

Professor says awareness of Southeast Asian culture lacking

An APASU-sponsored presentation sheds light on the region's customs

By Edward Yuen
Oregon Daily Emerald

Some students at the University cannot recognize the differences in the Southeast Asian cultures, said Gerald Fry, director of Center for Asian and Pacific Studies, at a presentation and discussion session on Wednesday evening at the Multicultural Center.

To introduce Southeast Asian cultures to the University community, the Asian/Pacific-American Student Union organized the event, titled "The Forgotten Ones." More than 40 students attended.

According to statistics released by the Office of the Registrar in Fall 1998, 1,069 American students at the University identified themselves as of Asian or Pacific Islander descent. Among 1,435 international students at the University, 292 were from Southeast Asia.

"It's very important that the University has events that present the appreciation of the multicultural diversity of Southeast Asia," said Fry, who has been working in Southeast Asian countries since 1966. Fry has traveled in Laos, Myanmar, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand, where he worked with the Peace Corps.

The presentation started with the traditional Thai dance "Cheurn Pra Quan" led by Vatsana Chanthala, a senior in international studies who immigrated from Laos in 1984. Chanthala said the dance was performed at the beginning of the presentation to bring in "good spirit."

Fry presented a series of slides he took in several Southeast Asian countries.

He said American media misrepresent Asian countries and their cultures. Ordinary events are not being reported, but the economic crisis in some Asian countries or a forest fire in Indonesia is.



Senior Vatsana Chanthala, junior Gwen Howlett (foreground), freshman Sophang Lam and junior Samantha Pok perform a classical Thai dance at the Multicultural Center Wednesday evening.

Those reports scare off some Americans from visiting those countries, Fry said.

Fry said not only the news media are biased, but also the movie industry. One example was "The King and I." He said the movie distorted Thai history.

Fry also said some of the geographic terms, such as "Far East," "oriental" and "Indochina," are misused in describing Southeast Asian regions. These terms are either Eurocentric or were introduced in a colonial period. Misuse of these geographic terms leads to the issue of "equating," where some people cannot distinguish Java and Indonesia or consider Bangkok to be Thailand.

Chanthala agreed that students need to know more about the mix of cultures at the University.

"It's important for people to know the diversity on campus," said Chanthala. "Not just the culture but also the history."

She said some people are not aware of Southeast Asian cultural taboos, such as touching people's heads, pointing at people or disrespecting Buddhist monks.

Fry said Southeast Asia is important to the world's economy because of its location — it is the crossroads between East Asia, India, Australia and Europe. Also, the region contains a wide variety of ethnicities and cultures, and politics are complex and diverse, Fry said.

"This workshop presented an aspect of Asian culture that is often ignored or overlooked in the discussion of Asia," said Jason Mak, co-director of APASU.

The presentation ended with a Thai dance, which included audience participation.

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it is increasing them by a significant margin, she said.

"I don't think that doubling the investment in coverage would be able to fall entirely on the shoulders of the administration," Friesstad said.

Graduate students teach more than a third of all credit hours taught at the University, and individual workloads amount to approximately 22 hours per week, according to the GTF. Fellows are also required to take a minimum of nine graduate-level credits per term.

"At a time when the state of Oregon is reinvesting in higher education, we graduate student teachers are sending a message that the U of O needs to invest in the people and programs which make this university work," Redmond said.

Grad students are essential to the University because they provide world-class teaching, grading, research and many other duties at a very low price, he said.

"The bottom line is that we have earned our health insurance the old-fashioned way: by working hard for it," Redmond said.

Graduate teaching fellows at the rally said they hope to persuade administrators to continue to expand coverage to summer term and the fellows' spouses and children. The current policy covers only the GTFs themselves and only for fall, winter and spring terms. The University denied the federation's summer coverage last year.

Under the health plan, fellows receive medical, dental and vision insurance through an extensive preferred provider network. The individual medical deductible is \$200.

"I depend on my U of O insurance," said Ursula Wiljanen, a fellow in Germanic languages. "Graduate students simply cannot afford private insurance on our little salaries. And if we can't protect our health, how can we teach?"

Maggie Young contributed to this story.

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