

Community report – Phana, Project Trust 2023/24



Since coming to Thailand in September 2023, I have found myself strongly immersed in the community and rich culture of this incredible country. In my project – Phana, Amnat Charoen province – this culture is on show and demonstrated daily in the way we ‘wai’ (paying respect by placing the hands together) or how we refer to older people as ‘older brother’ or ‘older sister’. This is particularly true because I’m based in the ‘Issan’ (the north-eastern region) of Thailand where there is a strong regional culture and distinct language. As a volunteer teacher and just simply as a member of my community I experience this first-hand through my students, my neighbours and the people I meet. However, whilst volunteering and living here I was surprised to see the extent to which ‘western’ culture has become common and widespread and so I wanted to consider Phana’s culture and how ‘Western’ and Thai/Issan cultures interact here.

First of all, I would like to describe the role of religion in my community of Phana today. Here, Buddhism is very important in people's lives and Buddhist ceremonies and holidays are frequent and well attended. Monks



are highly respected and can be seen everywhere – in temples, buses and even 7-11 (the local supermarket)! Every adult male is also expected to become a monk at some point, and this is also true in Phana (however the length of time expected has reduced significantly from 1 month in the past to 1 week today). Buddhism is also present in the buildings of Phana whether that be in the 4 temples in the village or the many shrines and temples by the streets and in people's homes.





There are many restaurants in Phana too which offer a variety of Thai food: pad kaprow, fried rice and noodles are among the most common. In the past few years however there has been a growth in national chains here with the arrival of three supermarkets (two 7-11's and a mini big C) which are very popular, and some people eat and buy food here instead of at local businesses.

The Issan people have a unique culture within Thailand and nowhere is this more present than in 'Molam' music and dancing where bass-heavy traditional music is blared from a large stage with singers and dancers. It's a soundtrack to daily life, heard everywhere, every day. This music is always present at one of the many traditional Thai and Issan festivals which occur in the year. A few highlights in

Phana include Loy Krathong (a festival of lights and lanterns), the rocket festival (launching giant rockets to bring the rains) and Songkran (Thai new year), as well as many Buddhist festivals spent praying and dancing.



However, other types of music are very present in Phana too – Ed Sheeran, Westlife and Michael Learns to Rock to name a few from the ‘west’ (as well as of course K-pop) but there is also a growing domestic pop music scene with T-pop being popular too. Some festivals in the UK are also celebrated in Thailand too, the most obvious being Christmas (mostly involving Santa, Mrs Claus and snowmen whilst omitting any Christian parts) and the singing of Happy Birthday (although there is a ‘Molam’ remix!)





Finally, I'd like to discuss the culture in Phana's schools – where we volunteer. In Thai culture a person's real ('official') name is rarely used and Thai people have a nickname which everybody including their family, friends, distant relatives and strangers use. In older generations these are nearly all Thai but among a significant minority of the students these nicknames are English ones (e.g. Lemon, Big Boss, I-phone and Teacher at our Schools). Tik Tok has also meant that many English memes have made it Thailand too ('Skibidi Toilet' is by far the most annoying one!). English writing is everywhere in Phana too, on road signs, packages and in supermarkets; surprising considering how few people here can speak it.

In summary, Phana traditional Thai/Issan culture is relatively strong, compared to more tourist-heavy areas, but aspects of 'western' culture are becoming more common and present. Having said that, people in Phana, and Thailand more generally, are incredibly proud of their traditions and happily introduce them to others who take an interest (it lives up well to its reputation of being 'the land of the smiles'!). I think that this trend will continue and perhaps the best way to benefit from this would be for a biliteral cultural exchange, where the UK could draw on positive aspects of Thai culture, such as the politeness and respect they show to others and the great food and festivals!

