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METHODOLOGICAL ENGAGEMENT

Collaboration as Method: Field Lessons from South Sulawesi, Indonesia and Khon Kaen, Thailand

Ci Yan Sara Loh [1], Dalilah Haji Laidin [2], Fatwa Faturachmat [3,*], Anna Robin Duerr [2], Pamula Mita Andary [3], Andi Vika Faradiba Muin [3], Ariel Mota Alves [4], and Olivia Meyer [2]

AFFILIATIONS

1. Department of Anthropology, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, Honolulu, USA
2. Department of Geography and Environment, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, Honolulu, USA
3. Forest and Society Research Group (FSRG), Faculty of Forestry, University of Hasanuddin, Makassar, Indonesia
4. Department of Political Science, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, Honolulu, USA

* Corresponding authors: fatwaf@unhas.ac.id

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ABSTRACT

Collaboration in the context of international fieldwork serves to elevate the skills of all members involved while simultaneously contributing to a robust body of observations. This paper reflects on methodological lessons from a Collaborative Southeast Asia Summer Field School where graduate and undergraduate students from Universitas Hasanuddin, Sulawesi, Indonesia (UNHAS), Khon Kaen University, Thailand (KKU), and University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, USA (UHM) came together to learn how to conduct research collaboratively. Guided by mentors from these three institutions, our multi-disciplinary and multi-cultural group participated in collaborative field schools at three field sites - two in South Sulawesi; and one in Khon Kaen, Thailand - where we continued, and built upon our local partners' existing research projects and priorities in these areas. Each group focused on 'following' specific crops and commodities in different contexts, adopted and adapted multiple research methods, engaged with diverse team members and communities across various languages and landscapes, was guided by different fieldwork objectives and overarching questions, and yielded distinct findings. Despite these differences, all three groups shared a general aim to understand socio-economic and environmental transitions in Southeast Asian rural societies. Through collaborative and comparative reflections on challenges and adaptations before, during, and after fieldwork in both sites, this paper discusses how using collaboration as a research method has (re)shaped team members' understandings of our research, Southeast Asia as a region, and ourselves. Importantly, we reflect on how this experience has shaped our future collaborative research in, and of Southeast Asia, and how we might apply these methodological lessons in our own research projects.

KEYWORDS

Collaborative research methods; Field school; Fieldwork; Agrarian transformations; Southeast Asia; Cross-cultural collaboration; Political ecology.

1. INTRODUCTION

In Summer 2023, seven University of Hawai'i at Mānoa (UHM) graduate and undergraduate students participated in the inaugural Collaborative Southeast Asia Field School, which was funded by a five-year grant from the Henry Luce Foundation. The program was held over a span of six weeks in June and July, and took place across three different countries: Indonesia, Thailand, and Cambodia. The joint field school was organized by the UHM Department of Geography and Environment, the Center for Southeast Asian Studies, and the East-West Center, in partnership with Khon Kaen University (KKU), Thailand, and the Forest and Society Research Group (FSRG) at Universitas Hasanuddin (UNHAS), Indonesia. These two host universities were chosen as UHM researchers and field school organizers have established, long-standing relationships with existing faculty members.

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This joint field school was organized with the primary intention of exposing students of, and from Southeast Asia to field-based approaches to learning about our region of study, its people, and place. As our field school mentors emphasized to us, beyond learning about a place cognitively, via the classroom, being in the field allows for affective learning through using our senses, listening to the voices of the community members who live through environmental and agrarian changes, and building empathy through this grounded approach. Engaging in these kinds of relational and affective learning experiences with people and place leads to empathy that has the potential to transform learning, especially preconceptions that classroom learning may not be able to address.

This immersive, affective way of learning aligns with Preston's (2016) challenge to the overemphasis on skills- and knowledge-based learning in field schools, and Golubchikov's (2015) distinction between feel-trips and field-trips, which place emphasis on affective, immersive learning, as opposed to more distanced forms of learning. An engaged field-based learning approach that centers on pre-field school preparation, carefully selected field sites, engagement with people and places, and guided critical reflections on the field trip counters critiques of field-based learning, noting how field schools might reinforce students' existing misconceptions (Hope, 2009; Nairn, 2005). Ellsworth (2005) also states how the students' embodied experience, along with interactions with others going through a similar process, are themselves ways of learning.

Our field school also placed emphasis on the joint nature of the field school, as UHM students collaborated with 12 junior scholars, graduate and undergraduate students from KKU and UNHAS in planning, implementing, learning, adapting and reflecting on the three-week experience together with fellow young researchers of various linguistic, cultural and disciplinary backgrounds. This pointed emphasis engaged with the longstanding history of efforts in Southeast Asian Studies to convene cross-cultural, interdisciplinary, collaborative research. While many of us aspire to work in interdisciplinary and international groups, we are not always successful in doing it effectively. As Chann (2024) notes, the prevailing model of research in Southeast Asia often involves researchers from US universities collaborating with Southeast Asian partners to gather data that addresses predefined questions based on the disciplinary background of the US researchers. This field school aimed to improve the parity of this endeavor by involving junior researchers from both UHM and our Southeast Asian partner universities. This joint field school also spotlighted new opportunities for engagement, partnership, and parity, paving the way for novel ways of collaborative research amongst a growing network of young researchers of and from Southeast Asia.

