

## From the Director

Over Summer I spent time in Hong Kong, Thailand, China, the Philippines and Australia, conducting research, attending conferences and workshops and meeting with Asian studies colleagues in the region. While in Thailand, I was fortunate to meet U.S. Ambassador Eric John at his impressive Bangkok residence, brief him about UNC's links with Thailand and discuss the celebration of the 175th Anniversary of U.S.-Thai diplomatic relations.

In the Fall, the Carolina Asia Center joins in celebrating this Anniversary and acknowledging the long history of partnership and friendship between the peoples of Thailand and the United States. With the Royal Thai Embassy in Washington D.C., our celebration will culminate in a reception for students, faculty and friends of Thailand in North Carolina.

In March 1833, King Nang Klao (Rama III) granted an audience to American envoy Edmund Roberts. Roberts, a New Hampshire merchant negotiated the Treaty of Amity and Commerce with Siam. This was the U.S.'s first treaty with a country in Asia.

UNC's links with Thailand are well-established. In the 1960s, graduate students from Thailand attended UNC, training in public health and related fields. In 1984, Mahidol University and the Carolina Population Center established a research project in Buriram Province that continues to produce research outcomes. In 1994, the Kenan Institute opened an office in Bangkok and continues its work today. Anand Panyarachun, former prime minister of Thailand and founding chairman of the Kenan Institute Asia received a UNC honorary degree in 2005. In 2007, the undergraduate semester-in-Thailand program was established and in 2008 the Southeast Asia Summer Program will extend the time students spend in Thailand to a month.

North Carolina's links with Thailand are remarkable and long. A visit to the North Carolina Collection confirms that it was in 1839 that conjoined twins Chang and Eng Bunker, known as the "Siamese Twins," settled in Surry County and became U.S. citizens. Presbyterian missionaries from the state were active in Thailand from 1875. The Bank of America can claim a Thailand heritage from 1949. Today, trade and other linkages between North Carolina and Thailand continue to prosper.

Recognizing this important Anniversary, *Asia Connections* highlights recent student and faculty experiences in Thailand.

Kevin Hewison, *Director*

## CAC Awarded Two Grants

The Carolina Asia Center (CAC) has received two new grants totaling over \$500,000. The most recent grant is from the Freeman Foundation and the second, from the Royal Thai Government's Ministry of Foreign Affairs was briefly reported in the previous issue of *Asia Connections*. These grants will further increase faculty, graduate and undergraduate opportunities for engagement in Asia and provide for the expansion of Asian studies at Carolina.

### Freeman Foundation Undergraduate Asian Studies Initiative II

As part of the Freeman Foundation's continuing generous support to Asian Studies in the United States, the CAC has been awarded almost \$400,000 as part of the Foundation's Undergraduate Asian Studies Initiative II.

UNC was also a recipient, together with some 84 other universities and colleges, of Freeman Foundation funding during the first round of the Undergraduate Asian Studies Initiative. Among a select group of universities to receive a second round of funding, the grant seeks to foster a greater appreciation and understanding of Asia amongst undergraduates.

The new grant will fund two new Asia-related faculty positions (a Korean language position in the Department of Asian Studies and an assistant professorship in the Department of Sociology). Funds will also support course development, facilitate study abroad opportunities in Asia, and promote academic enhancement over two academic years. As part of the agreement with the Freeman Foundation, the College of Arts & Sciences will support a third year of funding. Exhibiting its commitment to strengthening international programs and faculty expertise in Asia, the College has committed to the permanent funding of the faculty positions beyond the three year grant period.

### Thailand and Southeast Asia Studies Fund

2008 marks the 175th Anniversary of Thai/U.S. Diplomatic Relations. In conjunction with this auspicious occasion, the Carolina Asia Center has established the Thailand and Southeast Asia Studies Fund made possible by a grant of \$113,000 from Thailand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. These funds will aid in the development of Thailand

and Southeast Asia studies at UNC and will be used for a variety of activities over the next year, including curriculum and course development grants, expanding library holdings, supporting study abroad, hosting a visiting Thai scholar, and coordinating a public workshop on Contemporary Thailand.

