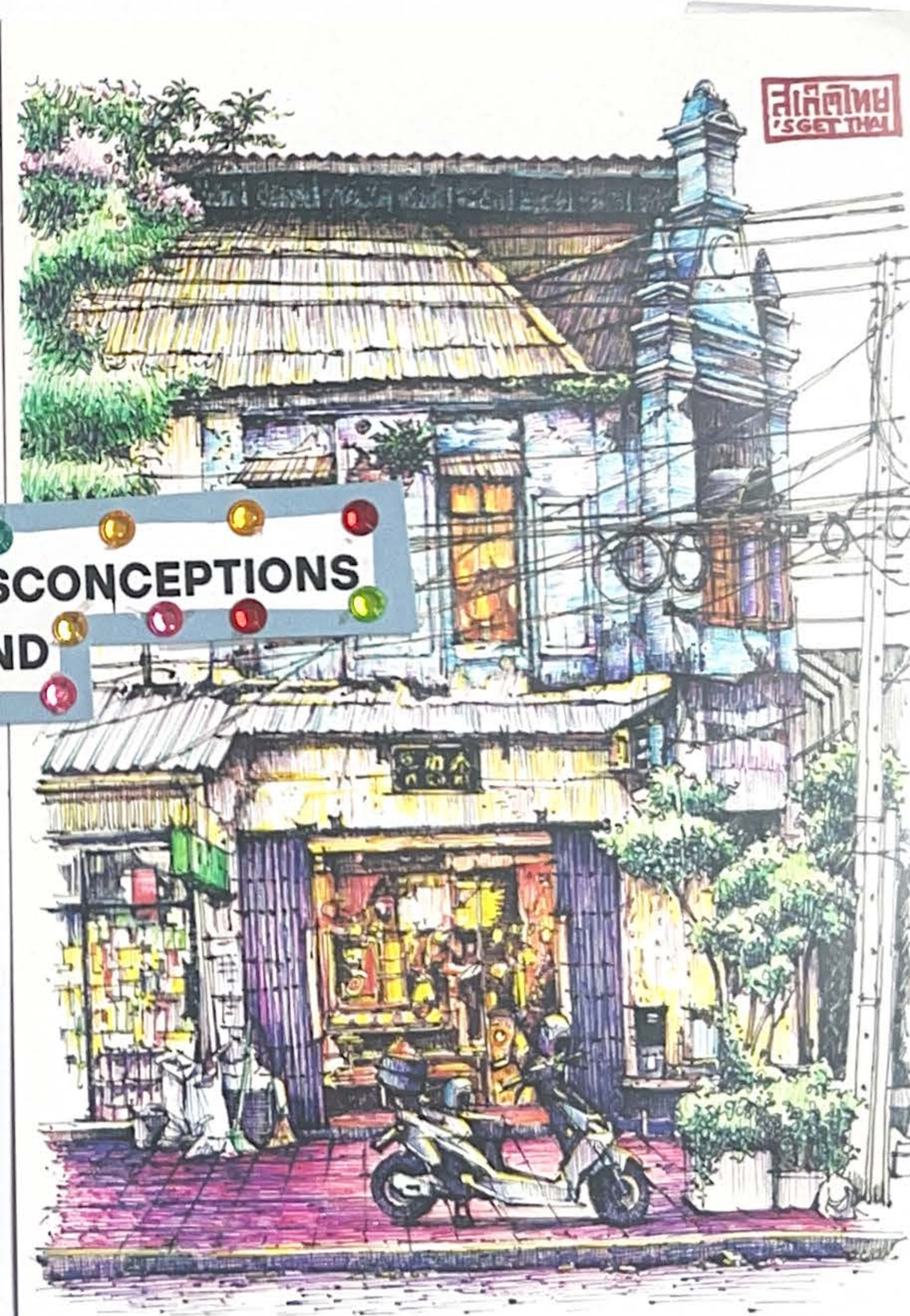
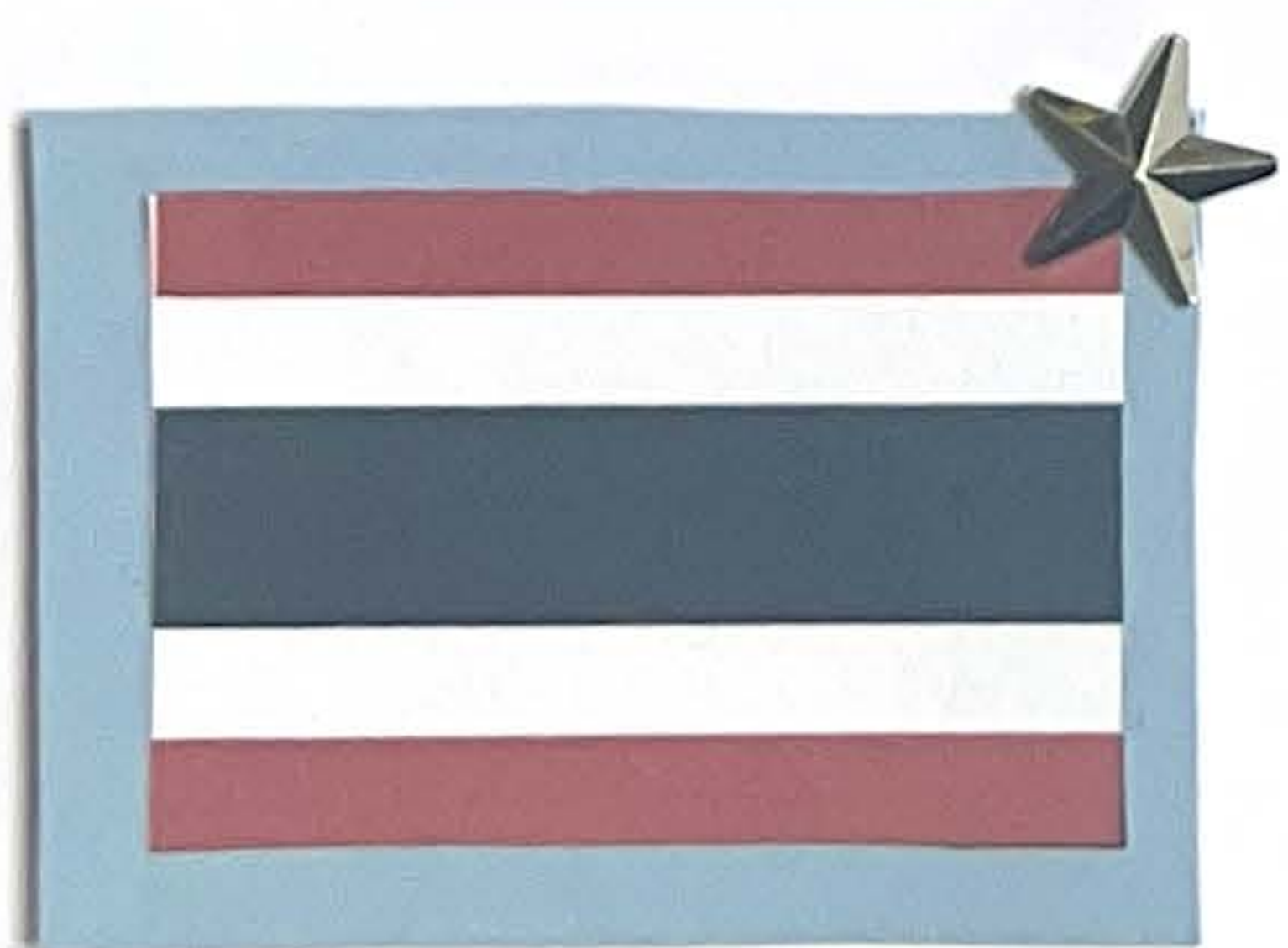