Before field school began, UHM students participated in training sessions on participant observation, fieldnote writing, ethnographic writing, and an introduction to StoryMaps. Students took detailed field notes to facilitate their understanding of daily practices and identify patterns in perspectives of the world around them (Emerson et al., 2011). After three weeks of preliminary training in Hawai'i, students kept detailed daily fieldnotes during an additional three weeks of pre-fieldwork language immersion in their host countries. This experience aimed at preparing students for heightening observation skills and maintaining the practice of collecting data beyond the interviews. While UHM students participated in the field school training, KKU and UNHAS students were involved in the scoping field visits and initial meetings with research collaborators. Once together in person, students paired up and developed research questions.

Our field school themes were intentionally shaped by our local host partners, in a collaboration where UHM students provided research support to existing themes at

KKU and UNHAS. Given the rapid socioeconomic, political, and environmental changes in Southeast Asia in recent decades, these result in multifaceted, interconnected, multiscalar shifts that transcend geographical boundaries. Understanding these relationships required collaboration and knowledge-sharing among multigenerational researchers trained in various disciplines, such as geography, forestry studies, anthropology, political science, and agricultural science, among others, who come from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

From UHM, students drew on backgrounds in geography and environment, anthropology, and political science, with training in political ecology as a lens for understanding environmental and socioeconomic shifts in Southeast Asia. From UNHAS, students and young researchers were selected from the pool of graduate and undergraduate students through the Forest and Society Research Group (FSRG), who demonstrated a keenness and willingness to commit to the 3-week program. As for the project sites, FSRG selected the field school locations based on two primary criteria. First, the sites have distinct land tenure and village issues. The second criterion was related to FSRG's future research project intentions. In Kacang, initial observations revealed that the community continues to practice shifting cultivation in their land management (Mujetahid et al., 2023). Additionally, as FSRG was in the early stages of a research project in Kacang, the field school served to support the local host's research project in terms of preliminary data collection. Bawang was selected because it has been experiencing rapid land changes in the recent couple of years due to conversions of land from forest to agricultural areas. UNHAS, as a local university in this region, has never engaged with the community in Bawang, so the field school program was also intended to support UNHAS in conducting preliminary observations in the village for future research projects.

From KKU, faculty partners in the Faculty of Agriculture and Faculty of Engineering conducted applied research on agrarian transformations and water access in Khon Kaen (see, for example: Saraphirom et al. 2013, 2022; Choenkwan & Rambo 2018). They selected two master's students from the Department of Agricultural Extension and Development. Faculty mentors also selected two villages as field sites: Ban Chompu and Ban Chola. The villages represent diverse livelihood strategies, including changing crops and markets, as well as differentiated access to state irrigation and groundwater resources. These two sites allowed students to investigate housing adaptation strategies through interdisciplinary and cross-cultural collaboration.

This paper outlines the reflections of our field school participant teams on their 6-week experience planning, researching, learning, adapting, and reflecting on how to approach participating in field school as a collaborative method. We first discuss our various project site contexts, methodological approaches, innovations, challenges faced, and lessons learned. We conclude with collaborative and comparative reflections from the various site teams; and end with some practical implications for growing our capacity and network of Southeast Asian scholars, including potential applications for future individual and collaborative research.

2. REFLECTIONS FROM KACANG[1], SOUTH SULAWESI, INDONESIA

2.1 Village context

In the past few decades, upland areas in Indonesia have been transformed through a series of market-induced developments that have (re)shaped local beliefs and practices. Kacang, a Bugis-Dentong community, has settled in this area since the Dutch

[1] Pseudonyms are used for all village names throughout the paper.

colonial era. Their settlement formations and land use have undergone significant transformations over time during key historical periods. Today, they are located in four different hamlets, mainly in the forested areas, that border and overlap with a large National Park and also an education forest. The villagers' livelihoods primarily center on agricultural production, including cultivating paddy, candlenuts, peanuts, and corn. Some also migrate to Southeast Sulawesi, Kalimantan, and parts of Malaysia for work. These historical and contemporary events continue to shape and reshape village development and people's livelihoods over time, primarily through land use transformations in and around the village.

2.2 Methods

In Kacang, our field school team participated in preliminary research for an existing Forest and Society Research Group (FSRG) research project, which examined landscape and livelihood changes in this forest-agriculture frontier. Initially, FSRG researchers sought to explore the communities' shifting cultivation practices. However, through the field school program, which served as preliminary fieldwork for the project, we found that these socio-cultural practices had been replaced by contemporary practices. Thus, our research direction shifted to collecting data related to commodity changes, as we observed that the community was cultivating multiple commodities simultaneously.

