

What I Learnt in Thailand

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It happened when I arrived at Chiang Mai airport: that smell. That special smell of Southeast Asia, it really hit me. I was shocked that even though it was only early March here, as it is basically always a summer climate here, the temperature was over 37C. Thailand is famous the world over for its Reclining Buddha, palaces and intricately designed temples. I was totally overwhelmed by the temple in the picture on the right. I realised how hard it must have been to build so many historic buildings in such a hot climate. That was how I started my time in Thailand.



I'd like to introduce some of the things I experienced in Thailand. Thailand is a Buddhist country, as is Japan, but in Thailand there is the tradition that men become a Buddhist priest once in their lives. I imagine that begging for food and alms and meditating for hours on end must be hard work. I realised that in Thailand Buddhism is a living part of people's lives. The people respect the priests and temples. I went to one very friendly temple in a small village and asked one of the young priests there who could speak English lots of questions about Buddhism, (see the picture on the following page.)

Thai food uses a lot of chilli peppers and various herbs and spices, and for me it was generally quite hot and spicy. I also really enjoyed the desert made with sweet Thai sticky rice, coconut milk and papaya.



There were also a lot of foods that really surprised me. Deep fried insect larva, durian (the smell of which reminded me of rotten eggs), and one condiment with a rather strong smell. It wasn't really my cup of tea!

Our group had two homestays, one in Chiang Mai and another in Doi Tao, a small rural village. The toilets in Doi Tao really surprised me. When you think of a toilet, I am sure you imagine a Western style toilet and toilet paper nearby. However, in Thailand in the countryside, there was no toilet seat and no toilet paper. Instead of toilet paper, people use



a little water nozzle to clean themselves. That really surprised me!!

We had a very busy schedule. We went for an elephant ride, had a traditional Thai massage, went for a swim in a river, visited to an orphanage where we taught groups of students there how to make origami and practiced making Japanese calligraphy. Students from Chiang Mai University also taught us Thai. We even went to a cabaret

show in Bangkok. It was really a full programme filled with many things I would not have been able to experience in Japan.

In a nutshell, I would have to call Thailand “The Land of Smiles”. In Thailand even when you meet a complete stranger, people will greet you with a smile. It’s a part of their culture. I’m not sure if this is only true in Thailand amongst Asian countries, but I think it is quite unimaginable in countries in the Far East, such as Japan, the Koreas, and China. I think this helps explain the Thais high level of hospitality towards others. Thailand shares borders with four countries: Burma, Laos, Cambodia and Malaysia.

These four countries are facing various problems including conflicts, starvation, and poverty. As a result of its good relations with its neighbours, Thailand have been able to welcome people with a smile. When I was in Thailand and greeted strangers with a smile, I didn’t feel shy but felt quite happy. On the other hand, there are many people in Thailand suffering from poverty. The average wage in Thailand for an eight-hour work day is about 400 yen. I



I saw quite a few people begging in the streets. There is a big gap in wealth. Some people were living just as the Japanese had done just after World War II, whereas others were living, whereas other were living



the same lifestyle as if they were in a big modern city such as Osaka. Some people work for a company. There were also others earning their living as mahouts, and also others who made ends meet by selling things at street stalls. I thought that there is a great diversity in Thailand in what people do.

I realised after encountering Thai culture that there is a Japanese presence in modern Thai culture. Japanese *manga* and cakes are very popular, and about sixty percent of the cars in Thailand were Toyotas. I noticed ads on TV with images of Mt. Fuji in them. I realised Japan has a strong presence in other Asian countries. Travelling abroad and looking at Japan objectively from outside made me appreciate the great culture that

Japan has. I wonder how many Japanese appreciate that. Thailand is a constitutional monarchy and has a King, like Japan has the Emperor. At 8:00 a. m. and 6:00 p. m. every day the national anthem is played and people in the street stop what they're doing and stand still while the anthem is played. In every home there is an image of the King, whom Thais have a



very deep respect for. I felt that we Japanese have something to learn from the Thai people here. I also felt that I wanted to find out more about my own country, Japan. When I become a teacher in the future, I hope I can to express these things to my young students.

Thank you for reading my meandering sentences to the end. I would like to finish up by expressing my sincere thanks to all the teachers, students and staff at Chiang Mai University, as well as the teachers and students from Sapporo Gakuin University who were in our group. Also I would like to express my thanks to all the other people we met in Thailand who helped me and this programme in so many ways.

Korp kun krap! ありがとう！ Thank you very much!

What I Learnt from Thai people and culture

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1. Introduction

On this, the Chiang Mai University-Sapporo Gakuin University and Kagawa University Intercultural Exchange Programme 2010, I met a lot of great people and it was a very precious experience for me. As we had established contact my email prior to our departure, we had a smooth start to getting to know our Thai student hosts, our *buddies*. It was thanks to all the people involved in the programme, starting with our buddies' support, and all the people we met and spent time with, for me, the entire programme was such a meaningful experience. I'd like to tell you what I learnt as a result of our various activities and what I learnt about Thailand.

