1. Introduction

The Executive Director of the Thailand Fulbright Foundation, Porntip Kanjananiyot, asked me to write an article where I share some of my experiences and viewpoints with the Fulbright family about how to make a Fulbright experience in Thailand as productive and enjoyable as possible. This article is my response to her request, and by the way, thanks for asking. I will begin with a snippet of my background.

I have a PhD in computer science from the University of Washington in Seattle. I worked as a professor at a research institution, the University of New Hampshire, for nine years. Currently, I am on leave from Armstrong Atlantic State University in Savannah, Georgia where I serve as the Dean for the College of Computing. Although I work as an administrator, I enjoy research, and I have published 13 books on computing, about 50 papers, and given over 135 invited lectures throughout the world. Previously, I won senior research Fulbrights to Spain and Iceland. My award to Thailand is a lecturing and research award. I am an avid outdoorsman having
climbed 5 of the 7 summits, run many marathons and ultramarathons, completed about 10 Ironman triathlons, and walked across the USA both on the Appalachian and the Pacific Crest Trails. Traveling is one of my main hobbies, and I have visited 49 of the United States, 64 countries, and many remote islands.

I traveled to Thailand alone, so this article will not address issues relating to significant others and children. Armed with this context, now let me share some of my thoughts. I will break this article into three main sections: Philosophy, Professional, and Personal.

2. Philosophy

Be Flexible

Moving to another country for a prolonged period of time can be a challenging experience, but the rewards are well worth accepting the discomforts and risks. Be patient in everything you do and keep an open mind; embrace the people and culture; fit in with the lifestyle of the country that you are in and do not expect things to be the same as in your home country. In Thailand you will find most people friendly. The pace of life will be different than what you are accustomed to. You must be willing to adapt to the culture where you are living and go with the flow, as opposed to insisting that things be done in the way in which you are used to. People in Thailand are very open and accepting of many different viewpoints.

Finding a Bobby

You should have at least one solid contact in Thailand. In my case I worked with Dr. Sanpawat "Bobby" Kantabutra. I met Bobby through email when I was searching for a university to visit in Thailand. He received his PhD at Tufts University, and since I grew up and worked in New England for many years, I knew that we would have some things in common. Bobby helped me to find an apartment, set up my banking account, learn the ropes at Chiang Mai University, figure out transportation, and make contacts with other universities in Thailand. He assisted me with many other tasks as well. Without his excellent help and support, without his friendship, without our gigantic lunches, the Fulbright visit would not have been anywhere near as rewarding. You must try to find your own "Bobby." Thanks, Bobby. You are a remarkable man, and you represent your country beautifully.
Be a Great Problem Solver

All travelers should realize that there will be times when things do not go as expected. I try not to set a lot of expectations, and instead, I like to experience things as they are. Nearly all situations can have a positive outcome, if you are a good problem solver. When faced with a tough situation, think about the outcome that you would like to achieve, and then determine the best way to go about achieving that outcome. Do not vent or get angry. Work with those around you to find a satisfactory solution. As an example, the apartment that I rented came with "high-speed" wireless Internet. The Domain Name Server (DNS) would often not be running properly. I spoke to my landlady, Jo, and let her know that this problem could usually be solved simply by toggling the power on the wireless-access point. Since I often work late at night, I asked Jo if I could reset the access-point myself when there was a problem. She obliged and was happy that I was able to be part of the solution to this problem. Jo then taught others in the housing complex how to solve the problem for themselves as well.

Stay Focused

Set some goals for yourself and for your stay in Thailand. For example, I wanted to learn to speak Thai, make some lifetime friends, write and complete at least two papers, finish a book that I was working on, teach a class, visit at least five other Universities in Thailand, give at least ten research talks, visit at least twenty provinces in Thailand, and so on. Periodically, evaluate your progress. If you are not being as successful as you had hoped, you may need to readjust your goals. Within several iterations, you should have realistic expectations for what you can achieve. Remain disciplined and with periodic monitoring of your progress, you should be able to achieve most of what you set out to do.

Remain Optimistic

A visitor can get further with a smile and a positive attitude than one can by being a curmudgeon. Good things tend to happen to good people who are happy and optimistic. When I was traveling to Taiwan, the airport check-in clerk wanted to charge me about $100 for extra weight on some Fulbright business baggage. I politely asked her if there was anything she could do to help me out. After a pleasant conversation, where I explained what I was doing, she waved the baggage fee. Countless times while I was walking in Chiang Mai local people (not cab drivers) offered me rides. I won't forget the pizza-delivery guy who gave me a ride right to my destination.