**YOU'RE WRONG
ABOUT
THAILAND**

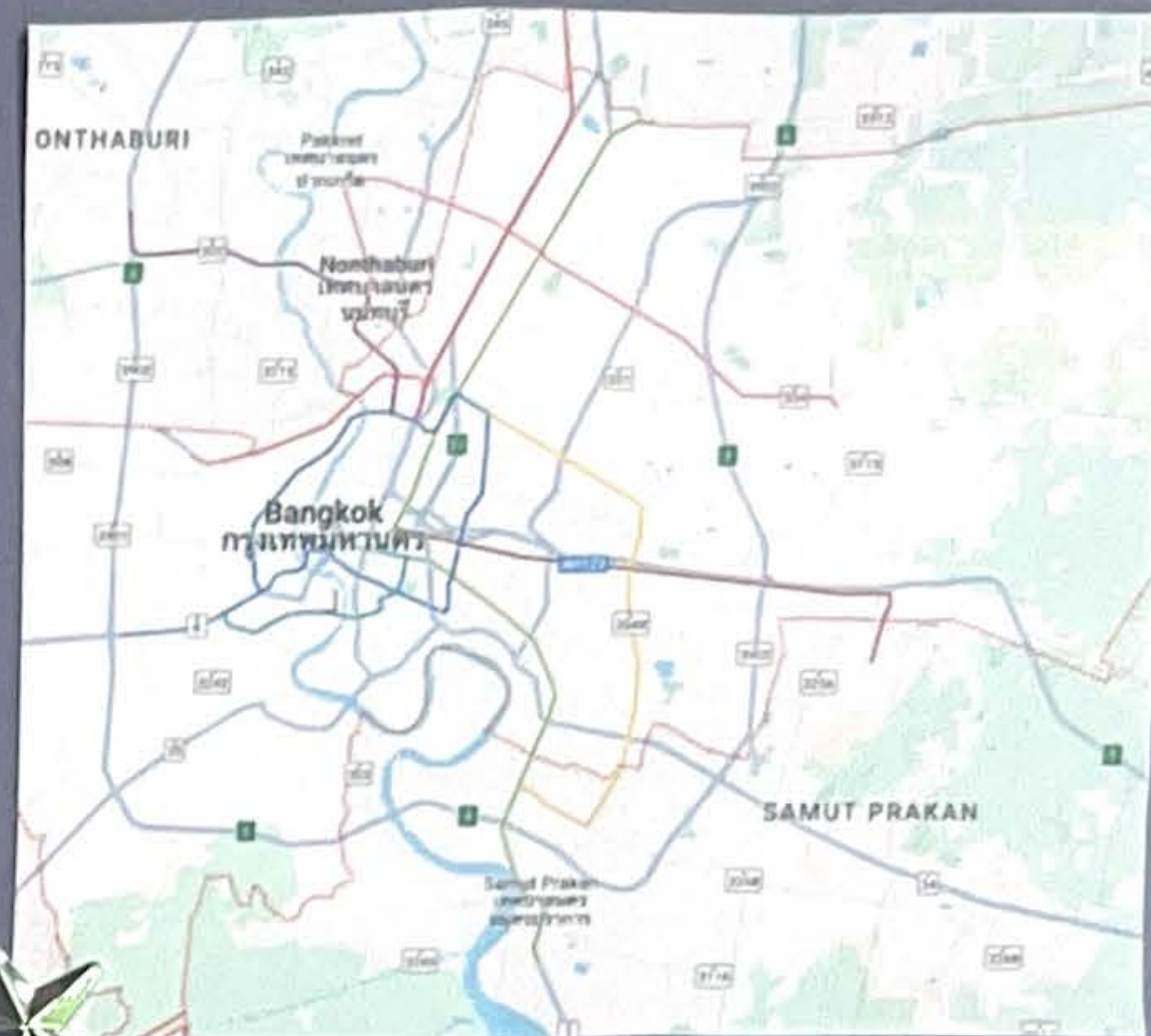
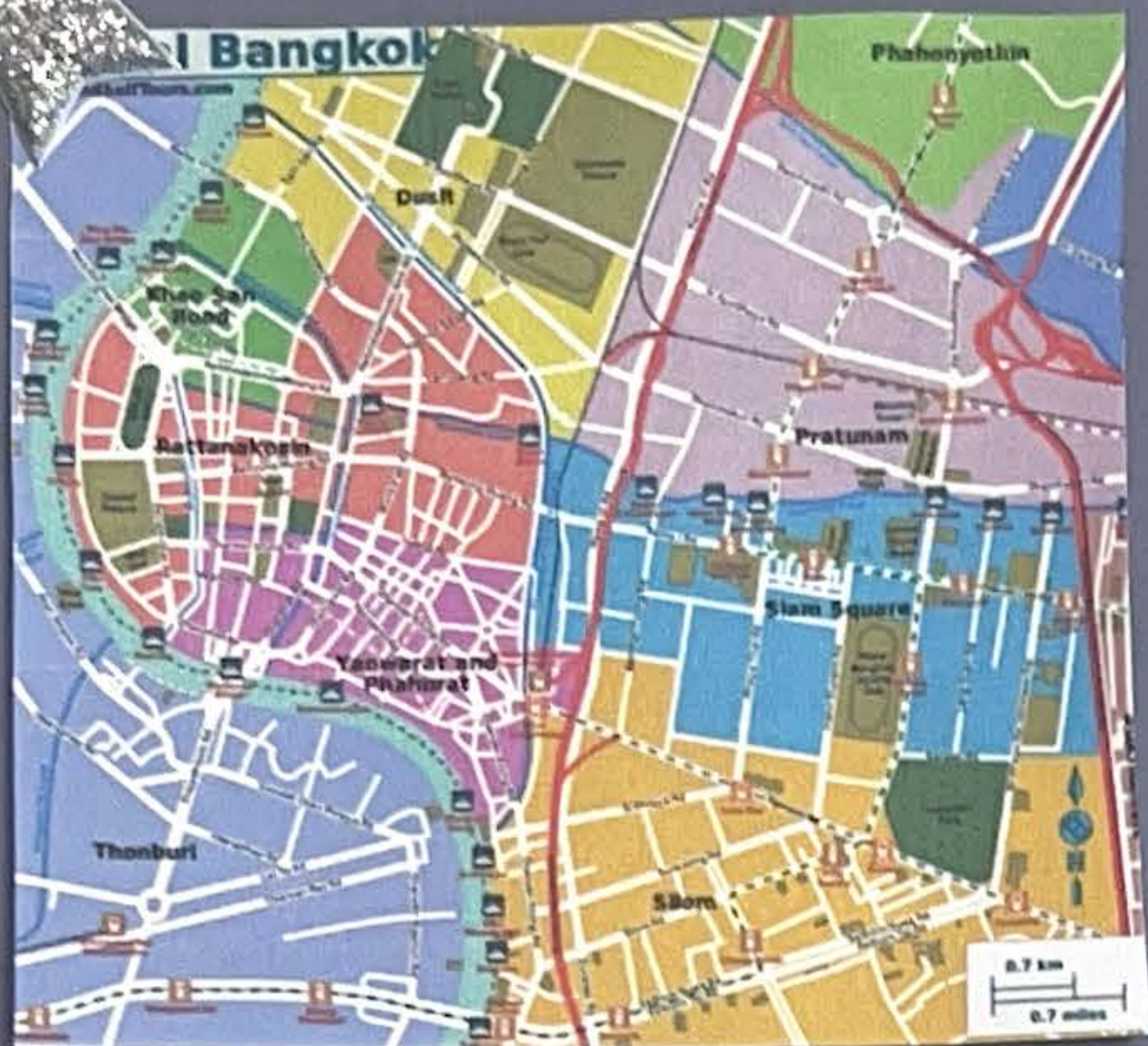