Participant observation formed the foundation of our methodological approach, but we remained flexible to get the most out of our interactions. This flexibility allowed us to adapt to the dynamic nature of our research environment and the unique opportunities that arose during our fieldwork. Our observations occurred primarily during our 'walk and talk' or 'jalan jalan' sessions with the forest sage Pak Jahir.[2] These sessions were not just casual strolls but were strategically planned to cover significant areas of interest within the forest and agricultural lands. By walking through our surroundings, we were able to gain a more profound understanding of the landscape and its changes over time. This immersion helped us to appreciate the subtle nuances of the environment, such as shifts in vegetation patterns, wildlife presence, and signs of human impact.

During these walks, we engaged in spontaneous and informal conversations with Pak Jahir, which allowed us to gather rich, contextual information. We could formulate our interview questions for the next day based on the things we saw and the individuals we encountered along the way. This method was particularly effective given Pak Jahir's lifestyle, which involved working in the education forest and spending the day there, or tending to his farmlands, and the large expanse of the area we covered each day. His extensive knowledge of the forest and its history provided us with invaluable insights that we would not have been able to obtain through more formal, stationary methods of data collection. Pak Jahir was our primary connection to the community, serving as a guide to the physical and cultural landscape of our study site. His role was crucial in helping us navigate both the geographical terrain and the social fabric of the community. He introduced us to local customs, traditions, and key individuals, which enriched our understanding of the community's relationship with their environment. Pak Jahir's guidance ensured that our interactions with the local community were respectful and productive, fostering trust and cooperation.

Our research team comprised scholars and researchers from different disciplines, backgrounds, and world regions. UHM graduate students were from Anthropology and Geography and Environment, while UNHAS undergraduate and graduate students from

[2] Pseudonyms are used for all villager descriptions throughout the paper.

Forestry were mentored by early- and mid-career scholars from both institutions. Team members called Hawai'i, the continental US, South Sulawesi, and Peninsular Malaysia home. This diversity brought a wealth of perspectives and research experiences, which significantly enriched our methodological approach. Each team member contributed unique skills and insights, allowing us to tackle the research questions from multiple angles. The interdisciplinary nature of our team enabled us to blend qualitative and quantitative methods, enhancing the robustness of our findings.

Figure 1. Agriculture land in Kacang: (a) Terraced rice fields that intersect with forest areas; (b) Interviewing farmers in their groundnut fields (Photos by Nurfadillah Sunardi & Anna Duerr, July 2023)

Language proved to be both a strength and a weakness within our team. While the majority of our team spoke and understood Bahasa Indonesia, not everyone was fluent, and local dialects posed challenges even for the more experienced speakers. This linguistic diversity sometimes hindered direct communication with participants, but it also highlighted the importance of collaborative efforts within our team. Those fluent in the language took on the primary role of conversing and interviewing participants, while others supported the process through different means. For instance, while some members were engaged in direct conversations with participants, other members of our team took a more visual approach to participant observation.

Given that much of what we aimed to understand was visible in the landscape surrounding us, we developed a live photo mapping research methodology. As Pak Jahir explained the history of the landscape we traversed, one team member would capture images of our surroundings. Using an iPad application, these images were then digitally annotated in real-time based on the information gathered from our conversations with Pak Jahir and other interview participants. This innovative approach allowed us to create a dynamic, visual record of our observations that could be continuously updated and refined. It provided a powerful tool for analysis, enabling us to correlate visual data with narrative accounts. The live photo mapping also facilitated a deeper engagement with the landscape, as it encouraged us to observe more critically and document our findings meticulously. This method proved particularly useful in capturing the complex interplay between natural and human elements in the environment, offering a

comprehensive perspective on the changes and challenges facing the forest and its inhabitants. It was helpful in guiding us towards our preliminary findings: '*penyempitan/himpitan*' or land 'squeeze' as a prominent land use issue in this village. This method enabled us to visualize the layers of stories from the communities surrounding key historical and contemporary events that transformed land use in the area, eventually infringing on the community's lands.

In summary, our methodological approach, grounded in participant observation and enhanced by interdisciplinary collaboration and innovative techniques, enabled us to gain a preliminary understanding of the landscape and community. The flexibility of our methods allowed us to adapt to the field's dynamic conditions, ensuring methodological learning alongside more holistic preliminary findings.

