

# A Heart for the Hmong

By Chin Han Xin and Roger Teo



Day out with the children from the STREEKIDS! shelter

“*Nyoob zoo,*” we chorused haltingly, our tongues tripping over the words, as the interpreter winced at our mangled Hmong greeting. The tongue-twisting Hmong language was like nothing we had ever heard; by the time we had reached simple clerking questions, we were close to throwing in the towel! It was hard to imagine that days later we would be high up in the mountains, in the thick of things, relishing every moment.

We launched Project Phetchabun in June 2011, in collaboration with RADION International, a Thai Christian non-governmental organisation (NGO) with a focus on the Hmong communities of Phetchabun, Thailand. The project, which lasted from 14 to 21 June 2011, was based in Khek Noi village in Phetchabun, where the largest Hmong community in Thailand lives, in order to serve the villagers in and around the region.

This pioneering medical expedition consisted of a team of eight medical students, a doctor and a nurse, as well as RADION staff, including Eugene Wee, the NGO's Singaporean founder, who has dedicated the past four years of his life to improving the lives of the Hmong community.

The Hmong people are the second largest hill tribe group in Thailand, with a significant proportion of Laotian refugees, fleeing retribution from the Pathet Lao for their involvement in the Vietnam War. A marginalised population, many without official identification or citizenship, the Hmong face numerous difficulties, including poverty, a high unemployment rate, as well as limited access to healthcare. These major issues are further compounded by rampant social problems, such as domestic violence, substance abuse, dysfunctional family units, and juvenile delinquency.

Our medical team partnered RADION as part of their Humanitarian Relief and Village Outreach programme. As this was the inaugural trip, our main aim was to familiarise ourselves with the situation on the ground (including the population demographics and disease epidemiology), to analyse the feasibility of our healthcare goals, and assess the sustainability

of the project in general. Our goals for the trip included: running acute clinics in a primary care setting, screening and management of chronic diseases, village education and community involvement.

## Planning and preparation

Upon arrival in Khek Noi village, we were given a cultural orientation course, where we were taught the basics of Thai and Hmong culture and language, with the Hmong language proving to be particularly difficult. In another aspect of cultural education, we were shown Rebecca Sommer's *Hunted Like Animals*, which documented the oppression of the Hmongs by the Laotian army – one of the most poignant moments of our trip. Clint Eastwood's *Gran Torino*, the sum total of our prior knowledge of Hmong history, certainly had not prepared us for the shocking atrocities that were presented, moving a great deal of us to tears.

On a lighter note, we also visited an integrated farm, one of several sustainable micro-businesses run by RADION, and amused the local farmers with our urban ignorance and wide-eyed wonder at the simplest aspects of farm life. Apart from chasing ducks and catching chickens, we assisted in the truly novel experience of slaughtering and eviscerating a wild boar in preparation for food distribution later.

Having familiarised ourselves with the people and the environment, we were then more adept at organising logistics to suit the local context, working closely with our invaluable interpreters to translate our posters and finetune our village education programme. In order to restock RADION's medical inventory, we also travelled to the region's largest pharmacy to procure medication for our clinics, navigating our way through a mindboggling array of drugs with the help of the friendly Chinese storekeeper.



Distributing noodles with wild boar to the villagers



Educating children in basic hygiene

## Clinics

With our supplies collated and preparations finalised, we conducted two free ambulatory clinics, with the first up in the mountain village of Poo Kat and the second in the village of Huay Nam Khao.

The journey to Poo Kat village, located 1500 m above sea level, was no mean feat, as it involved packing light and loading all our supplies and belongings into three four-wheel drives, the only vehicles capable of traversing the muddy and treacherously steep mountain paths, for a three-hour journey uphill. Several heart-stopping times, the wheels slipped and slid in the mud, but we managed to arrive safely, and set up our clinic in the village hall immediately after arrival. We were greeted with a steady stream of patients and our clinic lasted into the night, beginning again in the early morning the next day.

Our second clinic was run in the facilities of a primary school in Huay Nam Khao, where villagers of the area lined up to attend our day clinic. Although both clinics were centrally located, there were a number of bedbound and morbidly ill patients who were unable to travel; thus we conducted home visitations, providing comfort and relief for these socially isolated patients.

During our clinics, we also held village education sessions, with a focus on hand hygiene and safe food preparation. Posters in Thai were translated to Hmong and explained to the villagers, with demonstrations and interactive sessions for reinforcement. These sessions were well-received, particularly so by the children, with the proper incentive of glowstick prizes in the handwashing competition.

## Community involvement

Our team also participated in the distribution of food and relief items for Poo Kat, building rapport with the villagers. RADION staff prepared bowls of noodles with the wild boar we had slaughtered earlier, and we distributed them personally to the hungry crowd of 500: first the eager

children, the women, and finally the working men returning from the fields. While it rained heavily during the distribution, it did nothing to dampen the crowd's spirits, nor our own, moved by the sight of a scene akin to a refugee camp. Following that, we distributed relief packs containing blankets and dried foodstuffs to each family, with the special treat of donated toys for the children.

Some of our fondest memories stem from the children from RADION's STREETKIDS! programme, a juvenile rehabilitation centre for children from high risk backgrounds. As most of our delicious, homecooked meals in Khek Noi were taken at the STREETKIDS! shelter, we were able to interact with the bright and lively children, engaging them in games and local activities, including their mischievous ideas of fun, such as placing giant staghorn beetles on us! Upon our return from Poo Kat, we were also able to bring the group of ten children for an excursion to a nearby dam, where we caught crabs and water snails for dinner.

Looking at the carefree children, it was incomprehensible that most of them had come from backgrounds of neglect, sexual abuse or gang-related activities. To us, it was a testament to the resilience of children and a reinforcement of how any child's environment should be: safe and happy.

## Future involvement

With the completion of a fruitful trip, RADION is keen on working with future teams of medical students on a regular basis, with a view to establishing long term collaboration on a sustainable project. Project Petchabun requires both funding and an enthusiastic medical team for our future ventures. If you are keen on novel experiences, and have a heart for rural communities, please contact us at [projectpetchabun@gmail.com](mailto:projectpetchabun@gmail.com). **SMA**

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Dr Satish from our team examining a child



Conducting a home visit



"Open your mouth and say AH..."