**ADDRESSING MISCONCEPTIONS
ABOUT THAILAND**



P. Rattanaprasert, 6 June 2023, Shop House, Sam Phan Rot, Bangkok, Thailand.

A JOURNEY INTO BANGKOK



Understanding Bangkok - geographically

Bangkok is a big city. Not only is the population massive (9 million in the city proper, 17.4 million in the Bangkok Metropolitan Region), but the city itself is sprawling and dense. When I first arrived in Bangkok I thought there was genuinely no way I would ever possibly figure out how to get around, where anything was, or get a feel for what each area of the city was about. To be honest, after six months I'm still no expert, but the sheer size of the city no longer seems so daunting. There are a lot of misconceptions about Bangkok as a city - people tend to think of a few areas that are overrepresented in Western media, as they play into stereotypes of what the city is. These depictions undermine the truth of Bangkok, which is that it contains a variety of different neighborhoods, each of which is unique and has its own identity. Further, people tend to think that all areas of the city are going to look undeveloped or impoverished outside of the designated tourist areas, and that you can only go to Bangkok if you want to party day in and day out. This is also glaringly misinformed. Because there are so many misconceptions about the city, I want to share what I've come to understand about the city and its constituent parts.

Bangkok Yai/Thon Buri side: If you google "map of bangkok" you'll see that almost every map cuts off right at the river. This may lead you to believe that this area is sparsely populated, perhaps more rural or industrial or something. This is not the case. The west side of the river is known as Bangkok Yai, Bangkok Noi, or Thon Buri and it is in fact very urban and densely populated. The reason why it gets cut off like that is because it is very very Thai, as it has not (yet?) become overrun by tourists. This area is where GAATW is located, and where Carly and I lived for 6 months. Now I'm definitely very very biased, but this is my favourite area. Unlike many of the areas across the river, you're unlikely to see many non-thai people around, and you're able to bear witness to the way the majority of people in Bangkok really live. It is also much quieter, with less traffic and far less partying. Living here gave us the benefit of a more relaxed lifestyle in the city, but our proximity to the river made it only a 10-15 minute grab ride from the busier areas on the other side of the river. This part of "The Old City", the area around the river that was the inception point of Bangkok. However it is much less popular than the other part of the Old City across the river. It also is the location of my favourite temple in Bangkok, Wat Arun. There's less English here, but - like pretty much anywhere in the city - enough that you're able to get by with only knowing the most basic amount of Thai.



Phra Nakhon district: This is the other part of the "Old City". A lot of this area is very lovely. It is filled with many temples, small restaurants and cafes, markets, street food options, and various monuments to check out. However, this is one of the busiest areas in the city. It is home to the Grand Palace, the National Museum of Bangkok, Sanam Luang park, most of the important government buildings, Wat Phra temple (including Wat Po and the reclining Buddha), and the infamous Khao San road. So, this area is pretty much a backpacker and tourist center. As such, it is also the place where I encountered the most scam attempts, and felt the most concerned about being pickpocketed. In the daytime the area is really good for shopping, but it becomes a bit of a nightmare once the sun sets and all the backpackers come out of hiding. While it is a tourist area, this is for a good reason. You can witness so much of Thai history, culture, and identity in this area. Historical monuments, government buildings, museums, and traditional architecture are all around this area, and it is quite beautiful. Because of this, it is one of the few areas of Bangkok that is represented in the media, as it is quite distinctive in numerous ways.

Ari neighbourhood: UN headquarters for the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) is located in Bangkok. There is a large UN community in Bangkok, and they live in the Ari neighbourhood. I really didn't spend much time in this area. There are a lot of cute coffee shops, spas, nice restaurants, and communal workspaces. Things here cost almost as much as they do in Canada, which is likely because there are a lot of Western people selling Western things to other Westerners, or locals who are doing the same.

Chatuchak: Chatuchak weekend market is the largest market in Thailand. It is quite overwhelming, but I personally loved going there. There's really nothing that even comes close to this market back home. You can find literally anything you can imagine here, if you're willing to walk through a maze of 27 sections containing more than 15,000 stalls. There is also an amazing vintage/second hand mall right near the market, which I've recommended to literally everybody I know who has travelled or is travelling to Bangkok.