2. The importance of cross-cultural understanding

As a result of our activities with the CMU student buddies, I was able to think about the differences between our cultures. I would like to mention two points in particular that impressed me.

The first of these is greetings. Every morning when we met our buddies they would ask us first "Have you eaten already?" I took the question literally as an inquiry about what I had eaten for breakfast. So I was surprised to find out that for Thais this question really just means 'Good morning'. This type of greeting style made me appreciate the importance of rice and food for Thai people. Even though there are more and more supermarkets and shopping centres, and a lot of markets, at our homestay families I realized that many people still take the time to support themselves by growing their own food. And of course, everyone was very happy when I told them that the food that they had prepared was "*aroy*" (tasty). I appreciated differences in culture from a greeting and food.

My second point concerns the concept of time. In the programme this time we had a very detailed and precise schedule, but most of things did not go exactly according to the scheduled times. For someone like me who tries to be very punctual, I was very surprised. I realized that I was surprised because I had assumed that start time and the time for us all to get together were the same. I realized after seeing the Chiang Mai students, that what happened was that things generally started about thirty minutes after people started to appear and talk with each other. I realized that this time to get together and spend time with each other is valued highly. My buddy helped me understand this by telling me "If you want to start something from a certain time, you have to tell everyone to be there thirty minutes beforehand." When I heard this, and understand the difference between our cultures, I started to appreciate this nice aspect of Thai culture.

I learnt a lot about Thai culture. When I asked my buddy about things that surprised me on our various

activities, she would give me very nice detailed answers. And when there was something that was close to Japanese culture, I told her that and realised that I was also telling her about Japan. I realised that we were able to have this kind of interaction as a result of our joint activities. I appreciated again from all this, that finding out about both our countries' cultures and communicating with each other is more important than anything else.

3. Communication in the Doi Tao Village Stay

What impressed me the most during my four days spent in Doi Tao village was the strong links between the children, the adults, and also between the adults and the children. I think of it as a large community based around a primary school. As well as that, I was also very impressed by the warmth and friendliness of the people in the village. The teachers always interacted with the children with a smile, and I could tell that the teachers themselves enjoyed interacting with their students and with us, the Japanese students.

I found it difficult to express myself. It's very important to be able to express oneself with words. Nonetheless, I think that I was still able to make myself understood despite this lack of verbal communication, by using gestures and facial expressions as best as I could. Through card games, origami and soccer etc playing together with the children I felt I was able to make myself understood somehow.

4. What I Learnt from Thailand, the country

I was also able to learn a lot of things about Thailand itself. There are three points which I would like to mention.

The first is Buddhism. They say that Thailand is a Buddhist kingdom in which over 95% of the people are Buddhists. We visited several Buddhist temples as part of the programme and I certainly saw a lot of people there, from young children to adults at these temples. On the homestay too, the children went to their local temple every morning, as well as visiting the temple once a week with their families. I realized how deeply Thai people believe in Buddhism and how deeply it is a part of their lives.

My second point is about the King of Thailand. I realized that Thai people are extremely proud of their King and when I asked my buddy about this, she told me with tears in her eyes, that "The King is involved with many projects to help the us Thai people and the poor. Whenever I speak about the King I get tears in my eyes," she said, with tears in her eyes. According to the Thai Embassy in Tokyo, "The King in Thailand is doing his best for us, the Thai people. And so, it is for the King, we the people will also do our best.' Because of all the guidance of these wonderful kings, protecting our independence from the spread of socialism and western colonialism, our country has been able to develop into a politically, economically, and socially stability. Due to the efforts in the past of farmland developers and the development of new food product, there are now more 400 "Royal Projects" that the King is involved with throughout the country and as a result of these the people's reverence and respect for the King

remains firm.” (1)

My third point concerns the family. I had heard how children in Thailand respected their parents, but due to my homestay, I was able to see this before my eyes. My homestay sisters, a high school third-year student and a junior high second-year student, both respected their parents and grandparents. They also helped out without any fuss chores around the home. The number of nuclear families is increasing, but in my homestay families, they all had very strong links with the local community. In Dao Tai, in the morning and at night, lots of local people would visit and chat. I thought it was a really nice lifestyle. I thought that in this type of good environment it was only natural that children would grow up developing a sense of trust in adults.

5. Final Comments

Due to the CMU-SGU and KU Intercultural Exchange Programme 2010, I able to enjoy a wide range of activities and meet a lot of really nice people. Chiang Mai University students, the buddies who helped us out in our activities, the teachers and students from Sapporo Gakuin University, the host family people, and all the people I met at Doi Tao. For me, what made this programme such a once-in-a-lifetime valuable experience was the people who I met and participated in the programme together with. It was due to the teachers from Kagawa University and my friends. Thank you all very much.

After returning to Japan, I will be a primary school teacher and will teach young children. I would like to be able to tell the children about my wonderful experiences and the wonderful people I met in Thailand and would also like to help educate children who can tell other people about Japan.

URLs referred to:

Royal Thai Embassy

www.thaiembassy.jp

Outline of Thai Buddhism

www.jyaaku.com/travel/thai/buddism