Home Base

You will need an extremely reliable person taking care of financial matters, mail, and other important issues at home. This person can greatly enhance your overseas stay by being totally reliable and by being an excellent communicator. For example, when a bill for my auto insurance arrived unexpectedly, I was informed about it and then we were able to make a plan for payment. By minimizing or eliminating worries relating to home-base activities, you can better enjoy your trip abroad.
Language Issues

Learning the Thai language is not easy. As Fulbrighters, we work hard and most days use a lot of brain power on research and teaching activities. When we return home after a long day at the office, our minds are tired. Nevertheless, by exercising strong discipline, we can still learn Thai. In my case I did not have the time to learn to write and read Thai. My goal was to learn how to speak Thai. I focused on learning a subset of Thai that would be most useful for me. I hired a private tutor, and Toey met me ten hours per week for about two months. Toey and I worked together. I let her know what practical vocabulary I needed. After working on theoretical computer science all day, it often took a lot of concentration to learn new Thai vocabulary. However, Toey made it fun and with our schedule set up in advance and with her meeting me at my apartment, I could not skip any lessons. Like many things, if you "build in" the discipline, the task becomes easier to carry out.

Cellphone

I do not like to use a cell phone in the US. However, in Thailand I found the cellphone very useful for business, for keeping in touch with new friends, and just for basic logistical reasons. For example, if due to language issues a meeting point was misinterpreted by one of the parties, the cellphone became extremely useful in bringing the scheduled rendezvous to fruition. Cellphone numbers in Thailand are currently 9 digits long and begin with a 0. If you can, get a GSM phone; it is simple to buy new SIM cards for each new country that you visit. In Thailand many convenience stores sell phone recharge cards, usually for a maximum of 500 Baht. My phone had a maximum capacity of 5,000 Baht. The cellphone network is oversubscribed and often times during peak hours calls would fail. I recommend storing telephone numbers to the phone. Backup your phone directory as well. For lower-rate from Thailand lots of people dial 009 when calling other countries.

3. Professional

Primary Contact

As I noted earlier, you must find your own Bobby. You must never take advantage of this person's good will, and you should do your best to contribute to his/her work and reputation within the country and internationally. In my case Bobby and I co-authored an article together, visited a university in Thailand together, worked together on a joint conference, and talked about many professional activities such as journal submissions to editors, curriculum issues, and research topics.

Your University

It is important to learn to speak some Thai shortly after your arrival so that you can fit in with your colleagues. If you cannot make small talk in the hallways, it is tough to make new contacts and friends. Try to learn about the campus and the activities on campus. Many of the campuses in Thailand are very beautiful and extremely large geographically. Sometimes I like to eat in the dining halls on campus, and these are a good place to meet new people. Thai food in these locales can be spicy, but a good meal can be had for 20 Baht. I attended a number of parties for students initially and that was a good place to meet people and learn some Thai culture. Early on I met with the Department Chair and then later with the Dean.
**Goals**

Thailand is such an interesting and diverse country, and there are many distractions. I mentioned earlier under the heading of "Stay Focused" that I felt it is important to set some tangible goals. You can set a goal, for example, of writing two hours per day or of publishing two papers or of doing whatever else is appropriate for you and your discipline. Assess your own performance periodically and make sure that you are on track to meet your goals. Adjust your work habits and goals as necessary. It is most important to monitor yourself early on while you still have time to make adjustments. Having greater discipline initially will pay big dividends later. Do not get discouraged if you cannot achieve your goals, simply work harder.

**Equipment**

Although your host may offer to provide you with a computer and printing facilities, I chose to bring my own laptop and printer. Since I work in front of a computer for long periods of time, I like to have a very large screen. I prefer to edit hard copies as well. In my case the extra weight of the computer and printer were well worth it. The Fulbright can often assist with reasonable excess baggage charges. Prices for computers in Thailand for high-end systems seem to be a little more than in US. Supplies such as toner cartridges seem to be cheaper in Thailand. I used a thumb drive and email to the US to backup my system. I found that bringing certain specialty items was worthwhile, as I did not want to spend time shopping for such items in Thailand. I also brought some small supplies with me: paper clips, post-its, folders, pens, and so on. These can easily be obtained in Thailand, but I felt that I had enough to do initially without worrying about these trivial items. So, again, I was glad that I had packed these. All household items that I needed were easy to obtain with Bobby’s help, and the prices were reasonable as was the quality.

**Visiting Other Schools**

I visited ten other Universities on my Fulbright, including institutions in Taiwan and Vietnam, as part of the Asian Fulbright Program. If you have the time and energy to go to other institutions, it can be a rewarding experience for all parties: you, your host, your US institution, the Fulbright commissions, and, of course, your "home" institution in Thailand. I am establishing exchange programs with several schools and my US institution. I also hope to help arrange an all-expenses paid-for visit for Bobby to visit some universities in Taiwan.

