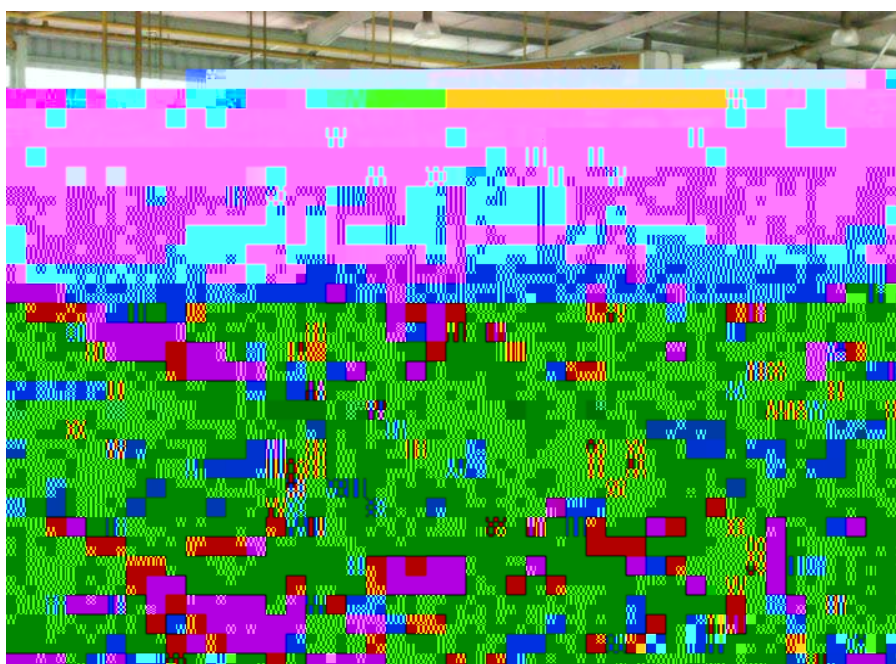


Education in Singapore, and what I learned

readings, and discussed about the contents during class. As this course was based on Southeast Asian studies, many students, although not all, had Southeast Asian backgrounds in their majors. This led to very high-level discussions in the class and in group projects. However, those like myself who did not major in anthropology and Southeast Asian studies were not left out, since the readings were plenty enough for acquiring basic knowledge, and the professors were always ready to offer help. Students were also helpful, and the ones experienced in anthropology would lead the group and discussion in projects.

But this was not the only interaction we had with the international students. At the NUS, we were given rooms at the dorm called Prince Georges Park Residence, or the PGP, on the edge of the NUS campus. The students and the TA on the course were given rooms on the same floor. So every morning you would meet each other, eat breakfast together, and go on for a drink, at times. Staying with all these people for 2 weeks made me informed with a lot I never knew about the Danish, English, and American, some which I can't describe here. If not for this course and this 2 weeks, I don't think I would have come to know that the Danish have a custom to go into the shower together. Or was I just cheated?

If someone would make a plan to go clubbing, or play football, or anything, everyone interested would just pop out, and go out together. The time spent in the PGP was a very enjoyable one, and something I believe very unique to this course, where you spend a whole 6 weeks together on the same course.



On our visit to a hawker center (a public food stalls)

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4. Anthropology in Southeast Asia

As I have said, your ethnicity is something that comes out strongly when confronted with other ethnic groups. And that is why Southeast Asia, a place with multiple and very diverse ethnic groups, is the ideal place to go on a field study for traces of ethnicity. Ms. Cynthia Chao was the professor who assigned us to this group project, to find something that you can challenge the ethnic theories that already exist, by going out in the city.

One group went to see a Malay wedding, a traditional style of wedding for the Malay people. What that group found out was, although the bride was Malay, the groom had Indian blood in him. So they managed to take in parts of the Indian wedding tradition, in this case a yellow umbrella, into the Malay style wedding. This is a sure example that ethnicity is nothing something static but a dynamic process, with changes going on all the time, however managing not to change too much to lose its original state.

Another group went out to study the void deck, which is another name for the ground floor of the HDB's or public housing. It is something unique to Singapore, and was originally made so that people could interact there. It is now a place for conversation, eating dinner, playing chess, and at times, weddings take place there. It is a place where you can see interesting mingles of ethnic traditions through the uncles there.

Our group went to find out how chili pepper could be an indicator for ethnicity in the Southeast Asian cuisine. Peranakan cuisine, which is another name for the cuisine the Chinese who have come to live in Singapore have made, is known for its spiciness. We made interviews to chefs in restaurants, groceries selling chili peppers, and people in the hawker market, which is the local food stalls. We came to find out that indeed the people of Singapore, whatever ethnic group they may come from, have something to say about the chili in their foods, and is something that shows what ethnic group you come from.

Studying anthropology in Singapore was very challenging, and the activity you could have out in the field was something very unique and special.



