International
Thailand's Safety Net: Farms and Faith --- Buddhism Helps Ease the Pain of Economic Crisis
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Page A15


UBON RATCHATHANI, Thailand -- As dusk bathes the spires of a Buddhist temple here, a man bows his head to the ground three times, paying respect to an abbot who has just given him counsel.

"I always taught people not to get into debt," says the abbot, Phra Kru Jitti Wannobon. "At one time, these people told me, `You are a monk, you don't know anything.' Now it is my time to teach them again."

With Thailand's economy mired in crisis, what keeps the country from spinning apart socially is a resilient safety net: extended families, abundant land and a ubiquitous belief in Buddhism. Indeed, Buddhism's detached acceptance seems to permeate people's response to the crisis. Instead of anger and violence, the mood is a mixture of frustration and quiet bemusement, worry and confident self-sufficiency.

"The people who are suffering are the rich people," says the headmaster of a village primary school outside Ubon, a provincial capital of about 110,000 people near the Laos border. "We'll go on living. If the price of sugar goes up, we don't care. We don't eat sugar; we eat fish sauce. If fish sauce is too expensive, we'll live with pickled fish we make ourselves."

Many people who flocked to the cities in the past decade still have farming relatives to return to, and a reverse migration is under way. The bountiful land makes Thailand one of Asia's only net exporters of food -- and means few if any Thais should starve during the economic crisis. Even farmers who sold their land in the boom years often used some money to buy new land, farther from roads and towns. And the extended-family system remains largely intact, with three or four generations often sharing a home.

Wasana Cheuntam, 26 years old, worked six years in a dried-fish factory in Bangkok, before she accepted an offer in November to take six months' salary to leave. Now she's back home in Ban Khaem, a small village outside Ubon, living with her brother's family, helping tend his chickens and her mother's rice fields.

"We don't need that much money here. So maybe there won't be that many problems," Ms. Wasana says, sitting on a low stool under her brother's stilt-raised house of rough

wood. Her two-year-old son giggles in the arms of his grandmother. "It hurts to be out of a job, but I can still come back to the family."

As extended families absorb displaced workers, the 30,000 temples blanketing the countryside beckon the spiritually homeless. For centuries, the Thai monk was the keeper of wisdom in a land of illiterate peasants. But in recent boom years, a monk's education often lagged far behind that of his flock, making him seem increasingly irrelevant to a people obsessed with gaining wealth.

Now, the stress of the crisis is bringing people back to the temples, seeking spiritual solace, a place to pray for better fortune -- and if worst comes to worst, food left over by the monks. Since Thailand's economic crisis began, the number of people coming to Wat Nongbua has jumped by half.

And the message they hear there no longer seems so dated and unrealistic. In fact, the abbot's analysis of the economic crisis somewhat jarringly mirrors the views of global economists: Thailand shouldn't try to compete on all fronts, but should instead focus on its natural strengths.

"Countries are like families," the abbot explains, puffing on a cigarette as he sits on a bamboo platform. "Every family has to do a different job. We have to produce different things. Thailand is basically an agricultural country. But the government wanted to turn it into an industrial country. We didn't know how to keep what we had. This is the reward."

Kambuey Thamasat knew how to keep what he had. Like many residents of the village of Ban Kam Charoen outside Ubon, Mr. Kambuey sold his land to a property developer during the boom years. He spent the money on a used Isuzu pickup truck parked now under his stilt-raised house, bought a chicken coop out back, fixed up his house, and blew a third of it "here and there," he says.

But crucially, he used some of the money to buy a plot of land farther from the road -- even larger than the plot he sold. As chickens peck around his litter-strewn lot, a commercial for disposable diapers plays on a television set, though villagers here let their toddlers run around bottomless instead of buying diapers.

Four of five people in the Ubon area are farmers, and the harvest that just ended was a good one: 1.4 million tons of rice were grown in Ubon Ratchathani province, up from 870,000 tons a year ago. And rice prices have risen by as much as two-thirds. "Rice production is a key to our living," says Chavalit Ongkavanit, head of the agricultural section of Ubon's chamber of commerce. "So when the rice price and harvest are good, it can make up for the crisis. The purchasing power remains."

Still, people look to the future with apprehension. A recent shortage of rain is worrisome. Prices have soared for the imported fuel, fertilizer and pesticides farmers depend upon. And not everyone was wise enough to hold onto their land before setting off to Bangkok for a factory job. "Within six months, if a person can't find a job, he will turn to robbery

to survive," predicts Thirachai Jungwiwattanaporn, a businessman. "I think the country will go into turmoil. It's very dangerous."

But along with the Buddhist detachment taught in Thai temples, a tendency to play down problems and avoid conflict is a hallmark of Thai society. In contrast with their rioting Indonesian counterparts, even Thai villagers who blame Thailand's Chinese merchants for the economic crisis temper their anger when pressed. "The Chinese people have become Thai, like us," says the village-school headmaster.

Indeed, for people who have watched their wealth evaporate, the Buddhism that permeates Thai society offers an explanation for the bust that followed the boom: the impermanence of all things material. The abbot at Wat Nongbua explains it: "There is night, there is day," the saffron-robed monk says. "There is death, there is life. This is the nature of the world. The people who are surprised don't know nature."