2.3 Challenges and lessons learned

We initially structured our fieldwork to investigate shifting cultivation in Kacang, in support of the scoping study of the research project. However, we did not encounter these traditional practices in the field, and needed to reformulate the research focus, design, and methods, to suit the dynamic local contexts and issues. Our debriefs at the end of the day proved crucial for reconfiguring our research plan for the remaining days. The information collected through field school also assisted the EXPLORE Program in setting the scene for the following research project activities, particularly by providing preliminary data and methodological frameworks to support UNHAS students' future ethnographic studies, which aim to delve into the crucial land transformation and livelihood issues in the village. An additional challenge we acknowledged was that most of our preliminary data came from our key collaborator, Pak Jahir, and villagers whom we were introduced to, via Pak Jahir. Based on our preliminary reflections, the future ethnographic research carried out by FSRG team members ensured engagement with a more diverse set of voices within the village.

Working together with fellow researchers was also a learning process that continues to this day. In the case of our Kacang team, emerging researchers from diverse disciplines, backgrounds, positionalities, and language skills came together to conduct preliminary research and determine the best methods. Multidisciplinarity brought different perspectives to our collaborative research. Students assembled diverse experiences while conducting research, including various methods for conducting interviews, different perspectives for framing empirical findings, and variations in data analysis. Drawing upon these mixed approaches helped us expand our thinking and doing research.

As for language, local students primarily led community engagement, interviews, and participant observation, as they spoke Bahasa Bugis and Bahasa Makassar, while UHM students observed. This helped with forming and building relationships with the community. In terms of communication among our team, UHM and UNHAS students had varying degrees of proficiency in Bahasa Indonesia and English, respectively. Thus, multiple levels of translation and interpretation were at play when discussing research plans and findings, with some details getting lost in translation. However, since all students were generally accustomed to fieldwork activities, they easily adapted to the program activities in the village, though they encountered challenges in conversation. When it came to team bonding, there was much reference to popular culture and social media, along with plenty of laughter.

3. REFLECTIONS FROM BAWANG[3], SOUTH SULAWESI, INDONESIA

3.1 Village context

Landscape transformation in the highland areas in Indonesia has been affected by commodity changes and forest conversion. In the district of Bawang, there has been a significant land use change, with the conversion of protected forests into agricultural land resulting from massive shallot cultivation. Bawang is one of the region's primary sources of shallot production, where most of the population works as shallot cultivators, farmers, and sharecroppers.

Shallots were introduced to the area in the 1980s and started to boom in 2005. From 2012 until 2022, the area of land used for shallot cultivation had expanded, and the shallot production rate increased. Despite being a profitable commodity, shallot cultivation has led to significant environmental degradation. In particular, the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides has affected the quality of air and water in the area, as the chemicals waft through the atmosphere and some settle in open-water sources. This subsequently affects agricultural productivity in the low land areas. With emphasis on an experiential approach to field research and exploration of research methods, this field study was guided by the primary question: In what ways are the people of this village involved in shallot production, and how do they benefit from it?

3.2 Methods

Participant observation was one of the primary methods used. The observation took place at various locations, including cultivated lands and under the house, where both pre-planting and post-harvesting activities occur. We familiarize ourselves with both physical and man-made features required for shallot cultivation. Observation also yielded perspectives and data that could not be easily answered during an interview. For example, a question about the time it takes to complete one work cycle of cleaning, weighing, and packing shallots into large bags was difficult to answer in either an interview setting or while the workers are amid their tasks. While such questions might appear trivial, it is a small piece of the puzzle that offers insights into the temporal and spatial aspects of everyday experiences in shallot cultivation. Moreover, as we observed the process of cultivation during our stay, we also participated in seed planting and harvesting during our third day. This participatory approach of learning-and-understanding-by-doing offered more profound insights into the contexts, and inner workings of shallot cultivation. The observation was frequently accompanied by casual conversations or informal interviews as our team moved through the landscape and engaged with the community.

Visual documentation in the form of still images, and videos was another primary method that we used. This method was practical in bridging language barriers, multiple disciplinary backgrounds, and training among team members. The photos and videos aided in stimulating discussions among team members during the debriefing sessions that usually took place at the end of the day, and when preparing for the presentation, where information needed to be refined. Having these visuals also serves as a mnemonic device for our study context, for example, where and when the visual was taken, what we were doing at the time, who else was present, etc. Dissecting these details from the visuals helped provide depth to the narrative, or information that we want to share.

By the end of the field school, findings were consolidated and presented in the form of a StoryMap. Acknowledging the collaborative nature of this program, our team

[3] Pseudonyms are used for all village names throughout the paper

utilized a template for the StoryMap introduced by Scott Allen (field school graduate assistant) as a tool to initiate discussions, and in some instances, prompted by photos and videos that would be incorporated into the final product. The template was divided into objectives, narratives we wanted to convey, and media (including photos and videos) needed to support the story. The template was shared with team members via Google Docs.

Figure 2. Shallot farming in Bawang: (a) A farmer spreads pesticide to his newly planted shallots; (b) Some women farmers peel harvested shallots while being interviewed (Photos by Dalilah Haji Laidin, July 2023).