**Hiring a Graduate Student**

I asked Bobby to introduce me to his top graduate student. When I met Yui, she was shy to speak English and spoke little. Now I usually speak Thai to her and she speaks English to me. Her English has improved dramatically. I hired Yui early on to assist me with mailings and editing. An express letter to the US runs about 600 Baht. Yui has done a tremendous job for me. I have helped her to learn the LaTeX document formatting system. Yui receives an hourly rate from me that is good for supplementing her income. We work well together, and we have become good friends. I will try to help her get accepted to a good PhD program in the US.
Sharing Information and Time

As a Dean and a Commissioner for the Accreditation Board for Engineering Technology (ABET) in the US, I know quite a bit about computing curricula and accreditation issues. I have reviewed curriculum for the Department of Computer Science at Chiang Mai University and also spoken to a number of colleagues here about accreditation. Whatever expertise you have, your colleagues in Thailand will greatly appreciate your sharing information and your time to work on ways to help improve their educational system. It is amazing how many good ideas can be generated when two different cultures and viewpoints are brought together to brainstorm.

Helping Out Where Possible

If you can, try to help out the faculty at your host institution with their research. This can mean reviewing their papers for technical accuracy and for quality of writing. It could mean checking the grammar on a brochure or commenting on the English version of the departmental Web site. The same comments apply to any help you can give relating to teaching. Your help will be greatly appreciated.

4. Personal

Know Yourself

We all have different comfort zones and mood swings. Through my travels and solo hikes across the mountains through the US, I have learned a great deal about myself. I know what things I enjoy and how to keep myself productive and happy. For example, I like to walk. With this fact in mind, I rented an apartment that was about four kilometers from my office. Even though many Thai people think I am crazy, I walk to and from work everyday. My walk has me traversing several interesting streets where I go through markets, pass by a boxing camp, numerous stores, lots of barking dogs, and so on. I have met many people on my walk through these neighborhoods. Another benefit of walking is you notice more about the transformations that the neighborhoods are undergoing. Chiang Mai is a rapidly changing city, but if you do not look closely, you may miss some of the changes.

I prefer to live in a good-size apartment that is quiet; I like good lighting. Also important to me is a place where I have good running nearby and a pool. Remember,
the climate in Thailand can be hot and humid. Whatever you like, try to find a place that suits your needs and one where you can be happy. If necessary, spend more money to find the type of place where you can be productive. I also require a place with high-speed Internet. Choose your own apartment if possible according to your likes and dislikes. Of course, anything is acceptable, but I find that I can be more productive if I have a place that suits my needs. Thailand has many interesting creatures that may visit your apartment. In my rustic setting in Chiang Mai I have encountered huge spiders, scorpions, and even a cobra.

I like to play the guitar to relax, and I also like to lift weights. Bobby helped me to buy a guitar and some dumbbells. These conveniences were well worth purchasing. When I purchased the guitar, I was not allowed to play it until I bought it, so the purchase was sound unheard. You may have other hobbies or things that keep you on track. The guitar or weights are perfect for occupying a small chunk of my time here and there, and I can also entertain my friends with the guitar.

Moving 12,000 miles from home can be a traumatic experience. At some point feeling slightly depressed is normal. For example, if you ate some food that you shouldn't have and have been confined to a toilet for three days … If you traveled to Thailand alone, at times, well, you will feel lonely. You may not used to be eating alone so often. It is important to make yourself comfortable enough so that the new environment, the longing for family and friends, the missed comforts from home, the professional obligations, the difficulty with language, and so on do not get you down. Monitor your feelings. If you are longing for Italian food, go eat Italian. If you feel tense, treat yourself to a massage. From time-to-time reflect on how lucky you are to be in Thailand. If necessary, take a break. Use your cellphone to call home and touch base with some good friends. Keep in touch with friends via email. I maintained a Web site (www.cs.armstrong.edu/greenlaw, take the Thailand link), so that I could update my friends on my Thailand activities. New entries there generated welcome emails from my friends. The site also provides me with a log of my trip, almost like a diary.

People

I feel the most-important part of a Fulbright experience is the people that you meet and the friendships that you form. Thai people usually embrace friendly foreigners. Through friendships, knowledge about cultures can be exchanged. Be ready to make new friends at any time, as you never know when you are going to meet a special person. Try to make it a habit to go out on your own at least a couple of times per week. Thailand has many shops, local hangouts, and restaurants, as well as interesting markets. I make it a point to see some of the major sites when I travel, and when I go alone, I always make new friends. When I first came to Thailand, I printed up business cards with one side in Thai and the other in English. I printed up about 200 of these and now I am realizing that I should have printed even more. People like to exchange cards in Thailand, and if you include your email address and cellphone number, the cards are a good way for people to be able to contact you.