Silom: The Silom neighbourhood is often referred to as "Wall Street of Thailand" because it's a major financial district. You'll see corporate offices, banks, embassies, and fancy high-rises along the main roads. The area also contains Bangkok's most famous park - Lumpini Park, with a bridge that connects it to Benchakiti park - which is a nice break from the hustle and bustle of the rest of the area. It is also home to the (in)famous Patpong night market/red light district at night.

Sukhumvit: this is the area where a lot of expats live, particularly those who would identify as "digital nomads". If you find yourself missing Canada while you're in Bangkok, this is definitely the area where you'll find a taste of home. That being said, it is not a very walkable area - the buildings take up what feels like entire blocks, the streets are massive and the traffic is non-stop. It is also home to one of the most famous red-light districts in Bangkok, Soi Cowboy, which attracts an interesting crowd in the evening. This area has a lot more money in it - fewer backpackers, and more people who have money or are making a western salary while working in the area - so prices are much higher. This area is kind of what is presented as Bangkok in The Hangover 2 (not a very accurate encapsulation of the city as a whole though). Sukhumvit is the other area that is often depicted in tv and film as a representative of Bangkok as a whole, which is definitely misleading.

Thonglor: This is one of the biggest "hipster" neighbourhoods in Bangkok. Lo-fi and hi-fi vinyl listening bars, jazz clubs, designer boutiques, trendy coffee shops, and many western-thai "fusion" restaurants. There are also a handful of fancy hotels in the area. The people you'll see here are a mix of wealthy foreigners, and wealthy young Thai people. It's a very cool area, but it is quite expensive.

Malls: Bangkok has some major malls - CentralwOrld, Siam Paragon, MBK centre, Iconsiam, terminal 21, and more. Bangkok is full of malls. Unlike Canada, malls in Thailand are definitely not dying - they seem to be one of the main hangout spots for Bangkok locals. I think this in large part because people crave that free air conditioning in the crazy heat. These malls are filled with all sorts of restaurants (that are actually good), and pretty much every store you could ever imagine. Some of them are quite crazy - Iconsiam has an indoor market with sections that are themed after the various regions of Thailand, and Terminal 21 is travel themed with different sections representing various countries. These malls are very modern, and very beautiful a lot of the time. You can tell that they have been invested in as attractions within the city - and it worked! Even though there are countless malls, most of them are full of people at any given point in time.



A BRIEF HISTORY OF THAILAND

Sukhothai

Thai history is rich and complex, shaped by a series of kingdoms, cultural exchanges, and political shifts that span over a thousand years. The history of Thailand begins with early civilizations in Southeast Asia, particularly the Mon and Khmer civilizations, which influenced the region significantly. The first major kingdom in Thai history was the Sukhothai Kingdom, founded in the 13th century, considered the birth of Thai civilization. Under King Ramkhamhaeng (r. 1277-1299), Sukhothai saw the creation of the Thai script and the introduction of Theravada Buddhism as the state religion, both of which became central to Thai culture and identity.

Ayutthaya

In the 14th century, the Ayutthaya Kingdom emerged, becoming the dominant power in the region for over 400 years. Ayutthaya was known for its cosmopolitan culture, flourishing trade, and impressive architecture. During this period, Thailand saw significant foreign interactions, with countries like Portugal, the Netherlands, France, and Japan establishing trade relations. The Ayutthaya kingdom fell in 1767 to the Burmese, marking a dramatic moment in Thai history.

Bangkok

Following the fall of Ayutthaya, King Taksin established the Thonburi Kingdom in 1767, and later, in 1782, his successor, King Rama I, founded the Chakri Dynasty and moved the capital to Bangkok, officially marking the beginning of modern Thailand. This new capital served as a political and cultural centre, consolidating the authority of the monarchy and expanding trade and international relations.

From Siam to Thailand

The transformation from Siam to Thailand occurred in the 20th century, reflecting the changing political landscape. In 1932, a peaceful revolution ended absolute monarchy, leading to the establishment of a constitutional monarchy. In 1939, under the leadership of Prime Minister Phibunsongkhram, the country was officially renamed Thailand, reflecting a new sense of nationalism and identity that was separate from its Siamese roots. This era also saw efforts to modernize the country, including infrastructure development, Westernization, and attempts to create a unified Thai national identity.

In the decades following World War II, Thailand navigated a complex period of political instability, with military coups, uprisings, and changes in government. However, despite these challenges, Thailand has emerged as a stable constitutional monarchy with a rapidly growing economy. Over time, Thailand's identity has continued to evolve, balancing its rich cultural heritage with the demands of modernity, while Bangkok remains the symbolic heart of the nation's political, economic, and cultural life.

MONARCHY IN THAI CULTURE

The Role of Censorship: The Thai media is heavily censored when it comes to anything related to the royal family. The lese-majesté law (Section 112 of the Thai Penal Code) makes it illegal to defame, insult, or threaten the monarchy, with severe penalties for those convicted. This law shapes how the royal family is portrayed in the media, ensuring that negative portrayals are almost entirely suppressed. The law also prohibits criticism of the royal family in movies, television shows, and public discussions, making it challenging for citizens and media outlets to address issues related to the monarchy. With the rise of social media, the monarchy's image is frequently discussed online. However, the lese-majesté law extends to online platforms, and people can face serious legal consequences for perceived insults or defamation of the royal family. This leads to a careful balance in online discourse, with many users self-censoring out of fear of legal repercussions.

loyalty and Respect: The Thai people display a deep sense of respect for the royal family, often depicted through public acts of reverence like standing for the national anthem, displaying royal portraits in homes and businesses, and participating in royal ceremonies. Pretty much every restaurant in Bangkok has a portrait of the King hanging on the wall.

The King's Birthday: One of the most prominent public displays of reverence for the monarchy is the celebration of the king's birthday, which is also celebrated as Father's Day. The king's birthday is a time for large-scale ceremonies, public displays of loyalty, and national pride.

Thailand a real monarchy?

Thailand was an absolute monarchy until 1932, where after a revolution it became a constitutional monarchy with an elected parliament ruling alongside the monarch. That being said, political power is often grasped by the military - there have been 12 military coups since 1932 in Thailand. While Thailand is a constitutional monarchy now, the royal family has a lot more power and influence than they do in Canada or the United Kingdom. The following are examples of how the Thai monarchy is engrained deeply in their culture.