3.3 Challenges faced, lessons learned

The purpose of this part of the field study was to scope out issues related to shallot production in Bawang and was thus exploratory in nature. The broadness of the topic offered more flexibility in designing research questions, objectives, and data gathering. However, it also led to a less structured form of fieldwork, which had implications for the questions asked, and the information gathered. Some of our team members had to work extra hard to connect our research objectives with their disciplinary expertise and interests. For example, in forestry and environmental communication. These challenges also stemmed from a need for more collective preparation, especially for the non-local participants, in terms of familiarizing ourselves with the local context pertaining to the place, local community, and culture, and prevalent environmental and socio-economic issues faced by the community. However, we were able to overcome these challenges through daily debriefing sessions at the end of each field day, during which we discussed findings, challenges, contextual information, and plans for the next field day.

Language was also one of the challenges that our team faced. A casual understanding and proficiency in Bahasa Indonesia and Bahasa Lokal were crucial in connecting and cultivating a good relationship with the hosts and local communities. Our team used a combination of at least four languages to communicate with one another: English, Bahasa Indonesia, Bahasa Lokal, and Bahasa Melayu. Among ourselves, we were able to bridge this barrier through translation, openness to learn,

visual aids (photos, videos, body language), as well as popular culture references. However, a beginner level proficiency in Bahasa Indonesia made gathering of information less effective, and conversations with local communities less smooth, which reflected the importance of having a multilingual team.

As it was our entire team's first time visiting the area, we needed to begin acquainting ourselves with the local residents, particularly our hosts. They were really receptive and equally as enthusiastic as we were. The presence of foreigners opened up different kinds of access to the field. Local residents were often curious to learn about us, and photo opportunities sometimes arose from these conversations. These exchanges allowed us to establish a connection with the locals and frequently provided a smooth segue into conversations related to our research topic.

Additionally, one of our primary collaborators was a prominent leader and farmer in the village—who also happened to be our host. Before meeting the villagers, our understanding of the different actors and processes involved in shallot production was primarily informed by the subjective viewpoints of this particular farmer and his wife. Given their strategic positioning in the village, their responses were not representative of the diverse perspectives of the villagers, who had varying socio-economic backgrounds. While this preliminary information served as a good starting point for our research, it also highlighted the need for wider community engagement in future research projects in this village.

4. REFLECTIONS FROM KHON KAEN, THAILAND

4.1 Village context

Our group conducted field school research in Khon Kaen province in Northeastern Thailand (Isaan). Isaan is a primarily rural region that has undergone rapid agrarian transformation over the past few decades (Molle et al., 2009; Podhisita, 2017), including agricultural intensification, rapid technological change, and social changes (Rambo, 2017; Choenkwan & Rambo, 2025). These processes significantly influenced the experiences of research collaborators and the research observations of field school participants.

Khon Kaen city, home to KKU, is a vital hub for agricultural development and research. Our KKU field partners conducted site visits before the research to establish plans for the field school and coordinate relationships with key research collaborators. Drawing on their ongoing research on groundwater recharge, salinization, and agricultural development, as well as their strong relationships with farming communities near the university, the faculty selected two field sites located within an hour's drive outside the city.

Fieldsites included the villages of Ban Chompu and Ban Chola (pseudonym). Ban Chompu has vast agricultural land (primarily vegetables), farms typically have access to state irrigation, and some areas have highly salinated water. In contrast, while Ban Chola also consists primarily of agricultural land and mainly grows vegetables, the farms are more likely to rely on large irrigation ponds and non-state irrigated land. While both villages experience a semi-arid climate, they represent a diverse range of farming practices and crops (including rice, vegetables, rubber, field crops, and livestock) and differential access to state irrigation surface water, state irrigation groundwater, households without irrigation, self-supported groundwater, and self-supported farm ponds.

4.2 Methods

The Thailand research team was smaller than Indonesia's team. It consisted of a lead researcher, two faculty members from KKU, and five students. Team members represented various departmental and country backgrounds, which informed our examination of the water and commodity constraints faced by farmers in the two villages.

The team conducted almost 30 interviews, typically including six primary team members. However, we also split up at times based on the two different research themes of water and crops. We also conducted additional field visits and supplementary interviews outside our field sites. Our two KKU faculty partners accompanied us on critical introduction days and on field visits where possible. For example, we visited the Ubol Ratana Dam, the Royal Irrigation Department, and various other groundwater and farm sites, providing additional context and information for the research topics. Students read about and observed state programs firsthand, including irrigation development since the 1950s to transform arid land for the production of industrial crops (Molle et al., 2009), rice subsidies, the promotion of a sufficient economy through the construction of ponds, and the introduction of cash crops through training and exchange programs.

Once at the field sites, field observations involved taking notes on the environment and the immediate surroundings during both sitting and walking interviews, as well as noting nonverbal cues from research collaborators. Students reflected on their emotions and senses, including sights, smells, tastes, and sounds, to interpret a new place and culture. Photos also supplemented these observations. Our team drove and walked around the village field sites to better understand the communities' physical layout and social organization. This added further nuance to farmers' narratives about how communities changed over time, led to impromptu run-ins, and introduced insights into village gossip.

