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## About the Weatherhead East Asian Institute:

Since its establishment in 1949, Columbia University's Weatherhead East Asian Institute has been a major center for research, teaching, and publishing on modern and contemporary Asia. The Institute's mission is to train new generations of experts in the Asian humanities, social sciences, and the professions and to enhance understanding of East Asia in the wider community.

## Building Homes (and Lives) along the Mekong River

By Christine E. Kwon, CC '10

The mighty Mekong River is known in the Tai languages as "Mae Nam Khong," the Mother Water River. It flows from high up in the Tibetan Plateau, runs down through China's mysterious Yunnan Province into the heart of Southeast Asia, meanders in wide swaths through Burma, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam, and pours into the South China Sea. Its waters sustain a complex and diverse ecosystem, including millions of people living along the 2,500 miles of its course.

Despite the richness of the Mekong Region, many of the inhabitants of its densely populated surroundings live in great poverty. A consequence of such destitution, of course, is a dearth of adequate shelter. Housing along the Mekong is not only insufficient, but often unsafe because of its inability to sustain the heavy rains and flooding to which the region is prone.

Enter Habitat for Humanity International (HFHI), a non-profit organization that works to eliminate poor housing by providing families with "safe, decent, affordable shelter." Habitat's work has expanded globally from its humble origins in Americus, Georgia more than thirty years ago, and to date, has built more than

*(HABITAT cont. on page 4)*



*Volunteers fill buckets with mud at a Habitat for Humanity build in Laos.*

## Chatting with Lotto Dealers in Vietnam

By Andrew Scheineson, CC '09

Most Columbians focusing on East Asia, it seems, tend to overlook the Southeast, passing over nations like Thailand, Indonesia, or Vietnam for their neighbors to the north. But Alexandra Dalferro, CC '09 and EALAC major, has thrown herself eagerly into the region, traveling twice to Thailand and spending the last several years studying Thai. This summer, she spent three months learning the language and conducting research on

rural migrants, with help from a Weatherhead grant, for her senior thesis. Recently, I spoke to this writer about her experiences there.

**So you've been to Thailand twice while at Columbia. What have you been doing there? What pulled you back to the country?**

I first went to Thailand for the fall semester of my junior year, and I participated in a program that focused on exploring the human and environmental impacts of development and globalization in the very rural northeastern part of the country. We did

*(MIGRANTS cont. on page 3)*

# Authentic Singapore Chow, Hidden in Queens

By Nicole Ng, CC '11

Has the lackadaisical “Singapore *Mai Fun*” from Ollie’s ever left you wanting? Ever wondered what the ‘authentic’ version would remotely taste like? Despair no more, for such noodles don’t even exist—at least not in Singapore. An invention of American-Chinese takeout, the dish is about as legit as a pizza is Hawaiian for its ham and pineapples.

Thankfully, Sentosa Malaysia Cuisine in Flushing, Queens actually manages to capture the celebrated *rojak* (eclectic mix) that Singaporean food really is—an organic fusion of Malay, Chinese and Indian flavors. “Sentosa” incidentally refers to Singapore’s kitschy tourist island resort. The geographical neighbors of Singapore and Malaysia share not only a long history but also a largely identical repertoire of food as well.

As native Singaporeans, my friend and I were skeptical at first of this restaurant located near the Sheraton hotel on Prince Street. With its

suspiciously clean and chic oak paneling interiors, the place seemed utterly bereft of any hole-in-the-wall chow cred.

But we were quickly proven wrong by its spot-on rendition of *roti canai*, a flatbread dipped in curry. While most Chinatown joints in Manhattan either reduce the dough to papery nothings or end up with rock pancakes, Sentosa produces a crispy-brown roti that is fluffed, beckoning, and sublime with the curry chicken. All our food is served at hawker-fare speed within 5 to 10 minutes.

We ordered what is arguably Singapore’s national dish, the Hainanese chicken rice. Academics assiduously trace the dish’s genealogy for Singapore’s identity construct; we, on the other hand, were looking to see if our humble comfort food was treated right. Sentosa scored well: the rice boiled in chicken stock was lightly fragrant and suffered no stale oil aftertaste; the steamed chicken dipped in chopped ginger and chili was tender, yet springy. If you’re willing to fork out \$15, the *sarang burung*, a taro-woven basket of chicken, mushroom, and cashew nuts, is also a must-try.

For the noodle fiends out there, Sentosa presents some



Sentosa Malaysian Cuisine offers a spot-on rendition of *roti canai*, a Southeast Asian flatbread that’s crispy, fluffy, and typically sublime with a curry chicken.

solid options. The stir-fried *chow kueh teow* (flat rice noodles) was flavorful, but never cloying, and came with generous toppings of squid, shrimp, and eggs. The *kueh teow* was a tad oily, but this was already a much pared down version of the sinful original designed to fatten up laborers at a low cost. (In Singapore, *chow kuay teow* is a delicious vice fried in pork lard and served with a toxic dollop of cockles.) The *mee siam* vermicelli was a lighter Thai stir-fry in sweet chilli and ground peanuts, and were arguably the best noodles I’ve had in a while.

