Statement of Purpose

In China and Thailand, capitalism, with its inequalities, crises, and structural domination, has won. The recent history of both countries is marked by the limited possibilities for democratically organized government and their uneven location in the world economy. Yet, both also share an interwoven history of radical social movements and Marxist intellectual traditions. On the one hand, the Maoist critique of capitalism cannot be understood without its international intentions, which had a much larger direct impact on and interest in Thai thought than has been recognized in the scholarship on either country. On the other hand, Thailand, Southeast Asia’s Cold War capitalist stronghold, produced several waves of Marxist scholars who depended upon Maoism as both a source of critical thought and as a historiographical foil. My proposed research is a comparative, sociologically-inflected intellectual history of these two traditions in which the grounds for comparison is each nation’s experience of the universalizing forces of imperialism and capitalism and the transnational flow of ideas that ultimately made Thailand an intellectual arena for competing Marxisms. This research is guided by the following questions: Where are the moments of congruence and break in Chinese- and Thai-Marxist theories of the past? In what ways are remnants of the past seen as obstacles to revolution, and in what ways are such remnants mobilized as anti-capitalist possibilities? Finally, how might the contrasts in these localizations of Marxist thought be explained through particular experiences of imperialism and global capital?

Marxist ideas initially moved into Thailand with Chinese immigrant laborers in Bangkok who, in 1927, established the Communist Party of Siam. This group maintained both its political position and ethnic Chinese base through the end of absolute monarchy until the establishment of the Communist Party of Thailand in 1946. Even in the later eruptions of Marxist scholarship in the 1950s and 1970s, the main intellectual force in Bangkok remained Sino-Thai scholars, many of whom had close relationships to scholars in Beijing. Radical novelist and journalist Kulap Saipradit, for example, went into self-imposed exile at Peking University in 1958 following a coup in Thailand by Sarit Thanarat. From Beijing, Kulap participated in the Afro-Asian Solidarity Front’s cultural education and research programs as well as regularly speaking on a Chinese Communist Party radio station broadcast throughout Thailand. Further, while Beijing served as a favored destination of exiled Thai radicals, including former prime minister and architect of the 1932 Revolution Pridi Banomyong, Yunnan Province in Southern China became an ideological and guerilla training ground for many in the Communist Party of Thailand.

Although much of my very preliminary research into the intellectual history of Marxism-Maoism in Thailand has yielded dogmatic recitations of the communist stage theory of history, there is also evidence of very interesting breaks between what some of the major Thai intellectuals were writing and the orthodox teleology of slave society, feudalism, capitalism, and so on. These breaks occur precisely around the question of the past and how to account for remnants of old traditions in the modern era. The working title for my project is “Emergence of Radical Pasts: China, Thailand, and the Nightmare on the Living.” The nightmare to which the title refers is an allusion to a line in Karl Marx’s “The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte.” In short, Marx describes the traditions of dead generations, i.e., the past, as hanging like a nightmare on living generations, shaping the revolutionary imaginations of the present. The presence of the past in the
modern era leads to a sense of recurrence in history that prevents the radical break Marx deemed necessary for a successful overcoming of capitalism. In its use by Marx, it was intended as a call for a radical modernism. The tension between the multiple temporalities that characterizes capitalism as a global dynamic is not always so cleanly addressed by Thai Marxist-Maoist intellectuals. On the one hand, writers such as Supha Sirimanond and Jit Phumisak both used the Sakdina system as a comparative to the European feudal system. The Sakdina system was seen as a feudal stage that had only partially been overcome, which created obstacles for a revolution but linked Thai intellectuals to the semi-colonial, semi-feudal debates within Maoism. On the other hand, Jit Phumisak, along with Kulap Sairradit, wrote about the revolutionary potential in the pre-capitalist traditions of Theravada Buddhism. Remnants of the past, therefore, appear both as a nightmare and as a potential for different societal organization.

In my dissertation research, I hope to connect these scholars more closely with the Maoist traditions to which they were contributing. I will approach these debates from a socio-historical perspective that considers the chief source of agreement and disagreement between Chinese and Thai Marxist-Maoists not to be individual intellectual biographies but the concrete differences in experiences of imperialism and capitalism. While capital operates along a universalizing tendency, this universalization is mapped onto particular pasts. These pasts, whether seen as nightmare or potential, create configurations within the multiple temporalities of modernity which, in my approach, account for particular interpretations of Marxism-Maoism in ways that tell us far more than intellectual biographies could.

If awarded the Center for Southeast Asian Studies Field Research Award, I plan to begin pre-dissertation research by working with Dr. Suthachai Yimprasert in the History Department at Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok. Dr. Suthachai is a former Communist Party of Thailand (the Party) member and custodian of the Communist Party of Thailand collection at Thammasat University, Bangkok. Dr. Thongchai Winichakul has offered to facilitate our meeting. As a former member, Dr. Suthachai has access to archival materials and oral histories, especially of debates within the Party after 1976, which would greatly enhance my ability to compose an executable dissertation project. I also plan to meet with and interview Dr. Kasiyan Tejapira at Thammasat University. Dr. Kasiyan has published several works on the intellectual history of Marxism-Maoism in Thailand and has access to several journal archives that would not be included in the Party collection. Specifically, I hope to gain access to copies of the radical journal ‘Aksornsarn,’ which was edited by the first Thai intellectual to publish a systematic study of Marx’s thought – Supha Sirimanond. Dr. Yuki Mukdawijitra, with whom I have been reading Supha’s text as preliminary research, has offered to facilitate a meeting with Dr. Kasiyan. Finally, my MA advisor, Dr. Ian Baird, has offered his services in connecting me to several key former members of the Party living in North and Northeast Thailand. These interviews would allow me to frame the intellectual climate of Thai Marxism-Maoism within the history of the guerilla movement itself. They are also very likely to produce rare archival data not officially catalogued in any library or university.

I plan to arrive in Bangkok, Thailand on June 1st and return to the United States on August 15th (please see my application form for budgetary details). My primary goal in these ten weeks is to familiarize myself as much as possible with the available archives. I plan to base myself in Bangkok for the majority of these weeks as it is home
to both Chulalongkorn and Thammasat Universities. However, I plan to travel to meet contacts made through Dr. Baird at their convenience. It is therefore difficult to develop a week-to-week itinerary. I will establish accommodations for a ten-week stay in Bangkok and make trips to other provinces via bus or train. I do not plan to need accommodations outside of Bangkok for more than four or five days at a time. I will also travel to Vientiane, Laos at the end of July for the purposes of visa renewal, as this is the least expensive option. While my MA research was conducted at Chulalongkorn University and at the National Archives of Thailand in the summer of 2013, this was during the course of a political ecology-focused project. As such, I have experience with some of these archives but little knowledge of what they hold for my dissertation research. Coupled with the three years of language training I have received from the University of Wisconsin, I believe that this experience will maximize my ability to use a Field Research Award in acquiring a state of the field in the Thai scholarship and establishing an achievable dissertation project based on knowledge of archival resources.

Given the recent coup d’etat in Thailand and the authoritarian government’s harsh treatment of critical intellectuals, I believe a project focused on the history of radical Thai thought and its place within larger radical Asian traditions is timely. Although I have taken steps toward my dissertation research in Madison, including accessing Party microfilm archives and studying what texts are available, I believe that any serious enhancement of my proposal hinges on a firm knowledge of what is possible based on the archives. I thank the committee for its consideration in funding this research.

Nicholas R. Zeller
Ph.D. Student
History Department
University of Wisconsin, Madison
423-596-4178
nzeller@wise.edu