Figure 5. Rice planting and pond in Khon Kaen (Photos by Olivia Meyer, July 2023)

We walked on red soil cracking under the sun and observed the water-drenched fields as farmers shaded by large hats bent over for hours to plant rice (a traditional method of Dam-Na or ดำนา). We waded through high grasses to uncover irrigation canal structures and learned to compare the size of cassava plants to determine their age. These participant observations enabled us to gain a deeper understanding of and process information about crops, infrastructure, and livelihoods that we might have otherwise overlooked during interviews.

Scholars have noted that collecting data through participant observations informs the kinds of questions asked and the conclusions drawn (Bernard, 2011). Students found this significant during fieldwork when they observed plant species or water sources that farmers failed to mention during the interview process. The research team

discovered that these observations were crucial in identifying the diversity of farming practices that Isaan farmers engage in, but that they might overlook for various reasons. For example, if the plants are not a significant source of income, farmers might see them as unimportant and omit them from the interview. Through participant observations, students learned how farmers' crop choices (e.g., cash crops and climate-resistant crops) relate to the available water infrastructure (e.g., irrigation, groundwater, and state-sponsored ponds), as well as other factors such as age, labor, cost, and state intervention. Students also participated in activities such as tasting various fruits and vegetables offered, petting prized buffalo and farmer's dogs, or observing and engaging in farming activities such as tapping a rubber tree. These activities provided valuable insights into the emotions, connections, materiality, and physicality of farming practices and village life. It helped students understand and gain new appreciation for the physical demands of farming. For example, while students read about increasing deagrarianization through urbanization (Gullette & Singto, 2018) and younger generations moving to cities (Promkhambut et al., 2023), participant observations helped them understand what this meant for older generations when they discussed labor shortages and market demands.

The research team attended to the emotions that emerged during interviews. Emotional moments included Amphai, whose eyes grew watery as he recounted a story of being recognized for his farming successes, and Anya, who told us about the hardship she encountered when the government failed to open the irrigation canals for three years, and as a result, she could no longer grow off-season rice. When the drought came, she had "just to sit and watch the plants die." Farmers discussed challenges including gaining sufficient income, aging, struggling with farm and construction labor, water shortages, and fears of impending droughts. Attending to these emotions revealed trends in farmers' experiences, as Karuna similarly told us she knew there would be a drought this year, but she had to plant regardless. Coding field notes for emotion drew out other important themes, such as the demographic transition in the villages. Many farmers became emotional when discussing how their children moved to Bangkok to pursue new careers and better opportunities, often leaving the farming lifestyle behind and leaving the future of the farm uncertain.

Each morning, we shared our intentions and goals for improving our research process, as well as the type of data we hoped to collect. We conducted debriefings in the evenings and on analysis days to share the insights we gained. The reflection process involves translating complex landscape or irrigation techniques into more digestible information. Debriefing also involved clarifying questions and gaps that may have arisen during the interviews, serving as a helpful reminder that our ethnographies are based on partial observations. Each research team member identified different aspects from interviews and observations that we found interesting, important, or marginal.

4.3 Challenges faced, lessons learned

The role of translation was central to our team's collaborative research experience. This included non-verbal translation, in-person interpretation, and post-interview collaborative reflections. In-person interviews were particularly challenging due to language constraints. UHM team members had varied levels of Thai language experience, and KKU students had varied English proficiency. One KKU student who was more advanced in English, conducted the majority of in-person interpretations of English, Thai, and Isaan.

When in-person translations were not feasible, students used Google Translate or focused on questions that could be answered with more creative methods. One of the

ways this happened was in the water team, where a KKU graduate student would jot down notes, drop pins on maps, and create drawings during an interview, and then work with a UHM graduate student to explain crop layout, upland-highland divisions, and how varied irrigation, wells, and pond water operated across these landscapes. The maps and charts they created allowed us to understand the geographic information that farmers recounted in interviews. Observations facilitated an understanding of the diverse environments within and between villages and high and low-elevation land.

5. DISCUSSION: COLLABORATIVE FIELDWORK AS METHODOLOGY

This section discusses reflections on collaborative field school and fieldwork as methodology, from our group of emerging scholars of and from Southeast Asia - either educated in the US, in Southeast Asia, or a combination of both, and two American colleagues who continuously challenge and complement our perspectives, as we navigated our three field school experiences. These reflections and learnings, whether intentional or unintentional, stem from our perspectives as emerging scholars, as we are either about to embark on our own dissertation and research project fieldwork or are already in the midst of it.

