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Mellon Foundation Area and International Studies Fellowships for Incoming Graduate Students

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I would like to express my sincere appreciation for the generosity and support of the Mellon Foundation which allowed me to pursue pre-dissertation field research in Thailand. My dissertation project investigates the embodiment and the development of the Thai refugee regime and its impacts on lived experiences and livelihoods of refugees in Thailand. The study focuses on (1) the socialization of international refugee norms and practices in the context of a refugee transit country that is not a party to the international refugee conventions but is pressured to admit refugees; (2) the dynamics of bureaucratic ambiguity embedded in the Thai refugee regime, which plays a significant role in shaping lived experiences and livelihoods of refugees; (3) the impacts of the Thai refugee regime on lived experiences and livelihood of refugee in Thailand; and (4) the overall refugee dynamics in a refugee transit country.

The Mellon Foundation Area and International Studies Fellowships for Incoming Graduate Students provided me with the opportunity to visit Thailand in Summer 2017. During my field study in Thailand, I was able to gain access to an archive at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand where I was permitted to read declassified historical documents related to refugee policies and practices since 1956. Each of the folders contains documents, such as internal memos within different bureaucracies, minutes from official meetings, and talking points prepared for key officials in the Thai government. Archival research allows me to have a better understanding of the development of Thai policies towards different groups of refugees in the country.

At the same time, I was also able to establish contact and interview 7 officials—each from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), the Ministry of Interior (MOI), the Office of the National Security Council (NSC), Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS), Bangkok Refugee Center (BRC), People's Empowerment Foundation (PEF), and Fortify Rights. This group of people provided me with knowledge able the present refugee practices in Thailand from the perspective of their organization as well as the role of their organization in the Thai refugee regime. This information led me to successfully see a strategic connection between different refugee-related organizations within the Thai refugee regime.

In July 2017, one of the civil society organizations helped arrange a meeting between me and five urban refugees from Somalia and Pakistan. Through several rounds of interviews with them, I obtained a better understanding of refugee's lived experiences both before and after arriving in Thailand. It brought me into a new research angle in which I was unanticipated. I was informed of stories about persecution, flight to Thailand, welfare service, and humanitarian assistance. Some refugees also discussed their experiences engaging with bureaucrats and civil society groups with me as well. Knowledge from this group of people led me to have a more holistic perspective of the Thai refugee regime.

I would like to thank the Institute for Regional and International Studies (IRIS) and the Mellon Foundation for financial support, which made my field study in Thailand possible. I eventually anticipate that my dissertation will contribute to both academic and policy circles. First, it will lead to the formulation of the theory about bureaucratic ambiguity, which is central to the Thai refugee regime. Second, this study will pave the way for the reconstruction of theories about the socialization of international norms in the domestic context, the post-colonial state, and lived experiences and livelihoods of refugees. Third, it will provide implications and new insights into the management of refugees, in the previous underexplored context of refugee transit countries. In terms of its practical contributions, this dissertation will generate new inputs for the scheme to reform the refugee regime in Thailand—the initiative that key officials in the Thai government has expressed their interest. Lastly, it will benefit NGOs and intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) that are currently engaging with the Thai state on refugee matters by highlighting important domains that require their further involvements, support, and intervention.