As part of these initiatives, the Carolina Asia Center is hosting visiting professor Dr. Tanet Charoenmuang, a professor of Political Science at Thailand's Chiang Mai University. He arrived in October and will return to Thailand in late November. Dr. Tanet is a leading scholar on the decentralization of Thailand whose current research focuses on issues of rapid growth and development in Thailand and the Greater Mekong Subregion.

A workshop on Contemporary Social and Political Issues in Thailand will be held in mid-November in UNC's FedEx Global Education Center. Leading Thailand scholars will be brought to Chapel Hill to present papers. As well as 10 leading scholars from the U.S., speakers from Thailand will include Dr. Pasuk Phongpaichit, Dr. Pitch Pongsawat and Punchada Sirivunnabood. Please visit [www.carolinaasiacenter.unc.edu](http://www.carolinaasiacenter.unc.edu) for further details on this and other upcoming events and opportunities.

To coincide with the workshop, the Carolina Asia Center will host a celebration and reception in commemoration of the 175th Anniversary of Thai/U.S. Diplomatic Relations to be held in the FedEx Global Education Center.

Karen Gil, Senior Associate Dean for Social Sciences And International Programs in the College of Arts and Sciences recently spoke about these new funds saying, "We are grateful to the Freeman Foundation and Thailand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs for these two grants which will allow us to

expand UNC's engagement in Asia." She added that, "It is more critical than ever before that our students have a deeper knowledge of Asia, as they seek to understand its increasing importance and influence on the rest of the world."



## 2008 Southeast Asia Summer Program

Cycling through rubber and palm oil plantations in Malaysia, visiting model apartments at the Singapore Housing Development Board, and meeting with Burmese exiles and refugees in Chiang Mai, Thailand...these were all part of our experiences as co-directors of the 2008 Southeast Asia Summer.

The twenty-five UNC students who participated in the program were able, through the generosity of UNC alumni Alston Gardner and Barbara Lee, to spend six weeks studying and living on-campus at the National University of Singapore; to make a four-day trip to Malaysia, with a focus on the historically rich city of Melaka; and to travel in Thailand – Chiang Mai and Bangkok – for eight days. In addition to a wealth of program-related excursions, the students also had ample opportunities to explore the region and to interact with students from the National University of Singapore and Mahidol University (in Salaya, Thailand, just outside Bangkok).

Andrew Reynolds and I, the program's directors, also benefited from our time in Southeast Asia.



*Layna Mosley and Andrew Reynolds with daughter, near Chiang Mai*

We are both faculty in Political Science; Andrew's research and teaching interests involve democratization and political change, while mine center on the politics of economic development, reform and crisis. While our interests relate directly to Southeast Asia — for instance, democratization in Indonesia, the repeated constitutional crises in Thailand, and the roots of and recovery from the 1997-1998 Asian financial crisis — this was our first opportunity to spend a longer period of time in the region, and to teach a course that dealt specifically with Burma, Indonesia, Thailand and Vietnam. In the course, we explored the Vietnamese government's recent policies toward foreign direct investment; the implications for Thai politics of repeated constitutional crises; and the linkages between economic crisis and democratization in Indonesia.

Our students took advantage of experts in Singapore as they conducted group research

projects; some of the topics they explored included the provision of health care to migrants and refugees along the Thai-Burmese border; the debate regarding intellectual property rights protection in Vietnam; and labor migration from Indonesia and the Philippines to Singapore.

And perhaps most importantly, the program-related excursions allowed us and our students to get a hands-on sense of contemporary political and economic issues in Southeast Asia. For example, in Chiang Mai, Thailand, we spent an afternoon with Aung Naing Oo, a former student activist in Burma who fled in 1988. Aung now teaches at Chiang Mai University and remains very involved in the Burmese exile movement (indeed, when President Bush visited Thailand a few weeks later, Aung was one of the exiles with whom he met). He discussed with our group the history of Burmese politics, as well as the debate among exiles regarding engagement with versus sanctioning the ruling military regime. The next day, our group spent the morning at NGO-run schools that teach English to adult Burmese refugees, as well as educate young Burmese children. For us and our students, these visits brought to light the complicated political issues at play in today's Burma.

