

NSC Archaeological Field School Reflection (2015)

By Lee Ho Yan Karen

As an English major student with an anthropology minor, I never imagined myself to have the opportunity to take part in a real-life excavation. I had only taken two archaeology courses in CUHK, and I knew that I lack a strong background in archeology and art history. When I sent out my application for the NSC Archaeological Field School, I did not get my hopes up. I was genuinely surprised and overjoyed when I received the acceptance letter from the field school.

This archaeological field school has been unique in many ways. One of the missions of the school was to strengthen regional cooperation and networks, so the participants were selected from different ASEAN countries, including Vietnam, Myanmar, Singapore, Laos, Cambodia, Indonesia, Philippines and New Zealand. Sharing an archaeology background, they all had different expertise and specialized in various fields. It turned out that I was the only participant from Hong Kong; I couldn't help feeling nervous and excited at the same time.

As the date of the field school approached, we soon received more detailed information regarding the trip, along with a packing checklist and a set of readings. The field school, led by Dr. D. Kyle Latinis, began in Cambodia and culminated in Singapore. After we arrived in Phnom Penh, we went on a series of museum and site visits around the city, in order to learn more about the Cambodian history and heritage. Some museums and sites that I visited there included National Museum of Cambodia, Cheung Ek Site, Phnom Chisor, Angkor Borei and Kampong Thom. These visits and the on-site lectures provided me with a deeper understanding of the history of the Funan period of Cambodia.

After spending 3 days in Phnom Penh, we traveled to Siem Reap, where we visited the world-renowned UNESCO heritage site Angkor Wat. With the guidance from Dr. Darith and Dr. Helene Njoto, we closely inspected the modenature and wall paintings at the site, and were able to appreciate the beauty of Angkor even more. Also, we attended a series of lectures and workshops at APSARA Authority, which is responsible for the conservation, management, and research facilitation in the Angkor region. There we learnt more about the Angkor site, such as its infrastructure, water management and tourism development plans. These practical knowledge proved to be very useful when we started our own excavation.

Our field school proceeded with a 10-day excavation at the Koh Ker site, a remote archaeological site which is 120km away from Siem Reap. This field school was also unique in the sense that we were actually pioneers of excavating in that particular site. We set up three excavation pits KK1, KK2 and KK3. Through the excavation, we hoped to learn more about the building structure of Koh Ker related to water management and control systems, as well as the nature of settlement and habitation at Koh Ker.

Dr. Kyle adopted a job rotation system, and he put us at different sites with different duties every day, so that we could receive training in different fields. I have taken part in drawing, digging, soil sampling, mapping, sieving, cleaning and classifying the artefacts, overseeing the excavation at the pit, and other duties. In the last few days of the trip, we went to Singapore to analyze the artefacts we had found and prepared for a presentation. I partnered with the girl from New Zealand, and we shared our findings on the bone pieces unearthed at the Koh Ker site.

Truthfully speaking I have learnt a lot from hands-on excavation experience and

from cooperating with my companions, who apparently know a lot more than me in terms of archaeology. Before I came to this field school, there were some archaeological concepts that were vague to me, as I only read about them in books. At Koh Ker, I was given the opportunity to observe and actively engage in the whole excavation process, and I was absolutely grateful for this learning opportunity.

Apart from gaining knowledge in archaeology, the best part of the field school is all the friendship that I have made and the precious experience I had during the trip. We slept in a wooden house in the middle of a forest, surrounded by insects every night; we ate instant noodles every morning as breakfast; we climbed up a steep hill to reach an ancient temple, just like pious worshipers did; we watched the sunset and gazed at the stars on top of a pyramid; we jumped into an ancient reservoir and swam like kids...we did many exciting things together and made this trip an unforgettable one.

We also exchanged our local cultures, such as living styles, food, movies and entertainment, with others through conversations. They have broadened my horizons in a lot of ways, by introducing me to Bollywood movies, comparing the cost of living between Hong Kong and Southeast Asia countries, teaching me how to make local handicrafts from straw, walk in the wilderness or cut a tree.....I realized that my knowledge about the Southeast Asia and South Asia region is greatly limited, and that there are many more ways of living than what I have ever imagined. Joining the field school is one of the best decisions I have made in my university life, and it has been a life-changing experience for me.



Performing prayer and ritual on the first day of digging for a smooth and safe excavation at Koh Ker site



Drawing session at Koh Ker



Exploring the ruins of a deserted temple in jungle



Sieving the soil to look for artefacts (mainly ceramic pieces, bone fragments and charcoal)



Presentation and Closing Ceremony in Singapore