5.1 Reflection 1: Revisiting approaches to fieldwork methodology and methods

Southeast Asian scholars, such as Pepinsky (2015), call for embracing, rather than transcending "*the tensions within disciplines, between discipline and area, and across disciplines in the area*," (2015: 216). As our three field school experiences demonstrate, each team brought multidisciplinary and collaborative approaches to the table. While we faced challenges in addressing the tensions of contextualizing or fitting together our interdisciplinary perspectives, a multidisciplinary team generally helped provide broader perspectives on our respective themes, as well as different frameworks and lenses that took into account our respective differences. This was especially important given that many of the themes and issues we found–'the squeeze' in Kacang, the shift to shallot production in Bawang, and water micropolitics in Khon Kaen–benefitted and even required multidisciplinary perspectives from geography, anthropology, political science, history, forestry, agriculture, and engineering.

In terms of the multilingual nature of our teams, one of the key questions that fostered our team's collaboration was the question of, how can everyone be involved even if they might not speak the language, or know it fluently? This led to innovations in methods which tapped into everyone's strengths and weaknesses, as well as their respective positionalities. For the Kacang team, one colleague who was new to Bahasa Indonesia, offered innovative, improvised participatory mapping activities with the villagers; in Bawang, the team used visual aids, namely photographs and videos taken during the day's fieldwork to navigate between the interviews in Bahasa Lokal, debriefings in Bahasa Indonesia, and translations to English for members of the team less familiar with Indonesian. In Khon Kaen, team members combined interpretation, Google Translate, mapping, and other visual aids to translate between Issan, Thai, and English.

Contrary to what many first-time researchers assume, data is not simply 'out there' waiting to be collected. Research collaborators have their own agency for negotiating the type of data they are willing to share. For example, in Thailand, we may have been interested in learning about how crops and the water infrastructure support farmers' livelihoods, but some farmers found talking about their cattle more exciting. Thus, refining questions became an iterative group process and helped clarify our research goals for collaborators and team members. Field participants had to hone their research skills by asking clear interview questions. Equally important, the field school

demonstrated the extent to which fostering positive relationships, intentional exchanges, and clear research goals is necessary for data collection. UHM team members found creative ways to exchange knowledge from their own homes about farming trends and practices they had experienced in Singapore, Timor-Leste, and Hawai'i. Informal moments of sharing cultural traditions, tasting agricultural products, and farm tours facilitated richer exchanges with research collaborators. We learned that while we may enter the field with pre-existing knowledge shaped by our training in graduate school, Southeast Asian societies are always in transitions, and as scholars, we have to remain open to learning new information and encountering ethnographic surprises (De Volo, 2009).

Nonetheless, the various linguistic and cultural positionalities of the various teams—we had complete outsiders (from US/UHM), outsiders from SEA who were in the liminal space between outsider and insider, insiders to South Sulawesi, but still outsiders to the villages we worked with—enabled us to engage in fieldwork and with the community members in very different ways. These negotiations of insider-outsider positionality interacted with our gender and other identities to enable or hinder our access to various community members and spaces. An additional aspect of our positionality was the multiple layers of learning resulting from our varied educational experiences. Our teams also consisted of our mentors, junior scholars, as well as PhD, MA, and undergraduate students. As Hau (2020) notes, our relationship to Southeast Asia as people and place "*cannot be reduced to the Self/Other dichotomy that informed older notions of area studies*" (2020; 66), due to our own complex positionalities.

5.2 Reflection 2: Rethinking power dynamics in research collaborations

The collaborative fieldwork model exposed us as young scholars to a new layer of power dynamics. Scholars working with diverse communities (Tipa et al., 2009; Umemoto, 2001) have examined power dynamics between researcher and community, or researcher and research collaborator, working to disrupt historical power relations where the researcher dictates the topic, plan, and language and instead towards more participatory, reciprocal, and engaged research and knowledge co-production (Dharmiasih et al., 2021; Fisher, 2021; Kimura & Kinchy, 2016; Maryudi & Fisher, 2020; Smith, 2021). Varied insider-outsider power dynamics enable different access to field sites. In addition to local researchers providing access to villages in Thailand, our UHM team helped facilitate entry to government interviews due to our status as outsiders. These combined positionalities offered new opportunities for our field school to gain a more robust understanding of agrarian transitions in rural Southeast Asia. This type of access underscores the strength of collaborative research, where we, as field school participants, acknowledge that such extensive access to field sites would not be possible without collaboration.

Additionally, the field school demonstrated that community members participating in interviews are vital research collaborators, pivotal in shaping research design and findings. For example, Pô Somluck, an essential figure in an organic farmer's cooperative, introduced us to most of our research collaborators in one village. He walked with us to field sites and helped us establish connections by immediately making our collaborators feel comfortable enough to share about their livelihoods with foreigners they had just met. Pô Somluck shaped our research by recommending farmers based on his relationships and knowledge of community farming activities that fit our interests. However, his selection of participants and his presence during many of the interviews may have influenced what other research collaborators shared.