Likewise, in Bangkok, we heard several presentations at Kenan Institute Asia, as well as at the Export-Import Bank (EXIM) of Thailand. At Kenan, the focus was on the linkages between multinational corporations and the conditions in Thai factories. At the EXIM bank, the focus was on the other side of the coin: how does Thailand make itself attractive to foreign investors, and how can Thai companies be encouraged in their efforts to expand throughout Southeast Asia? Again, we were able to see firsthand the challenges and issues faced by policymakers and non-governmental organizations in Thailand — something that will inform our teaching and research in the coming years.

*Layna Mosley and Andrew Reynolds are Associate Professors in the Department of Political Science.*

## Health Economics Research in Thailand and Vietnam

Since my first trip to the Philippines in 1984, I have always found something exciting about



*John F. Stewart in Hue, Vietnam*

getting off the plane in a Southeast Asian airport. The air is heavy with heat, humidity, and the smells and sounds of a truly foreign land. In May of this year I made yet another trip to Southeast Asia to meet up with the UNC students who had participated in the UNC Southeast Asian semester at Mahidol University's International Campus outside of Bangkok.

The last two and half weeks of the students' program were to be spent with me doing a research practicum on the economics and policy of health systems in Thailand and Vietnam. My goal was to expose the students to the world I work in, a world where research provides the information needed to make policy decisions. This is an area I have worked in for almost 25 years. During that time I have seen many of the problems that the health systems in poorer countries face and I wanted to share these experiences with these students and let them see how research informs policy decisions.

We started in Bangkok with several days of classes to get the students up to speed in health economics and the health care systems in Thailand and Vietnam. While in Thailand we visited with faculty members working on health economics issues and we visited Bumungrad International Hospital to gain some understanding of the new phenomena of medical tourism and its implications, both positive and negative for the countries pursuing this new trend.

The students had spent the whole semester in Thailand and had the opportunity to get to know the people and see the sites. None of the students had been to Vietnam before so our nine days there include both academic work and a chance to see this beautiful country. We had meetings at the National Institute of Hygiene and Epidemiology, the Hanoi Medical University and Hanoi School of Public Health where we were able to discuss the pressing issues with colleagues I had worked with before on a variety of

projects. High points of our trip include a day at Ha Long Bay and Hoi An, both UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Our travel from Hanoi to Hue was done on the overnight night train which was a new experience for all of us.

Americans are very aware with the problems our own health care system faces, but few have a real appreciation of the problems faced in countries with resources much more limited than our own. Vietnam spends less the \$40 per year per person on health care, only \$6 of that amount being spent by the government. In such a situation, each decision becomes crucial and these decisions often have to be made on very limited information. Seeing this process in person, and having the opportunity to explore one policy issue in detail for the course paper, gave these students broader insights on the problems emerging nations' face. It was a wonderful experience for me to get to share these insights with students and to share my love of the beauty of these countries and the warmth and generosity of their people.

*John F. Stewart is Professor of Economics at UNC.*

## UNC Students visit Mae Sot, Thailand

Located on the border with Burma, surrounded by hazy mountains the Burma Labor Solidarity Organization (BLSO) School in Mae Sot,



*Elaina Giolando with BLSO students in Mae Sot*

Thailand was established to educate the children of Burmese migrant workers who enter into Thailand seeking work and refuge from political oppression and turmoil. The school gives the children the opportunity to learn English, Thai, math, and other basic subjects. While the BLSO is funded by organizations in Australia, Korea, and the United States, it still struggles to make ends meet while reducing expenses for the poor parents whose children attend the school.

The UNC Southeast Asia Interest Association (SEAIA) raises money each year for the school to fund a lunch program. For only \$30 per week

(we raised \$1,400 last year), the students are provided with lunch on Fridays, which is the only day they can afford to do a community lunch. Other days, the children aren't provided with any meals at school and, if they are able, bring lunches with them.

As UNC ambassadors from SEAIA to the school this summer, Raley White, Daniel Acker and I met with Ko Than Doke, one of the leaders of BLSO. In addition to teaching us about the school, he spoke with us about his own background as a 1988 refugee from Burma as well as other activities of BLSO that work to protect Burmese migrant workers against exploitation. We were pleasantly surprised when we were asked to teach an impromptu English lesson to about 50 students ranging from kindergarten to fifth grade, which proved to be a challenging task since none of us had ever taught before! However, the students loved our silly songs and games that tried to reinforce the little English they already knew.

