



Rotary Club of Bangkok President Dr. Abdus Samad and my host counselor Mrs. Churairat Panyarachun

Greetings to my dear Rotarians of District 5340! ..or Sawadika!(Sah-wah-dee-kah!), as they say here.

It has been an incredible past few months of change and transition here in Bangkok. After arriving in Thailand a few weeks early to travel a bit before school started, I finally returned to Bangkok in September to meet up with the Rotarians here, get in touch with my master's program, and find an apartment to live in; essentially, to get down to business, or at least do my best to prepare for it. It was one thing to travel around Thailand, and an entirely different thing to approach the city again, weeks after my first date of arrival, as a newcomer; not just a tourist, but a "falang"(or 'foreigner') and future resident, trying my best to absorb, understand, and get in sync with this unique city's distinct pulse.

One thing that has made this process of integration so special is the certain level of tolerance of diversity that I have noticed and felt here; an aspect of Thai culture that I have really come to appreciate as a newcomer to the city. During my program orientation, we had a cultural workshop on Thai social etiquette. We learned a lot about "Thai-ness" and the meanings behind many Thai social graces and practices that I had unknowingly observed or in some instances was completely unaware of. Among other things, we learned how to wai (palms pressed toward each other in a prayer like position in the center of the chest, elbows in, gracefully bowing your head, fingertips to nose as a greeting, thanks, and sign of respect. Through this letter, I pass on to you all my respect and great thanks!) However, the final lesson that we all took away from the workshop was that although we learned many examples of 'the Thai way', we should feel in no way pressured into practicing all, or even any, of these social graces if we

didn't feel comfortable doing so, as Thai people(in general) are quite tolerant and respectful of cultural diversity. I still try my best to wai properly and speak what little Thai I know whenever possible, but it is a nice environment to be welcomed to, as a foreigner, where there aren't these social pressures between cultural differences. And for instances where I see that my Thai cultural (and linguistic) knowledge falls short, it is nice to know I can rely on a sincere smile to make up for most of the rest. There is almost a language of smiles here- a smile for every emotion and expression- and I assure you, it is much easier to 'read' than written Thai. So although "the land of smiles" may sound more like a cliché from a travel brochure, it is one cliché I have found quite useful so far, an example of "Thai-ness" that transcends both language and culture.

However more than just a few cultural observations, I wanted to share with you all a bit of what I have been up to here. Back in September, I was so lucky to arrive just in time for Rotary's 80th Anniversary in Thailand. I was able to hear past Rotary International President, Bhichai Rattakul, speak and share his experience and story with Rotary, both here in Thailand as well as at the international level. I also later got the chance to meet with him at the graduation of the Rotary Peace Scholars I met and befriended here this fall. Late in September I also made my first visit to my host club here, the oldest club in Thailand, Rotary Club of Bangkok. Observing and being a part of these Rotary celebrations and activities so early on in my time here was really great, as it gave me the opportunity to view Rotary through a new cultural context, learning more about Rotary and Thailand all at once.

Since my master's program in International Development Studies began in October, as of late, I have been very focused on my studies. As it is an intensive program year-long master's program, the work load definitely keeps us all busy, but I am very happy to say that the coursework is incredibly interesting and I am also learning so much in this respect as well. My classmates are another learning experience in itself- there are 24 of us from 12 different countries ranging from North America, Europe, Africa, East and South East Asia. It has been the most unique and enriching experience to study and discuss these issues of development, learning from and through the many different and insightful perspectives and experiences of my classmates.

In sum, there have been so many enriching experiences to be grateful for thus far, and I am sure so many more to look forward to this year. I keep you all close in my thoughts and thanks this holiday season, and look forward to staying in touch with you all.

With love, best wishes, and great thanks!

Marika