Through our field school, we also strived to think about the politics of knowledge production in collaborations between researchers in the global North and the global

South. Such collaborations historically resulted in research projects, questions, objectives, plans, and theories shaped by Northern researchers, while Southern researchers were tasked to collect empirical data (Chann, 2024). Instead, our field school contributed to the host university's existing research projects. For example, in Kacang, our team supported the early data collection for the ongoing multi-year research project, the FairFrontiers Indonesia/EXPLORE Program. In Bawang, our team supported a scoping study to explore the rapid environmental transformations in the region. UNHAS students are used to working with established foreign researchers or their local mentors. However, as we are all emerging scholars in this collaboration, we were able to actively help to renegotiate those power dynamics and approach our fieldwork and co-production of knowledge in a more egalitarian way.

5.3 Reflection 3: Relearning Southeast Asia experientially, from the ground

As we spent time together on our various field sites, we began to have conversations organically about what Southeast Asia meant to us. As a region and people, we found commonalities in our food, culture, songs, dance, media, languages, and migratory patterns. We were exposed to the various connections with-in and with-out Southeast Asia that transcend our state and regional arbitrary borders. Even through our methods, as we compared our *santai-santai* approach to the *sabai-sabai* approach to fieldwork, both of which translate to 'being relaxed,' involve a lot of waiting around for people to show up, storytelling, and going with the flow. Specific to the Indonesia team, we also learned about the diversity of people, language, and culture of Sulawesi and Indonesia as a whole, beyond an often Java-centric introduction to Indonesia.

As a field of study, we have always learned about Southeast Asia as an abstraction, an imagined region with and within borders, as an imagined community, and through the lens of Southeast Asian Studies as defined by Western institutions (Heryanto, 2002). Field school reminded us that Southeast Asia is a real place, with real people facing real issues, and undergoing numerous socioeconomic, political, environmental, and climatic transitions. Winichakul (2014, in Hau, 2020) discusses how Thai intellectuals writing in their local language contribute beyond academia by engaging in activism, reaching out to the general public, and prioritizing the interests of both local and national audiences, thereby placing more value on policy-oriented and applied knowledge. Similarly, our interactions with local partners challenged us to think about Hau's question of, "for whom are Southeast Asian Studies?" (2020); for whom do we research and write? These led us to reflect on the cyclical questions of what makes a Southeast Asianist a Southeast Asianist (Heryanto, 2002). Beyond that, what makes a Southeast Asian, a Southeast Asian (Gin, 2009)? And specifically, what makes a political ecologist a political ecologist of Southeast Asia?

Finally, working on these three sites concurrently provided rich opportunities to compare and contrast, and learn from each other via reflections. In Indonesia, this provided us with a broader understanding of the context of different pathways of agrarian transitions in South Sulawesi. In Kacang, we followed multiple commodities, accompanied by a local guide, and in Bawang, we pursued a single commodity: the shallot. Adding the perspective of our colleagues from Khon Kaen made us think more deeply about connections across divisions between 'mainland' and 'island' Southeast Asia, as well as how agrarian transitions might be similar or differ depending on the local context, connections, geographies, and histories.

6. CONCLUSION: GROWING NETWORKS OF EMERGING SOUTHEAST ASIAN SCHOLARS

To return to the discussion of collaboration as a method, our field school experiences, while in different contexts, with different teams and themes, adapting different methods, and while relatively brief, all centered upon collaborative ways of learning (to work) together. Our various disciplinary training methods, language expertise, cultural backgrounds, affective experiences, and power dynamics, as well as those of young scholar teams, were integral to our innovative approaches and preliminary research findings. These field school experiences demonstrate first, the importance of bringing multicultural and multidisciplinary teams together to experientially examine the nuances of environmental transitions in Southeast Asia. Second, the importance of building upon these networks through comparative discussions, continued collaboration and exchange, and collective reflections.

As we have undergone this intense, affective experience together, learning about pertinent issues in Southeast Asia and Southeast Asian studies, and learning how to collaborate with colleagues, we have thought comparatively across Southeast Asian countries about topics, themes, and connections. In doing so, we have forged new, strong research relationships and friendships. This has led to continued language exchange through learning how to write and theorize this paper together, with plans to continue collaborating and organizing similar programs within our own institutions to grow our networks further and learn collectively.

On a professional level, our group continues to engage in discussions and debates on what it means to be a Southeast Asian, a Southeast Asianist, and a political ecologist of Southeast Asia. We come together in efforts to create space for Southeast Asian issues to be voiced by Southeast Asians, and challenge dominant narratives being formed solely by Western scholars. On an individual level, our experiences and lessons inform how we approach our own fieldwork in our respective field sites, as well as in future collaborations. Our experiences serve as a testament to the importance of joint-field schools like these, where intercultural, interdisciplinary, and affective learning, as well as collaborative knowledge production, are key. These are especially important for early career scholars such as ourselves, as we bring these lessons with us as we go on to conduct political ecology fieldwork in Southeast Asia with real people, in real places, and on real issues.

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