A great learning experience

The writer together with several academicians who presented papers at a joint conference between a Malaysian and Thai university in Bangkok is inspired and pleased at the outcome of their presentations and the trip.

ROSILINA ABDUL LATIF

We were about to board our bus to the airport for our flight to Bangkok that mid-February day when we heard the news flash - a bomb blast at the Israeli Embassy in Bangkok! We were obviously shocked by the news but that didn't deter us for we were going to be in the Thai capital for a bigger purpose.

All of us in the entourage were going to present papers at the Mahidol-Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) Fifth Thai-Malaysian International Conference on Southeast Asian Studies and the theme for this year was Re-Making Historical Memory in Southeast Asia.

Our entourage comprised Assoc Prof Dr Er Ah Choy (chairman of the UKM delegation), Dr Chong Sheau Tseuey, Dr Paul Joseph Lim, Dr Sivapan Selvadurai, Dr Suhana Saad, Dr Zainah Ramli, Dr Abdul Hadi Harman Shah, Dr Novel ak Lyndon and Dr Richard Mason (School of Social Science and Environmental Studies), Muhd Norizam Jamian (School of Languages, Literature and Malay Culture) and Asmawi Noor Saarani and Wan Fairuz Wan Chik from the Institute of Malaysian and International Studies (IKMAS), Dr Ali Salman, Helmi Abdul Rahim, Dr Wan Amizah Wan Mahmud and I (School and Media and Communication).

Needless to say, security at the airport was tight when we arrived later that day, but we managed to breeze through with the exception of Dr Ali who was from Ghana. He was sent to another line and was checked as Ghana was experiencing yellow fever at that time.

We scurried through the airport and were welcomed by the hot humid air, very much like Kuala Lumpur.

As we were driving through Bangkok, I couldn't help notice that it was pretty normal with its hustle and bustle, given the morning's events.

The next day, Feb 16, we were all up and ready for the conference while still getting used to the small time difference.

Arriving at Mahidol University International College (MUIC), we were surprised to see that it had weathered the recent floods in Thailand without much damage.

The conference had originally been scheduled for December last year, but was postponed because of the floods that brought the city to a standstill. The flood had swept the city waters and the waters from the city's canals and rivers had overflowed onto major thoroughfares and city streets converting them into waterways. MUIC was not spared and it had to be sand-bagged to prevent the 1.5m deep waters from coming in.

Even with the challenges, the conference managed to get 40 paper presenters and four keynote speakers. It was an achievement that MUIC was proud of and so were we, as their Malaysian counterpart.

The conference was opened with welcoming speeches from Assoc Prof Peter Smith and UKM's dean of Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Prof Dr Hazita Azman. Prof Maleeya Kruatrachue, the MUIC dean then gave his opening speech. In short, both deans saw this collaboration that has spanned a decade to further explore and discuss among others issues pertaining to memory spaces and alteration of landscape ideas.

The first keynote address was Prof Charnvit Kasetsiri, a visiting researcher from the Institute of South East Asian Studies, Singapore.

In his research on the Cambodia-Thailand relations, he questioned the Preah Vihear (the dispute between both countries over ownership of the Preah Vihear temple in Cambodia) and the clash of nationalism between the two. He further discussed the sacrifices and the loss both nations faced in the struggle. Prof Kasetsiri, suggested that instead of losing territories in order to regain nationalism, what could have been done was to demilitarize these areas into peace-zones that could be enjoyed by both nations.

Dr Er's keynote on Re-Making of Historical Memory of Selected Industries in Malaysia gave focus on the palm oil industry and how it had evolved in recent years in Malaysia. Its technology perfected by local scientists not only benefited Malaysia but also other regional nations, he said. It was unquestionably a morning of scholarly discourse covering sub-themes that covered modern South East Asian politics, economic history, mental history and arts.

As compared to the previous Mahidol-UKM conferences, the topics this time were wide ranging covering not only Thailand and Malaysia but Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos.

A few attention-grabbing titles were Remembering January 7, 1979: a 32-year debate in Cambodian Political History by Sok Udom Deth (Zaman University), Re-Making...

Later that evening, all participants and the organising committee took time-off for the dinner. We were presented with garlands of sweet-smelling orchids and jasmine as we entered the ballroom for dinner.

We were in great company and had excellent food and entertainment. Even the dean and several members from both parties had fun joining in the closing dance.

The following day started with Dr Michael J Montesano from the Institute of South East Asian Studies, Singapore speaking on Memory and the Modern Southeast Asian Historiographical Enterprise: How serious the Siren Song of Marginality and Resistance?. His research covered the serious issue of a housing development plan on Bukit Brown Cemetery in Singapore.

His narratives exposed social changes among the Peranakan elite who have been directly affected by the project as their ancestors are buried in the cemetery. Nevertheless his findings showed that the “New Chinese” do not share the ideals and the cultures of the “Old Chinese” on the island.

After the interesting presentation, it was my turn to present. My paper titled A Broadcasting History of Malaysia: Progress and Shifts was taken from the first chapter of my working thesis and re-written for this purpose.

My supervisor, Assoc Prof Dr Faridah Ibrahim, gave her full encouragement and took the time to go through the full paper. Changes were made, taking her valuable feedback into consideration and with the approval of MUIC, I was fulfilling yet another step of my doctoral dreams.

Although Dr Faridah wasn’t able to make it because of prior engagements, my co-supervisor, Dr Wan Amizah was there to lend support. Both of us were presenting in the same session, she being an expert on censorship issues on the big screen, while I stayed with the small screen.

Feedback from her and pockets of discussion that ensued gave me a better perspective of where I was and possible changes to better my research.

The main mission for this trip was first to present a chapter of my thesis, second to network and third to have fun in Bangkok, after all the hard work.

With that mission achieved and possible contacts for future research collaborations and projects, it was time to have some fun in Bangkok.

The weekend was spent sightseeing, shopping and eating but not particularly in that order. It was a good weekend to wind down after the conference.

We visited interesting places like Bang Nam Paung Floating Market and the salt farm in Samutsongkran, watched traditional performances in Nopparat, shopped for jewellery in the city, purchased t-shirts at the Hard Rock Café and ate Thai food whenever we stopped!

It was during these makan sessions that we had a chance to chat. The topics varied from religion to family to interesting experiences. By the end of the trip, we were already plotting projects; conferences and lunch get-togethers for the future. By and large, it was a good trip to say the least, a learning experience while re-making historical memories in Bangkok.

Roslina Abdul Latif is a Broadcasting and Journalism senior lecturer at Taylor’s University and doctoral student at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

Roslina presented a paper on A Broadcasting History of Malaysia: Progress and Shifts at the conference.