returning to Bangkok on Thursday evening. Thankfully, recognizing that I had to catch a plane back to the US on Saturday morning, the only event scheduled for me was a two hour interview with some local journalists on Friday. This respite provided me the time to do a little souvenir shopping before packing for the trip home.



Ray and a US Embassy colleague pose in front of one of the beautiful and historic Thai sites.

The people that I got to know best, besides my embassy colleagues, were the individuals who interpreted my presentations for the participants. It did not take very long before we were able to communicate in subtle ways to convey meaning across the languages. At one point during a presentation, my interpreter, Dr. Thanit Pewnim, gave me a quizzical look as he attempted to rephrase my comments to the audience. Upon rewording my statements to him, along with what I hoped to be useful hand and arm gestures and facial contortions, he relayed his interpretation to the participants. His response drew a chorus of laughter. I'm not exactly sure he had extracted the meaning of my words as I didn't think I had said anything funny. But generally, communication was not a problem.

The issues that appeared to be of most interest to the Thai educators and officials with whom I spoke involved providing a quality science and mathematics education for more than just the children of the most affluent families in the country. Limited resources restrict the number of students who might benefit from exposure to high quality science and math experiences. There was also interest in inquiry teaching and learning approaches. There was great interest in the Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy's Excellence 2000 + program. This after-school program offers such experiences to middle school students through units taught by teachers from their own schools. Students are invited to be accepted into the program. Teachers take part in professional development sessions that support the teacher's explorations into inquiry teaching and learning in problem-centered contexts that incorporate integrated subject matter led by Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy professional development specialists

The cooperation and understandings that were born on this trip have fostered further collaborations between Thailand and the United States. Preliminary plans are underway to host Dr. Pewnim and two colleagues for a visit to the Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy during the spring of 2007. This visit has spawned new ideas and promise for both educational communities. It is now time to move forward using what we share with and learn from other cultures.

Even though Ray was kept very busy giving numerous presentations about science education in the US and Illinois, he still found time to take in some of the local Thai sites and to enjoy the trip as a tourist.