Customs and Culture

I try to respect all customs and cultures. About 95% of Thais practice Buddhism, and they are very peaceful and spiritual. When I travel, I usually do little to no additional background research on a country. I prefer to visit places without
having any preconceived notions or expectations. Try not to judge things and try not to compare things. For example, I went to a bank with a check in US dollars to deposit into my account, and there I was told that it would take two months for the check to clear. Once I had that information, there was no point in comparing that duration to the five days that it would take a check to clear in the US. I quickly realized that I simply needed to mail the check home and have my trusted home-base guy, put the check in my account for me. Be observant and mimic what others are doing if you are encountering a particular situation for the first time.

Weather

Thailand can be hot and humid. Bring lightweight clothes and protect yourself from the intense sun. I found it useful to keep a hat and umbrella handy. If you have a favorite brand of sunscreen, bring it with you, as well as your favorite sunglasses. I prefer to run in extreme heat, but you may decide to exercise early in the morning while it is still relatively cool.

Language

I tried to use my Thai as often as possible. You cannot rush things. Results do not come for free. Sometimes you will undoubtedly get frustrated and feel like you are moving backwards. My “Kuun nii” sounded like “Prung nii”, and I once waited half an hour for a friend who planned to arrive tomorrow. Like most things in this world, we rarely break new ground ourselves. Many have gone before us, and we just need to keep plugging ahead one word at a time. I tried not to get too hung up on absolutely perfect pronunciation. Gradually, you will speak more clearly. Just keep talking and try to learn a few new words each day. If people do not understand you, say things in a different way. Also, it helps to have more than one person to speak to at the same time. If multiple people are listening to you, I have found that combined they can often figure out what you are trying to say. Again, the cellphone comes in handy as a way to practice Thai by calling your Thai friends.

Ray at Wat Pra-tart-lam-pang-luang in Lampang

Travel

Although travel is relatively cheap, you will need to budget some money for your trips. Initially, I think it is a good idea to explore your local area. Once you have more language skills, it is easier to venture farther. I love to travel, so I made it
a point to go somewhere new at least once a week. When I go, I like to bring some work with me. This makes me more productive and makes the waits for delayed flights and the flights themselves feel shorter. On the other hand, if I am seated next to an interesting person on the plane and he/she is in the mood to talk, I put my work aside and enjoy a good conversation. I ran three marathons while in Thailand and those races took me into areas that I otherwise would not have explored. Whatever your passion is, use it to your advantage to enhance your trip. I recommend traveling with earplugs, eye mask, eye drops, and passport photos, as well as a large number of small US bills, an adequate amount of US cash, credit cards, and debit cards. Leave copies of important documents with friends, bring a couple of copies of your passport with you, and keep some passport photos with you at all times. It is a good idea to travel with toilet paper and any speciality items you need. Never check luggage items that are critical to your travels.

**Baht**

As of this writing, there are about 37 Baht in a dollar. Early on I recommend establishing a bank account. If possible, I would recommend bringing about $5,000 in US with you to open your account. You can then use your Thai bank card at ATM machines. In using your US ATM card, you will normally pay about $10 on a 20,000 Baht withdrawal. When you charge items with a Visa card, you often pay an additional 3% fee. Thus, by paying cash, you can save money. Taxi rides are often negotiable, and I have paid as little as 100 Baht for a 30-minute ride. Bank machines usually dispense 1,000 Baht notes, but I recommend you carry lots of small bills—20s, 50s, and 100s.

**Miscellaneous**

Reflect on what you are doing and your level of satisfaction with the way things are going. If you are not happy, make some changes. Evaluate again, and then make more changes. Eventually, you will find a rhythm that suits you. Listen to advice and opinions from others, but then make your own informed decisions. Oftentimes, there is no right or wrong way, but there is a way that will make you happy and one that won't. Check your energy level and if you feel that it is not as high as usual, monitor your diet. A new diet can alter your mood. Spicy food can alter your stomach. Pay attention to all you do and all you eat. Think on your feet. If you need to, ask for help. The Fulbright Commission in Thailand has many wonderful people working there, and they are more than happy to assist you.

**5. Summary**

I hope that you were able to take away one or two useful items from this article that will help you on your trip to Thailand. Like life, your Fulbright experience depends on you. Take complete responsibility for all you do and make the best of every experience. I hope your visit to Thailand is one of the best and most-productive times of your life! Mine was thanks to Bobby, Jo, Yui, the Department of Computer Science at Chiang Mai University, and the Fulbright Commission of Thailand.