To counter the flavorful palette, we ordered a simpler *yung tau foo* in clear chicken broth, a soupy dish of vegetables and tofu stuffed with minced shrimp and fish meat. At \$8, it’s slightly pricey but the broth doth warmeth the belly on a chilly day.

The only real disappointment was our dessert, *cendol*, which is shaved ice served with coconut milk, green flour strips, and melted palm sugar (*gula melaka*). Instead of a deep brown syrup, the ‘*gula melaka*’ was a travesty of nutella-paste consistency—it looked like some kid had squirted chocolate goo over a mound of ice. A safer option might have

been the shaved ice *kachang ABC*, dressed in rose syrup instead, with treasures like corn and red beans buried within.

Sentosa’s prices may be slightly steep for a Flushing joint, but the extra buck or two is definitely worth it. Portions are large and the service is decent—it’s no wonder the place was still busy at 3 p.m. on a weekday.

**Sentosa Malaysian Cuisine**  
1F, 39-07 Prince Street  
(b/w 39<sup>th</sup> Street and Roosevelt Avenue)  
718-886-6331

**Roti Canai**  
\$3.50

**Hainanese Chicken Rice**  
sm \$6 lg \$11

**Sarang Barung**  
\$15

**Chow Kueh Teow**  
\$6.50

**Mee Siam**  
\$6.50

**Yung Tau Foo**  
\$8

**Cendol**  
\$4

**Ice Kachang ABC**  
\$4

## UPCOMING EVENT: OSCAR LEE SYMPOSIUM OF UNDERGRADUATE EAST ASIAN STUDIES

A half-day conference featuring undergraduate research and discussion on East Asia

Friday, April 24 || 1-4 PM || KENT 403  
[www.eastasiasymposium.org](http://www.eastasiasymposium.org)

### Panels:

1:15PM **Recovering the Individual: Contemporary Asian Art**

2:10PM **Soft Power in Asia**

3:05PM **Rice and Steel: Urban Development in Northeast Asia**

Visit our website for more information on our individual presentations.

Please RSVP to [eastasiasymposium@gmail.com](mailto:eastasiasymposium@gmail.com) before Wednesday, April 22.

Light refreshments and food will be served. Business casual attire is recommended.

(MIGRANTS contd. from page 1)

lots of homestays in farming villages and could talk to people affected by industrial projects. These conversations often included stories of family members who had to leave their villages to find better work in Bangkok. If you go to a village in Thailand, you might find that most of the inhabitants are the elderly and babies. Everyone else has gone to work in the city. So I became very interested in issues of migration and also the impact of this migration in the cities.

This summer I spent three months in Thailand; I was mostly in the northern city Chiang Mai, where I did an intensive language program. And I also made frequent trips to Bangkok to talk to migrants who came from rural areas to work, which was research for my thesis. (Also, I could eat Thai food every day for the rest of my life).

### **How did you approach the fieldwork for your thesis?**

When I started my fieldwork, I was terrified. I can be pretty shy, so the thought of going up to people and speaking to them in Thai was a bit frightening. I ultimately chose to talk to lottery ticket sellers, who sell tickets on nearly every street corner in the city. Sometimes people were very warm and excited to chat, and sometimes I had very awkward conversations and left quickly. Some sellers even introduced me to their friends, which facilitated further interviews. These discussions in themselves were very rewarding.

### **Could you talk about a couple of those interviews?**

Yeah! One day, three sellers were telling me why they decided to come to Bangkok.

One woman was older, and said that she decided to sell tickets because it is a "profession of freedom." If she stayed at home in her village, family members would have to take care of her and provide for her since her husband had died. By selling lottery tickets in Bangkok, she made a life for herself. Her friend, another man in his 50s, told me that he only sells tickets when his fields are fallow or the rice is growing.

(teachers) also took us on a trip to a Sukothai, the site of an ancient kingdom, and we got to see lots of ruins and famous temples.

Chiang Mai has lots of regional pride. The former prime minister of Thailand, Thaksin Shinawatra, who was ousted in the coup in 2006, comes from this area, and it was interesting to see how much support he still has there. The region is also



*Alexandra Dalferro, CC '09, and EALAC major, has conducted original fieldwork on rural migrants during her two trips to Thailand.*

For him migrating is very seasonal. It was fascinating to see how the flexibility of the lottery system facilitated the lives of the migrants in so many different ways.

### **Shifting gears a bit, what was life like in Chiang Mai? What were a few things that stood out to you about the area?**

Chiang Mai is very different from Bangkok. It's in the mountains, and the economy there is focused more explicitly on tourism than in Bangkok. But being a university student there was great! We had SO much homework, but the Ajaans

home to many different "hilltribes," so in the city you can learn a lot about them and see lots of colorful traditional clothing. The hilltribe people, however, have also been exploited by the Thai government, as they are denied access to citizenship and sometimes forced to stay in their villages so that tours can come see the "traditional" ways of their people. The whole tourism element of Chiang Mai, epitomized by those hilltribe tours, could be very frustrating at times.