The Malay Wedding group, in traditional Malay outfits

5. The Field Trip

The section before was what we could experience in Singapore with several hours, by the new knowledge that came to us through studying for 2 weeks. What happened after that was so much more splendid and eye-opening, and definitely the highlight of this whole course.

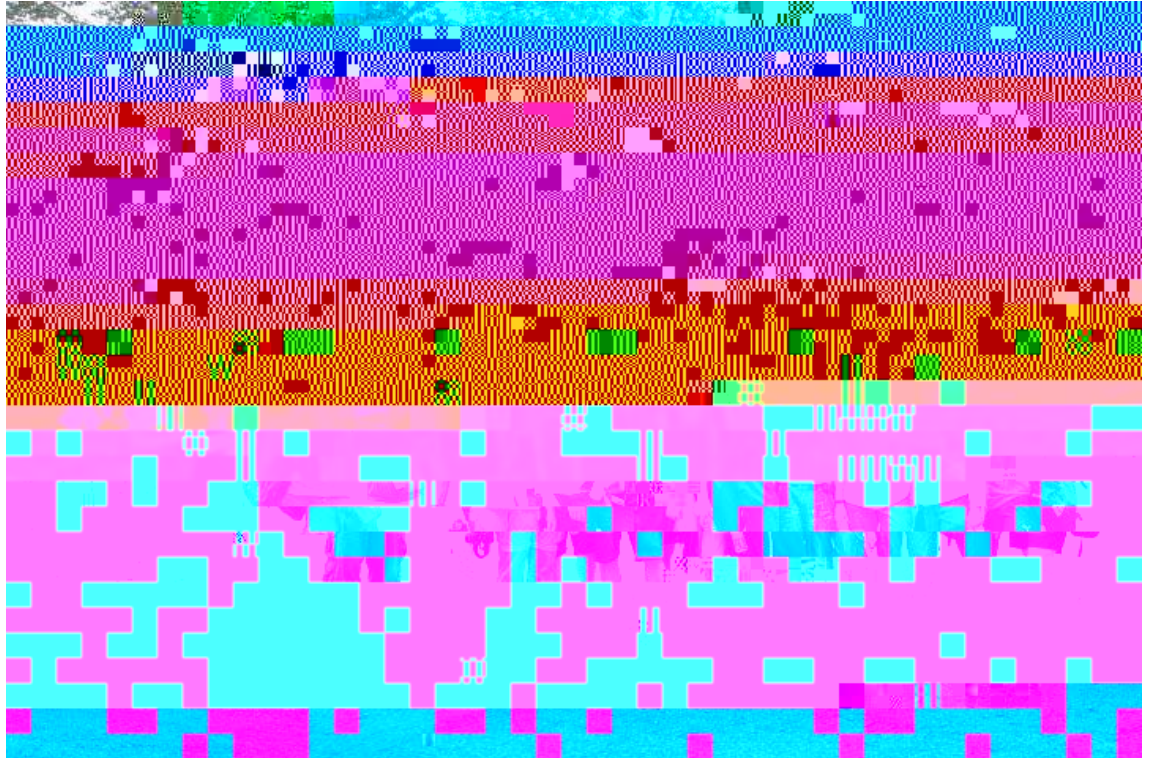
After the first two weeks of class and after all the assignments were handed in, the class sent off to Cambodia, and Thailand. After all, the class came to find out a lot of new things in the hours spent in the field. What couldn't you find out if you had a whole 11 days of time as a field trip?

It was an incredible 11 days. Students were paired so that we could stay in double rooms. People became to know each other a lot better, and I cannot easily express my friendship towards Dani, my roommate.

Cambodia was a thriller altogether. It was the first time I had went to a developing country, and the people, the culture, their history, everything was important and had special meanings. Angkor Wat was indeed a great place, just as you would see in television. But the people living there, the guides, and the children trying to sell souvenirs, those were not something that would be shown on TV, and was something that made you think a lot. We were able to see a village that stood on a river, 3 hours away from any other city, whose people made a living on the tourists that came to see them living. This was also not something you could see in regular tour. So many other hands on activities were there, such as rice planting and riding ox carts, each that lead to knowing what life was like in that region.

Thailand was also something to see. How strong the influences of Buddhism were on the Thai people was something in a way very shocking, as a I come from

Japan where most people are known to be “free thinkers”. Ayutthaya was also a place we visited and I can remember the places that are shown drowning now, on TV. With the anthropological lens, Cambodia and Thailand were not only an entertainment, they were a place of huge intellectual shock, that is only what I have to say now.



A cut from Cambodia, in Angkor Wat

6. Gratitude

I cannot thank too much the university and other people such as our professors who made it possible for me to spend this special time in Singapore. This is my report of the whole event, and I highly recommend this program to others who may go after me.

IARU Summer Program

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Southeast Asia in Context

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