



# Thai in the New York Metro Area

## QUICK FACTS:

**Place of Origin:**  
Thailand

**Significant Subgroups:**  
Varies by region (e.g., Central Thai, Northern Thai, Southern Thai)

**Location in Metro New York:**  
Queens (Woodside, Elmhurst, Jackson Heights)

**Population in Metro New York:**  
30,000 (Community Estimate); 11,867 (ACS 2010 Thai who selected Asian alone as race); 10,767 (ACS 2010 Born in Thailand)

**Population in New York City:**  
6,802 (ACS 2010 Thai who selected Asian alone as race); 6,770 (ACS 2010 Born in Thailand)

**Primary Religion:**  
Buddhism

**Secondary Religions:**  
Christianity (evangelical); Islam (Sunni) Status of Christian Witness: Less than 2% evangelical. Some evangelical resources available, but no active church planting within the past two years.

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**Primary Language:**  
Thai

**Registry of Peoples Codes:**  
101940, 104960

**Significant Notes:**  
The Thai word *wat* refers to any place of worship except a mosque. A church is called a *wat krit*, and a Hindu temple is called a *wat khaek*.

Since 2004, militant Muslims have claimed over 3,000 lives in the southern Thai province of Pattani, which was a small Islamic sultanate absorbed by Thailand in 1908.<sup>6</sup>

ALL PEOPLES INITIATIVE LAST UPDATED: 02/2010

"The most important thing to know about us is that we accept everyone," said Ricky, a former tour guide from Thailand and regular worshipper at the Thai Buddhist temple (known as the Wat Thai) in Elmhurst, Queens. "We even have a special worship room upstairs just for people from other religions," he explained. One of the reasons behind this inclusiveness is the high rate of intermarriage between Thai and Americans. Instead of rejecting mixed-religion couples, Buddhist leaders typically encourage them to embrace both faiths and pass on to their children a "double heritage"—equal participation in the religious communities of both parents. This dual religious identity means that many Thai-American families are accustomed to attending Midnight Mass at a Catholic Church on Christmas Eve and performing merit ceremonies at the Wat Thai on Christmas Day.<sup>1</sup> One expert claims Thai Buddhist temples have become the most ethnically diverse Asian-American religious communities in the US.<sup>2</sup> Community leaders estimate Metro New York's Thai community numbers 30 thousand people.<sup>3</sup>

## When Did They Come to New York?

Immigration from Thailand was nonexistent until the mid-1960s. During the Vietnam War, the Thai government allowed the US to use military bases and station thousands of American servicemen in Thailand. This led to a wave of marriages between US servicemen and Thai women in the 1960s and '70s. Once the door to the US was open, others came seeking educational and job opportunities. However, the ratio of women to men continued to be skewed. During the 1970s, three Thai women immigrated to the US for every Thai man. The 1980s saw the largest influx of Thai, with approximately 6,500 per year arriving in the US.<sup>4</sup> Today, Metro New York has the second-largest Thai population in the US after the Greater Los Angeles area (ACS 2008).

## Where Do They Live?

"We are scattered around the New York area, but Woodside, Elmhurst, and Jackson Heights in Queens are home to many Thai," said Ricky. Several Thai restaurants and stores can be found along Broadway and Woodside Avenues in Elmhurst. Most neighborhoods boast at least one Thai restaurant, as the Thai have established a presence both in New York City and the suburbs of Metro New York. Thai Buddhist temples are also spread out across the Metro area, from Queens to the Bronx, and from Mahwah, New Jersey to Centereach, Long Island.

## What Do They Believe?

Despite their inclusiveness, most Thai believe "to be Thai is to be Buddhist." Almost ninety percent of Thai, along with most Burmese, are Theravada Buddhists. Theravada emphasizes the individual's responsibility to reach spiritual awakening by following the Eightfold Path of Buddha and rooting out "cravings" for sensual pleasures, which are the cause of human suffering. It is believed that once a person dies, his or her soul does not persist into the next life, but a new personality is born, whose circumstances are determined by what was before. As a result, Theravada describes this continuity as rebirth, not reincarnation. The Thai tend to focus on the practical aspects of Theravada, such as *tam bun* or "earning merit," and *baap*, which means "avoiding demerit," in order to improve their present and future lives. In a survey of Thai Buddhists in America, ninety-two percent said *tam bun* was the primary reason for going to temple.<sup>5</sup> Metro New York also has a small Thai Muslim population, along with several hundred Christians—the spiritual descendents of missionaries who first came to Thailand in 1828. Although Metro New York has three Thai evangelical churches, located in Yonkers, Astoria, and Jackson Heights, they are small, and outreach to the community is limited.

## What Are Their Lives Like?

"We come here for jobs—that's the only reason," Ricky explained. The Thai community in Metro New York primarily consists of first- and second-generation immigrants, and most come from the cities of Bangkok and Chiang Mai. While the Thai work in many different professions, significant numbers are involved in the restaurant business as owners or workers. Restaurants are often family enterprises, requiring all members, including children, to pitch in as needed.

## How Can I Pray?

∞ Although the Thai often state, "All religions are equally good," they have been very resistant to Christianity. Pray they would see how Jesus has provided the "merit" they need for eternal life.

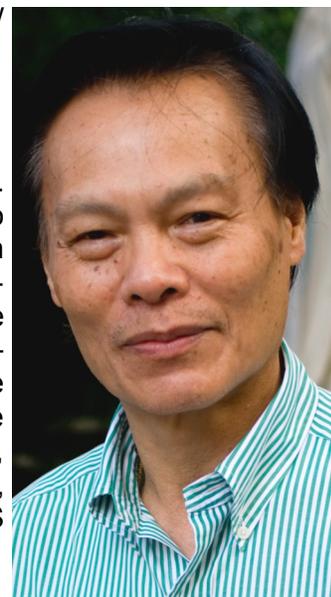


Photo by Joanna Johnson

1. Todd LeRoy Perreira, "Sasana Sakon and the New Asian American," in T. Carnes and F. Yang, eds., *Asian American Religions: The Making and Remaking of Borders and Boundaries* (New York: New York UP, 2004), 313.  
2. Perreira, "New Cosmopolitans in Buddhist America: Transcultural Dynamics and the Thai Community" (paper presented at the annual conference for the Asian Pacific Americans and Religions Research Initiative, Claremont, California, August 6-8, 2009), <http://pana.psr.edu/new-cosmopolitans-buddhist-america-transcultural-dynamics-and-thai-community> (accessed January 26, 2010).  
3. Estimate derived from conversations with community members and leaders at the Wat Thai in Elmhurst, New York, in July 2009.  
4. Megan Ratner, "Thai Americans," in Robert Dassanowsky and Jeffrey Lehman, eds., *Gale Encyclopedia of Multicultural America*, vol. 3 (Farmington Hills, MI: Gale Group, 2000), 1743-1744.  
5. Perreira, "Sasana Sakon," 336.  
6. Patrick Winn, "Thailand: The War You've Never Heard," *Global Post*, March 12, 2009, <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/thailand/090311/thailand-the-war-youve-never-heard?page=0,1> (accessed January 28, 2010).