A BIT OF REFLECTION

This isn't to say that Thai people are dogmatically approving of their countries' leaders. Many of the people I met are far from it. However, people are much more cautious when sharing their opinions of their leader - especially the current king Rama X or King Vajiralongkorn. Rama X is a very controversial figure, as he is the son of the beloved Rama IX King Bhumibol and Queen Sirikit, but is not himself a very well respected leader - many questions have been raised about his mental capacity, his numerous wives and mistresses, children out of wedlock, inappropriate social media content, appointing his poodle as an air chief marshal, and other issues regarding his personal conduct. He is also the richest monarch in the world currently, with an estimated value of \$43 billion, which in a country with as much poverty and wealth inequality as Thailand, could seem rather unfair. Under Rama X, political dissent has become more common amongst Thai youth who advocate for a more democratic system and challenge the rule of elite military and royal officials in Thailand. This dissent hasn't been outright quashed, and over the course of King Vajiralongkorn's rule there have been concessions made to dissenters, but by no means are the days of censorship behind the Royal family.

Living in Bangkok really changed my conceptions of what life is like in Thailand, and especially Bangkok in particular. Popular Western imaginings frame Bangkok and a wild place of debauchery and hedonism. A place where you'll be solicited by ladyboys constantly, where there are no laws and where everybody is brazenly intoxicated at all hours. This image of Bangkok does exist - it exists in the places that have been carved out to sell this exact image of Bangkok back to tourists who come there to pursue those things. This reinforces the idea in people's heads that this is all Bangkok has to offer, and that this is what Thai people are like. Upon further inspection, one may notice that if they were to leave the red light districts and Khao San road, they would find a city full of people who come together to eat food and talk and drink (reasonably) with one another in a very tame manner. One could also perhaps note, that though facilitated by Thai people who work in the tourism/service industry, almost all of the debauchery is committed by foreigners. I think people have a very warped view of what Thailand and Thai people are actually like, and overlook the fact that Thailand is actually a very religious and traditional society that is still governed rather strictly by a monarchy. In reality, the stuff that foreigners get up to in Thailand has very little bearing on Thai cultural norms for Thai people - the society remains relatively conservative and repressed, largely because of the strict laws and norms surrounding the monarchy.

NON-COLONIZATION

HOW THE LACK OF HISTORICAL COLONIZATION IMPACTS THAILAND TODAY

Thailand's unique position in Southeast Asia, particularly its successful avoidance of European colonization, played a profound role in shaping its modern national identity and regional dynamics. Unlike its neighbors, Thailand (formerly Siam) managed to remain independent during the colonial era, a feat largely credited to a few reasons:

Geopolitical Buffer Zone: Thailand was strategically located between British-controlled Burma to the west and French Indochina (Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia) to the east. Both colonial powers found it convenient to maintain Siam as a neutral buffer to avoid direct confrontation.

Skillful Diplomacy: Thai kings, particularly King Mongkut (Rama IV) and King Chulalongkorn (Rama V), engaged in diplomatic negotiations with Western powers. They signed unequal treaties but conceded just enough to maintain sovereignty.

Modernization and Reform: The monarchy implemented legal, military, educational, and infrastructure reforms modeled on Western systems to project Thailand as a "civilized" nation in the eyes of colonial powers—thus avoiding claims of backwardness often used to justify colonization.

Thailand's uncolonized status has become a core component of its national identity, including in aspects such as:

Pride in Sovereignty: The narrative of being the "only Southeast Asian nation never colonized" is central to Thai historical consciousness and national pride.

Continuity of the Monarchy: The uninterrupted reign of the Chakri dynasty helped preserve traditional institutions and royal authority, shaping a unique political culture where monarchy remains deeply revered.

Selective Modernization: Thailand had greater autonomy in choosing which Western influences to adopt, resulting in a blend of traditional and modern elements that distinguish it culturally and politically.



What I experienced

Going from Thailand to Vietnam was very interesting to me. Vietnam, especially Ho Chi Minh City and other areas in the south, are full of French colonial style architecture. Following French colonial rule at the end of WWII came an unofficial American military occupation that replaced France's place as the occupying power in Vietnam. The history there is so apparent in the architecture, religious pluralism, the street names, the use of the arabic alphabet, the amount of modernization, and even the food. Comparing the two countries I noticed that the Western influence in Vietnam was much more apparent than in Thailand, which even in the big cities seems to have held on to their traditional cultural roots more, which I can only assume is at least in part due to the fact that Thailand has had more control over its governance.

It was really interesting speaking with my coworkers, especially those who were born and raised in Thailand, about how colonization has played into their national identity. Thai people are very proud of the fact that their nation was never colonised, and for many Thai people it stands as a symbol of their strength as a nation. I learned that this pride in Thai history also has resulted in some prejudices held in Thai society against neighbouring nations. According to a couple of my coworkers I talked to, some Thai people are quite prejudiced against Filipinos, as they are seen as a "weak" country relative to Thailand. I witnessed this a little bit during my time in Bangkok, as one of my Filipino coworkers was harassed by a man who lives near our office, and she explained that he was doing so because she is Filipina. It was really interesting to me to learn about how national pride and patriotism influence the perspectives of Thai people towards other countries in the region.

THE PAD THAI OF IT ALL

Pad Thai is one of Thailand's most iconic dishes, but what most people don't realize is that it's not some ancient, traditional recipe passed down through centuries. Pad Thai is actually a relatively modern invention, and it was created as part of a nation-building campaign in the 20th century.

Beginning in the 1930s, Prime Minister Phibunsongkhram (Phibun) championed a modernization programme to promote Thai nationalism through creating a unique "Thai" identity, including national dress, language, and food. Pad Thai was markedly different from Chinese-style street foods that were popular at the time, and served to distinguish Thai foods from other countries in the region. There are many other traditional noodle dishes like pad see ew and khao soi that have been around for much much longer. and The majority of Thai people I met don't even eat Pad Thai regularly at all, and the dish becomes harder to find as you move out of more touristy areas. That being said, the 1930s were almost a century ago now, and over the past 100 years the dish has become a significant part of Thai culture, and is considered a signature dish of the country by many locals.



khao soi



pad see ew



Pad Thai



THE LAND OF 7-ELEVEN



7-elevens are ridiculously ubiquitous in Thailand. Walking around Bangkok you're unlikely to walk more than one minute down a main road without crossing at least one 7-eleven. There are over 14.5 thousand 7-eleven stores in the country, which is the second most in the world. This may not seem like that many, but they tend to be concentrated in more urban and tourist areas, so it seems like they're inescapable. The good news is, you don't want to escape a Thailand 7-eleven, because unlike at home the food they sell is actually pretty good. Thailand is not only famous with foreigners for having some of the best convenience store food in the world, but also is very popular with Thai people. One of my coworkers even told me that she is proud of her country for having so many 7-elevens. However, nothing is without its drawbacks. There are very few mom and pop convenience stores in Bangkok, as they are unable to compete with the corporate chains (especially ones with air conditioning). One coworker of mine explained to me that originally, many of the 7-elevens were franchised by local people, and it was an opportunity for everyday people to become business owners. But as time went on, they could not compete with the bigger corporate backed ones. Often when you see a small location across the street from a much larger one, the larger one was built afterwards purposefully to take business away from the smaller locally owned ones. This phenomenon is often overlooked when people talk about how awesome all the 7-elevens in Thailand are, which I think serves as a microcosm for both wealth inequality in the country and the rose-coloured lenses through which foreigners view Thailand.

THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

The elephant is a symbol of Thailand and is revered in Buddhism. According to legend, a

THE MYTH OF THE "ETHICAL" ELEPHANT SANCTUARY

In this day and age, almost every elephant sanctuary one would encounter is a self-proclaimed "ethical" elephant sanctuaries. Elephant sanctuaries in Thailand, especially those that market themselves as ethical or "no-riding" sanctuaries, often get a lot of attention from tourists seeking to interact with elephants in a way that doesn't involve riding or other traditional forms of exploitation. Many of these "ethical" sanctuaries actually get their elephants by rescuing them from "unethical" sanctuaries and zoos. While some sanctuaries do have good intentions and attempt to care for elephants, many face ethical criticisms for several reasons:

- **Harmful training techniques:** Elephants in sanctuaries, especially those that offer activities like feeding, bathing, or walking with visitors, may have been trained through harmful and brutal methods. A common method used to break an elephant's spirit and train it for human interaction is called the phajaan or "crush." This involves confining a baby elephant to a small space and physically restraining it from any real movement until it submits to human control. Even if a sanctuary claims to offer ethical treatment, many elephants in these places were likely subjected to this brutal training in their past.
- **Captivity and Lack of Freedom:** Elephants in the wild roam vast distances, sometimes up to 30 miles a day, in social groups, forming deep emotional and social bonds. In sanctuaries, elephants are often confined to small enclosures or have their movement limited for the sake of tourism. While they may not face the same level of abuse as elephants used for riding, their physical and psychological needs are still often unmet.
- **Tourism and Human Interaction:** Many sanctuaries in Thailand still allow visitors to interact closely with elephants, including feeding, bathing, and sometimes walking with them. While these activities seem harmless, they can disrupt the natural behaviors and needs of elephants. Elephants are social animals that need to build their own relationships, but constant human interaction can prevent this, leaving them dependent on human care and reducing their ability to live independently.
- **Elephant Tourism as a Whole:** The elephant tourism industry in Thailand has been criticized for perpetuating the use of elephants in tourism in general, whether through elephant rides or photo ops. Even so-called ethical sanctuaries often end up contributing to the problem by creating a demand for elephants in captivity. The more tourists that visit these places, the more elephants need to be sourced, often from unethical breeding programs or the illegal wildlife trade.

Many elephants in sanctuaries were originally captured from the wild or bred in captivity for the sole purpose of tourism. Once they are too old or injured to participate in rides or shows, they are transferred to a sanctuary, where they continue to be kept in captivity and exploited for a different kind of tourism. This cycle of exploitation doesn't address the root of the problem—the need for elephants to live in their natural habitats. In the circumstances surrounding this industry in Thailand, a truly ethical sanctuary is very hard to come by. That being said, people have varying opinions about what conditions are sufficiently ethical. Most sanctuaries that are considered ethical do not allow any touching of the elephants (including bathing), provide a **large** amount of space for the elephants to roam freely, and provide care for them even beyond their age of commercial viability.

A cemetery for privately owned elephants in Surin, Thailand, shows deep devotion. Thailand allows internal trading of ivory from domesticated Asian elephants, and smuggled African ivory finds its way into the mix.

SEX TRAFFICKING & PING PONG SHOWS & HAPPY ENDINGS, OH MY!

A LOOK INTO MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT HUMAN TRAFFICKING

UNODC research shows that 38.7 percent of victims are trafficked for sexual exploitation, which takes place on the streets, in brothels, massage centres, hotels or bars. The victims – mainly women and girls – often experience extreme violence and abuse. Thailand is notoriously one of the most popular sex-tourism destinations in the world. There is a sort of mysticism around the sex industry in Thailand that allows misunderstandings and misinformation to run rampant – as such, many people fundamentally do not understand the industries they are partaking in.

- Contrary to popular belief, prostitution is not entirely legal in Thailand. Sex work and the solicitation of sex work in public spaces and brothels is illegal. Like many countries, Thailand has legal protections for sex workers themselves, and the law tries to place harsher punishments on those running brothels. However, enforcement is very inconsistent, and even in cases of sex trafficking or exploitation law enforcement might not do anything to prevent or stop the situation. There is a lot of corruption in the Thai government, especially in the area of law enforcement. Living in Bangkok I learned that the police are very susceptible to bribes, and often operate in the interest of business rather than fully enforcing the law. Further, sex work operates in a legal grey-area in the Thai legal system, where sex work, sex trafficking, exploitation, and other issues often overlap and become quite complex.

- The idea of sex work being legal in Thailand has also seemed to cause men (mostly male) foreigners to think that their blatant sex tourism is normal or even good. Thailand is widely regarded as one of the biggest sex tourism destinations in the world. A trip to Pattaya, the nearest beach town to Bangkok, was potentially the most disturbing experience I've ever had in my life. Streets full of women in schoolgirl lingerie waiting in line to be picked by one of the hundreds of (mainly bald and white) men who come to the city to fulfill their desires with impunity. I even saw men trying to set up their teen sons with sex workers in Pattaya, calling it a "rite of passage". It was horrifying to see a power imbalance to that extent play out in front of my eyes, and equally terrible seeing the ease and entitlement with which these foreign men approach these women. And to then hear justifications about how "these women need the money" or other excuses of that sort as if it removes any fault from their actions.
- Even travelling through Thailand and meeting younger people, they will casually ask you if you've gone to a 'ping pong show' and then are genuinely confused as to why one would not want to go to attend such an event. As if the women in Thailand are doing that work under different circumstances than women doing sex work anywhere else in the world – that is, as a last resort. The casualness with which people watch and talk about sex work in Thailand was honestly shocking to me as it highlights how divorced from reality many people are while travelling. For me, participating in sex tourism definitely seems to require a certain moral detachment, and I think that the necessary detachment is able to occur due to the fact that westerners don't conceive of more "exotic" countries as anything more than a playground for them.