### **Yikes, sounds sort of like "Last of the Mohicans" in some ways.**

Yeah definitely, without the heroic Magua to save the day...

### **What are your thoughts and/or advice for undergrads who might be seeking to learn the language or live there?**

Of course they can talk to me! If you're interested, there are some great people at Weatherhead who have experience in Southeast Asia. The University of Wisconsin-Madison has an amazing Southeast Asian Summer Studies Institute, where I started learning Thai. There are also excellent study abroad programs through the Council on International Educational Exchange and SIT Study Abroad, which you can get approved by Columbia. It's also easy to get familiar with the language and culture right in New York. There's a large Thai population, a Thai school, Thai temples...and of course plenty of food!

#### **About Soundings:**

Published monthly by the Weatherhead Undergraduate Council, *Soundings* aims to help better incorporate undergraduates into the broader East Asian Studies community at Columbia by providing increased access to information about East Asia-related groups, activities, and events. Incorporating academic as well as non-academic news and listings, it seeks to help interested undergraduates further pursue their interest in East Asia, whatever form it may take. *Soundings* is edited by Preeti Bhattacharji. If you have any questions or comments, or would like to contribute, you can contact her at [pb2205@columbia.edu](mailto:pb2205@columbia.edu).

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300,000 homes for more than 1.5 million people in more than 3,000 communities. With its most famous volunteers, former President Jimmy Carter and his wife Rosalynn, Habitat holds the Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter Work Project (JRCWP) to promote volunteerism and a commitment to affordable housing in all regions of the world. This week-long building blitz brings together volunteers from all over with local families in the communities being served.

JRCWP 2009, beginning Nov. 15 and ending Nov. 20, will focus on the Mekong region, where "the need for affordable housing is immense," as Jonathan Reckford, CEO of HFHI, stresses. While the site in the Muang lane sub-district of Chiang Mai, Thailand, will serve as the primary location of the "blitz build," building will occur simultaneously at sites in Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and China's Yunnan Province as well. In all, about 300 families will work in cooperation with the participating volunteers. The JRCWP will initiate a five-year plan within these five countries to support 50,000 people, demonstrating an extended commitment to service in the area.

It is an ambitious project, but the achievements of JRCWPs in past years have shown the depth and care of planning in its execution. Part of the program's success stems from the fact that Habitat doesn't provide a handout, but a hand up. Habitat requires that families invest their own funds, time, and labor ("sweat equity") in the process of building their home. In the end, homeowners have truly paid for their own houses, and actually help fund the building of more homes elsewhere.

For volunteers, participating involves frequent interaction with members of the local community and an opportunity to build relationships with Habitat families. Cooperation in sweat, sun, sawing, and hammering defies barriers of culture or language. The mysteries of the Mekong and its people dissolve in a joint effort aimed at the same goal: eradicating poor housing. A house is just a structure built of brick and wood, but through the teamwork and labor of families and volunteers, it can become a home.

For more information on Habitat for Humanity and the JRCWP, see their website at [www.habitat.org](http://www.habitat.org).



Volunteers bind steel for a Habitat house in My Tho, on the Mekong Delta.

## Upcoming Events at the WEAI

**THURSDAY, APRIL 9, 2009**

**Center for Korean Research Colloquium Series:  
"Nonsensical Assemblage: Language Play and  
Gramophone in Colonial Korea"**

Se-Mi Oh, Postdoctoral Fellow, Harvard University  
5:00 PM - 6:30 PM  
918 IAB

**MONDAY, APRIL 13, 2009**

**"Traffic in Genre" Film and Lecture Series  
The Good, The Bad, The Weird film screening with**

Professor Ted Hughes  
6:30pm  
413 Kent Hall

**TUESDAY, APRIL 14, 2009**

**Center for Korean Research Special Lecture:  
"Korean Soft Power in International Relations"**

Shin-wha Lee, Visiting Professor, Columbia University  
2:00 pm - 3:30 pm  
918 IAB

**THURSDAY, APRIL 16, 2009**

**"Traffic in Genre" Film and Lecture Series  
"Political Economy of Korean Action Films"**

Jinsoo An, Hongik University  
6:30pm  
918 IAB

**MONDAY, APRIL 20, 2009**

**"East Asian Art: A Career Guide for Undergraduates"**

Panelists:

Elizabeth Hammer, Vice President, Specialist,  
Chinese Paintings, Christie's  
Joan Jeffri, Director, Program in Arts Administration; Director of  
the Research Center for Arts and Culture,  
Teachers College at Columbia University  
Elaine W. Ng, Editor and Publisher, ArtAsiaPacific  
Christopher Phillips, Curator, International Center of Photography  
Max Protetch, President, Max Protetch Gallery  
6:00 PM - 7:30 PM  
403 Kent Hall

**WEDNESDAY, APRIL 22, 2009**

**Brown Bag Lecture**

**"The Information Revolution in China"**

Susan Shirk, Director, University of California Institute on Global  
Conflict and Cooperation;  
Ho Miu Lam, Professor of China and Pacific Relations, School of  
International Relations and Pacific Studies, UC San Diego  
12:00 - 1:30 PM  
918 IAB