When it was time to go, we had to tread carefully through the knee-deep water that surrounds the school and the slum community where it is located on the outskirts of town, for it was the rainy season. We vowed to do everything in our power to bring more awareness about these children and their families' situation to everyone we can, and to raise more money than ever to support their cause. These children need our help to escape the cycle of oppression and poverty that their families face. We have the resources to help change their lives, and having been invited into their lives, if only for a brief time, was monumentally eye-opening and inspiring.

*Elaina Giolando is a sophomore in International Studies and SEAIA co-president. She was a 2008 participant in the Southeast Asia Summer Program, after which she spent four weeks in Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, and Burma. Visit [http://www.burmasolidarity.org/blso\\_school.html](http://www.burmasolidarity.org/blso_school.html) to learn more about the school.*

## Exploring Thai Buddhism

Thailand, whose population is reported as 94% Theravada Buddhist, is a country for which cultural and religious heritage and structures are inextricably connected. This past summer, I had the opportunity, through UNC's WITWAW (Where in the world are we?) program and a Phillips Ambassadors grant, to research this complex religious culture.



*John McElwee at Wat Prathat Doi Suthep*

I approached my project in the context of globalization. How, I wondered, are the ancient values and practices of Buddhism realized in everyday life in an increasingly global Thailand? What is the current state of Thailand's rich and distinct religious culture, in which Buddhist and indigenous Animist practices quite literally live side by side? So after much preparation, I traveled to Thailand and threw myself into a diverse array of situations, places, and spaces, hoping through first hand experience, conversation, and observation to try and figure out what exactly is going on in contemporary Thai Buddhism.

My travels were extensive and fast-paced; I touched every corner of the country in the month I had, trying desperately to soak it all in. Highlights of the trip included a stay at Wat Pah Nanachat, a remote forest monastery established for the education of foreign monks in the country's northeastern region. I spent my days there participating in alms rounds to the surrounding villages, raking leaves with village women, and engaging in hours of chanting and meditation with the monks. This was all, of course, after waking up at 3:00 am everyday.

Soon thereafter, I found myself living on a wooden riverboat in the nearby Ratchathani Asoke community, a self-sustaining agricultural settlement associated with the controversial Santi Asoke sect. As a member of this community, I spoke with teachers and monks, rode in a fruit truck to help in the fields, and was lucky enough to attend a monastic ordination ceremony.

Other aspects of my trip included two stints in other monasteries, interviews with teachers offering meditation courses and retreats catering to foreigners, meeting with professors at one of Thailand's Buddhist universities, and engaging in exhilarating personal travel.

So was the project a success? Sure, I learned a lot; I gained insight into several movements in Thai Buddhism that emerged in the last half century,

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## Thai Buddhism

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witnessed the complications of spirituality tourism, observed the dominance of magico-animist traditions in popular practice, and experienced the differences in rural and urban spirituality, for example. But as my project came to an end, I realized that I was dealing more with paradoxes and tensions than concrete answers; I surely learned that the products and effects of globalization are invariably myriad.

The face of Thai Buddhism is certainly changing in Thailand, but in countless ways, its soul is strong. And exposure to that soul is what I really took from my trip. I am thrilled to have caught just a glimpse of the beauty and color of Thailand's animist traditions and ceremonies, to have lived in the solitude and discipline of a remote Buddhist monastery, to have felt true gratitude and humility after receiving food offerings from pious rural villagers. These deeply moving experiences taught me much about Thailand — and myself.

*John McElwee is a Junior in Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies.*

## Fall Workshop

In addition to the Contemporary Thailand Workshop, the Carolina Asia Center with the support of the Odum Institute, hosted a workshop at UNC. On October 10th and 11th, more than 20 Southeast Asia specialists gathered to consider "New Directions in Southeast Asian Studies."

Organized by Donald Nonini in the Department of Anthropology, the workshop focused on presenting and exchanging ideas and research findings by UNC and Duke faculty. Max Lane from the Department of Malay Studies at the National University of Singapore, delivered the keynote address, "New Nationalisms in Indonesian Politics, the 2009 Elections and the Left," while Paul Gellert of the Department of Sociology at the University of Tennessee presented a paper on "Reforming Governance in Indonesia's Timber Industries."

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