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Narrative and Financial Report  
Scott Kloeck-Jenson International Pre-Dissertation Travel Grant  
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This summer, the Scott Kloeck-Jenson International Pre-Dissertation Travel Grant allowed me to travel to Laos and Thailand to conduct research and make contacts in preparation for the dissertation research that I hope to begin next summer. My wife and I departed on July 15 and returned on August 20. In all, we spent three weeks in Laos and two weeks in Thailand. Throughout the trip, I experienced many high and low points, but it was never short of interesting!

One of the most important lessons emerging from the trip revolved around just how different the situation in Laos was from what I expected. My wife has family there, and I thought they would be one of my most important contacts. This is due to the fact that the research situation in Laos has been very difficult for the past thirty years. Americans in particular have been kept at arm's length by Laos's communist government. Thus, I thought that family connections would give me somewhat of an edge, as things in Laos often happen based on who you know. In addition, I arranged to meet two Western scholars early on in the trip, both of who conduct research on Laos, and who I believed would be invaluable sources of information and encouragement.

To make a long story short, I was wrong on both counts. My wife's family members were not really sure what it was that I wanted to do, and the Western scholars left me feeling somewhat discouraged (although they were helpful with contact information). So, after an unproductive few days in Vientiane, the capital of Laos, we traveled to Luang Prabang, the home of Laos's former royalty and a UNESCO world heritage site. This small city helped me realize the importance of "tradition" as a public discourse in Laos. I have chosen to spend the bulk of my research period there, as it will provide a wonderful opportunity to challenge Western theories which posit that the public sphere is by nature a project of modernity.

After returning to Vientiane, I decided to meet with media producers there in order to try to understand what attempts the Lao are making to carve out their own specific form of modernity, especially when mass media from neighboring Thailand is so predominant in Laos. I was lucky enough to meet with the president of Lao Art Media, one of Laos's only private media companies. His company is making a dramatic effort to bring Lao-language media back into broad circulation, and they are doing so in a way that self-consciously tries to balance ideas of "tradition" and "modernity", once again problematizing the categories of Western scholarship on public spheres that I hope to engage through my research. Lao Art Media has agreed to let me use them as a research site, and has provided me with a letter of affiliation to that end. They also put me in touch with Mr. Khamkhong Kongvongsa, the head of the Mass Media Department of Laos's Ministry of Information and Culture. He has agreed to support my efforts to conduct research in Laos, and also encouraged me to expand the horizons of my project to avoid having to much emphasis on large cities alone.

With that in mind, I will seek my research visa for Laos through the Institute for Cultural Research, another arm of the Ministry of Information and Culture. I met with their representatives several times during our final days in Laos, and have kept in contact

via phone and e-mail after returning to the United States. They will be able to provide a suitable "umbrella" for the multi-sited, interdisciplinary nature of my project, and with Mr. Khamkhong's support should have no trouble helping me gain research clearance. They have also provided me with a letter of affiliation to include in my applications for research funding. In addition, they will be able to provide me valuable advice in the field.

Although the trip to Laos ended on a good note, I wanted to forestall deciding whether to conduct research in Laos or Thailand until having a chance to make some contacts and do some exploring in Thailand itself. After all, UW-Madison has very strong ties with a number of universities there. In fact, my co-advisor here had helped me to set up a number of meetings with scholars in Thailand before I ever left the States. I met with professors both in Bangkok and in Khon Kaen, the capital of Thailand's ethnically Lao northeast. At Thammasat University in Bangkok, Prof. Naline Tanthuvanit, a UW-Madison alumni, was able to provide me with contact information for scholars in Khon Kaen, and also advised me on research site selection in case Laos doesn't work out. Prof. Ubonrat Siriyuwasak, a scholar of the Thai media at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, advised me on some of the theoretical and practical issues surrounding my project.

In Khon Kaen, I met with Prof. Yaowalak Apichatwallop, Dean of Humanities and Social Science of Khon Kaen University. She is also head of KKU's Center for Research on Pluralism in the Mekong Region. The Center is very active in research on issues pertaining to Laos and its cross-border relations with Thailand. Prof. Yaowalak has agreed to host me as an outside researcher should I choose to base myself in northeast Thailand. She said, however, that I would still be able to collaborate with and draw on the resources of the Center even if I end up living in Laos. Prof. Ratana Boonmathya, the Center's Research Director, was very encouraging of my ideas and will be an invaluable source of advice. She also advised me to draw on the resources of KKU's Research and Development Institute, a slightly older, more established research center on their campus.

In all, I feel proud of all that I accomplished this summer. I have essentially laid the groundwork to conduct research in two countries, and may be able to help build bridges between scholars in both places. I also was able to function effectively in both the Lao and Thai languages. For now, it looks like I will try to base myself in Laos for the research; however, as already mentioned, I have no intention of burning bridges with the scholars who showed me so much hospitality in Thailand. Although I now have much work ahead of me in planning out the logistics of my project and securing funding, I feel that my research this summer has prepared me for future success. Needless to say, I have the Scott Kloeck-Jenson International Pre-Dissertation Travel Grant to thank for that.