- Traffickers in Thailand predominantly target young people and children from poor, rural backgrounds. Women are most commonly trafficked within the sex tourism industry, as prostitution is semi-legal within Thailand, while men tend to be trafficked within the fishing industry.
- Many victims of trafficking are economic migrants coming from Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos. These individuals often enter Thailand willingly under the pretense of being hired for well-paying jobs, where they are then subjected to poor working conditions, low pay, and even indentured servitude.
- People tend to get very confused when it comes to sex work vs. human trafficking. People will often conflate these two very different things, and make generalizations about one thing based on what they think about the other. Not all sex-work is trafficking – many women work in the sex industry who are not victims of trafficking. That being said, many sex-workers come from vulnerable populations, and are not (as some people think) making tons of money off of tricking foreign men. The conflation of human-trafficking and sex work is actually a strategy often used by various governments as an excuse to impose harsh punishments on sex workers and crack down on border security.



SO... WHAT DOES GAATW DO?

People assume that all human trafficking is sex trafficking, which is far from reality. The work we do at GAATW is about all forms of human trafficking, which takes place in all areas of labour. In Thailand many people are trafficked from both within the country and from neighbouring countries. Victims of trafficking often work in the fishing and agriculture industries in Thailand, and in these cases they are almost always from poor and vulnerable populations. However, increasingly in Southeast Asia, educated young people from urban areas are becoming victims of trafficking. These individuals are told they are getting jobs related to technology and computers in Thailand, and then are brought to Myanmar instead where they are trapped in scam compounds. Human trafficking is a phenomenon that people tend to be quite misinformed about. They think mostly about children, sex trafficking, and the most egregious forms of exploitation. They don't tend to think about how much issues of human trafficking have to do with migration, war, climate change, politics, and an endless array of systemic issues in countries around the world that are much more nuanced than the "evil group of bad guys" that is quite common. These misconceptions about what human trafficking is led a lot of people to have some serious misunderstandings of what my job at GAATW was - they imagined I was rescuing sex workers from their workplaces, and were quite surprised to hear that this field of work could actually be a desk job. The assumptions that people make are very "white savior" which is so far from the reality of the work that GAATW does.

GAATW is dedicated to promoting changes in the political, economic, social, and legal systems that enable human trafficking and other human rights abuses within the context of migration for various reasons, such as seeking employment and livelihood security. The work GAATW does encompasses the wide range of issues related to human trafficking. This includes addressing the key elements of trafficking, such as forced labor and involuntary services across both formal and informal economic sectors, and in both public and private work environments. Additionally, GAATW advocates for the rights and safety of all migrants and their families, especially as they face the challenges of a globalized and increasingly informal labor market. A lot of the most major issues regarding trafficking have very little to do with what popular conceptions of human trafficking are. GAATW has worked extensively to create works that reframe narratives around trafficking to correct the many harmful misconceptions about what anti-trafficking work entails. Anti-trafficking is not just "rescuing" women from sex work, it is a fight to advocate for policies that prevent the root causes of trafficking - harsh border restrictions, patriarchal laws, and a lack of labour rights in certain industries.

Women Workers for Change,
A Knowledge-Sharing & Solidarity Forum
13-16 June 2024, Bangkok

Maya Wilson

GAATW-IS



Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women

WEALTH INEQUALITY IN THAILAND

TOURISM, THE URBAN-RURAL DIVIDE, AND INEQUALITY

Thailand is a clear example of how rapid development can lead to serious inequality, especially between cities and rural areas. Urban centers like Bangkok have seen major growth, with better jobs, healthcare, education, and infrastructure. These areas benefit the most from the shift toward industries like manufacturing, services, and tourism.

In contrast, rural regions—especially in the northeast (Isaan), the north, and parts of the south—are still largely dependent on agriculture, informal labor, or seasonal work. Access to quality schools, hospitals, and stable income is limited, which makes it hard for people to break out of poverty.

Tourism plays a big role in Thailand's economy, but the benefits aren't evenly shared. Most of the profits stay in big cities or go to large businesses, while rural workers often take on low-paying, insecure jobs in the tourism industry. Even in popular tourist areas, local communities may not see long-term improvements.

Education and infrastructure also reflect this divide. Urban schools are generally better funded and staffed, while rural schools often lack resources. At the same time, development projects tend to focus on Bangkok and other major cities, leaving rural areas under-supported.

Many people from rural regions migrate to cities looking for work, often ending up in the informal economy—jobs like construction, food service, or tourism gigs that don't offer job security or benefits. These workers are essential to the economy but remain largely unprotected.

In the end, Thailand's growth has created a dual economy: a modern, well-connected urban population, and rural communities still facing major barriers.

The urban-rural wealth divide in Thailand is one of the biggest in the world. According to the World Bank, in 2020 the rural poor outnumbered the urban poor by 2.3 million people, and 76 percent of those living in poverty are in rural areas. There is also high levels of inequality within urban areas as well. As I mention in the monarchy section, the royal family is incredibly wealthy - which is a large point of tension for many Thai people both urban and rural who live with very little.



As somebody who is traveling abroad, especially to countries that are still developing economically, it is important to be conscious of the ways you are spending your money and the way you are engaging with the places you're in. Tourism is one of the main industries in Thailand, which obviously comes with certain positives and negatives for Thai people. As a traveller, I think it is important to look for accommodation and activities that are locally owned when possible. There's not much that any one individual can do to help the economic state of a country, but you can choose how and where you spend your money.

Living in Bangkok I witnessed a lot of urban wealth inequality. The most glaring example being that only a couple streets over from the lavish Grand Palace is a street that is almost completely filled with unhoused people in the evenings. Economic disparities between neighbourhoods was also very stark - some areas (like Sukhumvit and Silom) are chock full of luxury apartments, whereas others are filled with dilapidated old buildings in which entire extended families often share an apartment. The fancier areas tend to advertise a lot towards "digital nomads" as well, developing new housing and businesses that push out local people in favour of bringing in foreign money. While the income inequality in Bangkok was very visible, I really had no idea how stark it could be until I went up to visit KSDC in the north. The difference between city life and rural life is so immense. Seeing the rural villages really put into perspective just how much I take urban life and all the consumption (and air conditioning) that comes with it for granted. Seeing where the interns and KSDC students lived really illuminated just how little some people live with. Witnessing this first hand made me feel simultaneously guilty and grateful - it was a real check on my own consumption habits and how much I've come to think I need a plethora of material objects in order to live. Nobody should have to live with less than they need, but I think it's easy to think we need a lot more than we really do.



