



## Chiang Mai: An 'Active Minority's' Emancipation

**It was September 2011, when Chiang Mai culture began thoroughly percolating into Hussein Ghouleh's sense of Self – transforming his life, eternally.**

"The moment I reached Chiang Mai, everything became clear," says Hussein. "And when I started looking at this culture from the point-of-view of a Muslim, I related to my religion more than I ever could."

He felt, "peace."

For a contextual window into Hussein's mindset, he's from Jordan in the Middle East – a location for which he harbors spirited sentiments related to how his worldview was molded.

Hussein proclaims that many aspects of his root system are based on "limitation," which he maintains is about prescribing levels of personal production via education regarding religion and culture. Accordingly, he did feel part of a community, although "treated as a sheep – not (valued) for my potential."

While of course these cultural facets exist worldwide, Hussein – at the time of his initial arrival in Chiang Mai as an "Arab traveler" – "didn't know if it was right or wrong." Therefore, he naturally strove to make sense of his newfound environment by drawing from his prior life experiences. And this journey has been flip-flopping everything he had previously known about the world.

"Why I really love Chiang Mai is because I literally feel like I can accomplish anything I want here and anything anyone would ask me to do," said Hussein, while displaying a rich smile and a determined gaze. "Because I've finally realized that life is just one big, fat joke, and I've learned how to laugh."

"I'll be honest," he added. "Up until the moment I reached Chiang Mai, I was acting out of limitation and desperation...Now that I'm free, I can never go back."

CHIANG MAI TOURIST GUIDE :: 53

**“ The most important thing that's happened to me in Chiang Mai is I've started to know who I am. I've started to realize why I exist. ”**  
Hussein Ghouleh

Hussein declares that the fundamental difference between his prior lifestyle and the one he's now living in Chiang Mai is that his current environment is providing for a sturdy platform from which he's envisioning a seemingly endless array of life opportunities. He feels liberated from norms related to social ranking, especially those to which he's accustomed.

He's creating his own stick for which the carrot is attached, by life-nesting with his wife, Manami. They are both successfully indulging in a freelance work lifestyle, in a home tucked inside a dead-end soi located on the western fringes of Chiang Mai.

Here, Hussein is undergoing a series of personal growth journeys – including those related to patience, acceptance, responsibility and respect – that are nourishing both his external and internal worlds.

The general social environment of Chiang Mai's is offering him a "real education," which he's convinced is about being exposed to new information as well as adopting the behavioral traits of another culture. He thoroughly comprehends that a lifestyle in addition to the one to which he was accustomed is sustainable.

"There are too many reasons why I'm in Chiang Mai," said Hussein. However, "Upon arriving, I first noticed the people. Every person I dealt with was treating me for who I am as a person, which was a human being receiving a service; so, they gave it with a smile. Regardless if this smile was fake or not, it felt real."

Furthermore, he's thoroughly inspired by the tenacity of local, common-folk Thai people, their resourcefulness and capacity for survival, while being seemingly immune to perpetual worry. They "accept life as it comes."

Hussein acknowledges these traits as a positive result of religion and culture. And these life philosophies are at the polar opposite of the ones he's used to practicing. "It was never about the journey, always the destination."

Furthermore, "Most (Thais) are doing something to live, to operate, to function," added Hussein (who confesses to speaking in broad generalities). "Whatever skills they have, they use them to their full potential. This is what Chiang Mai is. Even if they don't have a (formal) education, they have something to rely on – a skill, and they're not ashamed to use it."

"What I have also noticed is they don't put the personal-life factor up front. It's a personal thing. It stays inside. 'Whatever I do during the day, I don't have to report it to anybody.' There is no judgement."

Hussein, for the most part, feels "accepted" and "embraced" in Chiang Mai. He also believes that tranquility between humans can be cultivated if people acknowledge that when they are interacting with others – say, from a different country – they are actually interfacing with another culture.

"They will then start to acknowledge that whatever this person is doing – which may seem weird or strange, but is normal to them – should be appreciated. It's something of a self-reflection, like looking into the mirror."



An example of this is Hussein's experiences while selling pita bread and sandwiches at a Chiang Mai street market. He felt free and welcomed, while receiving kind-hearted gazes and curious inquiries from both Thais and those from other countries. What astounded him most was the queries related to his levels of happiness. "This question, nobody, not even my father or mother or friends, have asked."

Hussein talks about "feeling rich when you are poor," adding that a self-sufficient mentality assists with this. "The more I've started becoming a Chiang Mai resident, the more I feel that I'm obtaining (life) skills and really shouldn't worry. I can do, anything."

He added that all of these overall factors related to Chiang Mai culture create an environment suitable for a plethora of personal backgrounds and opportunities.

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Hussein coins a term for himself - an "active minority," in the sense that he's been active as a minority within every community of which he's lived, whether related to his ethnic origins, or personal and professional backgrounds.

Likewise, he's diligently working towards providing inspiration and guidance for people searching for new challenges in their lives, willing to "break cultural and social boundaries to broaden their possibilities." For Hussein, Chiang Mai is currently the "utopia, whatever this means," for realizing this life vision.

"The most important thing that's happened to me in Chiang Mai is I've started to know who I am," Hussein expressed firmly. "I've started to realize why I exist."

Hence, he feels "alive."

"I didn't even stop for one second in my 30 years of living in the Arab world to look at a tree." However, "I feel like this is year one for me. It's like being in my childhood, as an adult."

"I'm really taking care of myself now. Every day I wake up, I still get the same feeling that this is my first day in Chiang Mai...I really don't know what will happen, or what I will be doing, but I am extremely excited."