BUDDHISM IN THAILAND

One of the most striking misconceptions about Thailand that I've encountered is the way Buddhism is perceived—especially through a Western lens. Visitors often arrive enchanted by the peaceful imagery of orange-robed monks, incense-filled temples, and golden Buddhas. But what many don't realize is that Buddhism in Thailand is not just a backdrop for a picturesque vacation or a "spiritual detox"—it's a deeply rooted way of life that shapes the country's culture, values, and daily rhythms.

In Thailand, Buddhism isn't just something people "practice" on weekends or holidays. It's integrated into the everyday. From early morning alms-giving to routine temple visits and Buddhist holidays that involve nationwide rituals, the religion informs how people live, celebrate, mourn, and relate to one another. Even major life events like births, marriages, and funerals are grounded in Buddhist traditions. And temples (wats) are more than just tourist attractions; they are community centres, spiritual sanctuaries, and educational hubs.

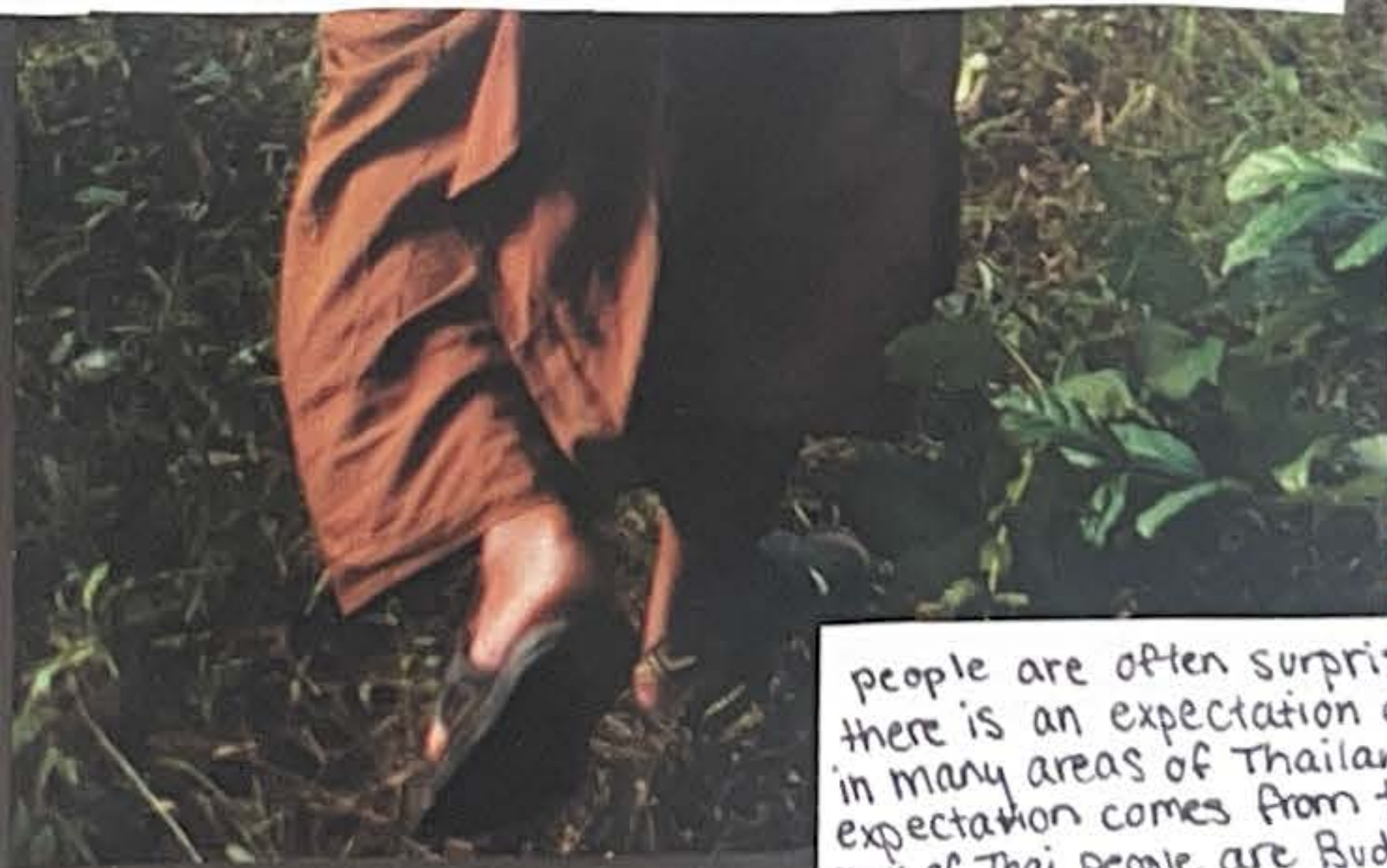
Despite Buddhism's central role in Thai life, it is often misrepresented or misunderstood by outsiders. One common misconception is treating it as a universally calm, monastic, and detached-from-the-world philosophy. In reality, Thai Buddhism is lively, local, and full of cultural nuances—ranging from spirit houses to temple fairs, monkhood as a rite of passage, and regionally distinct practices that blend with older animist beliefs. While — like any religion — devoutness varies widely, there is a tendency for foreigners to strongly identify with the theoretical principles of Buddhism without meaningfully engaging with its practices.

Perhaps more troubling, though, is the Western tendency to appropriate Buddhism as a kind of exotic self-help toolkit. There's a growing trend of people visiting Thailand for a "spiritual cleanse"—joining a silent meditation retreat or briefly "living like a monk" without understanding the religious and cultural significance behind these practices. Buddhism is reduced to a lifestyle brand: Buddha statues used as home decor, tattoos of sacred symbols worn without context, and mindfulness commodified into weekend workshops. While spiritual curiosity is natural and often well-intentioned, it becomes problematic when it strips the tradition of its depth and reuses it for personal branding or profit.

In reality, Buddhism in Thailand is not a temporary experience—it's a lived religion, shaped by centuries of history and closely tied to community life. To truly appreciate it requires more than just participation; it requires respect, context, and an understanding that what may seem like a spiritual novelty is, for millions of Thais, a sacred and enduring foundation of their identity.



drying robes in the monastery



people are often surprised that there is an expectation of modesty in many areas of Thailand. This expectation comes from the fact that 90% of Thai people are Buddhist. Misconceptions of Buddhism lead people to be unaware that Thai society, especially in the north, is actually quite traditional. Further, people don't expect certain standards of dress at religious sites.

