

Transcript: Public Policy & ThaiHealth – Excise tax funding supporting culture-health initiatives

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00:13 - 00:47

Hello, everyone, and welcome to this special episode commissioned by the Asia-Europe Foundation Culture360. Today, we are diving into a topic that might seem like an unlikely pair at first: public policy and culture. We often think of health as something that happens in a doctor's office or a hospital. But what if health is actually shaped by the stories we tell, the books we read, and even the art we create?

00:48 - 01:26

Today, we are exploring Thailand as a fascinating case study of how the cultural and health sectors can work together to build a better society. Our focus is on an organisation that has become a global model for this kind of collaboration — ThaiHealth, or the ThaiHealth Promotion Foundation. We'll look at how they use 'sin taxes' to fund creative cultural campaigns that don't just tell people to be healthy, but actually reshape the social norms of an entire nation.

01:28 - 02:17

So, what exactly is ThaiHealth? Actually, it was established under the ThaiHealth Promotion Foundation Act in 2001, so that's the starting point. Unlike a traditional government department, it is an autonomous public organisation that operates under the Prime Minister's office. Its core mission is simple but literally revolutionary — to promote health, not just treat illness. They called it 'the proactive approach.' Instead of waiting for people to get sick and then spending tons and tons of billions on hospital beds, ThaiHealth actually invests in social and behavioural change to keep people from getting sick in the first place. But there is the most interesting part — the money.

02:18 - 03:01

ThaiHealth is funded through what we call a 'sin tax' mechanism. They receive roughly a two percent surcharge on top of the existing excise taxes for alcohol and tobacco. Well, think about the logic here. We tax things that are harmful to consume, like whiskey and cigarettes. By doing this, we reduce negative behavior. But instead of that money just disappearing into the general government budget, it is redirected back into the public good to fight the very

problems those products caused. Well, it's a closed-loop system of social responsibility.

03:02 - 03:36

Now let's get into the how — how does ThaiHealth actually change the way people live? They do it through culture. In Thailand, like many places, drinking is deeply embedded in social life. Instead of just running boring ads about liver disease, ThaiHealth actually supports creative communication campaigns. They use storytelling and cultural engagement to gradually make not drinking a cool and respected choice in many social settings.

03:37 - 05:23

The campaign, called '[Poor–Stress–Drink Alcohol](#),' or in Thai, 'jon kriat ginlão,' is perhaps the most iconic and successful example of ThaiHealth's cultural intervention strategy, launched in the mid-2000s. It shifted the conversation from medical warnings to a relatable, rhythmic social commentary. So, before this campaign, most anti-alcohol ads in Thailand focused on, you know, liver damage or gruesome car accidents. These were effective at scaring people, but literally failed to address the reason why the working class — or literally everybody — drank. Escapism. The campaign identified a repetitive, tragic loop in the life of the Thai working class. Poor — meaning financial instability — leads to high-pressure stress. Stress leads to the desire for temporary numbness through alcohol. Alcohol costs money and reduces productivity, leading back to being even poorer.

The campaign used a minimalist storytelling style. It featured a man played by a recognisable everyman actor, staring directly into the camera and repeating the cycle: poor, stress, drink. Poor, stress, drink. And so on. By repeating this phrase rapidly, it became a catchy linguistic meme. It didn't lecture. It mirrored a reality that millions of Thais recognised. This repetition highlighted the absurdity of the behavior without being condescending.

05:24 - 06:05

The brilliance of the campaign was its second half, which provided a cultural alternative. The cycle was interrupted by a choice: stop drinking, work, save money, help the family — and live happily ever after. Instead of framing soberness as a medical requirement, it framed it as a path to upward social mobility and family duty — two deeply held values in Thai culture. The phrase 'jon kriat ginlão (Poor–Stress–Drink)' became so embedded in the Thai lexicon that it is still used in everyday conversation today.

06:06 - 07:39

Now, let's turn to something that affects almost every urban dweller. ThaiHealth supported a fascinating documentary series called 'The Firm: Hidden Obesity Organisation.' Instead of a flashy game show, this was a deep-dive documentary. It followed employees from two very different worlds — first, the public government sector, and then the private corporate sector. The goal wasn't just to see who could lose the most weight, but to document how these two different environments contribute to obesity in ways we don't even notice.

The cameras followed these participants everywhere. We saw office culture in action: the communal snacks, the celebratory sugary drinks, and the long hours spent sitting. It compared how a government official's daily routine differs from a corporate executive's, showing that obesity is often a hidden consequence of our professional lives. The most iconic part of the show was the measurement. They didn't just use the scale — they used waistline measurement. In Thailand, we have a simple rule: your waist shouldn't exceed ninety centimetres for men or eighty centimetres for women. By filming the participants measuring their belly fat on camera, the show made the invisible — visible. It turned health into a shared cultural conversation about how our workplaces — our firms — need to change to support our lives.

07:40 - 08:08

Another beautiful example is the 'One Read, Millions Awakening' project. This initiative encourages the public to buy new books to donate to community libraries. It's not just about health — it's also about fostering a culture of reading and lifelong learning. They recognise that a society that reads is a society that is more aware and better equipped to make healthy life choices.

08:09 - 10:30

The most profound example of cultural health intervention is ['Death Fest 2026.'](#) That's right — Death Fest. In Thai society, talking about death is often considered bad luck or taboo, but ThaiHealth recognised that a good death is a part of good health as well. According to a source called The Cloud, Death Fest uses art and engagement to open up space for these conversations.

Let me walk you through what this festival actually looks like, through its five main zones.

First, there is the Old School. This is a classroom for both theory and practice. It's where you learn how to care for yourself and your loved ones during the final

stages of life. You can come alone or with family to build actual skills for palliative care, making death a subject to study rather than a subject of fear.

Then there is the 'Before I Die' zone. This is an exhibition and activity space that encourages you to settle your physical and emotional baggage — to resolve conflicts, make space, and make peace with your stories. Not just for your sake, but for the sake of those you leave behind.

Next is the Human Life Library Café. Imagine a human library where, instead of books, you borrow a person — sitting down for coffee with people from all walks of life: artists, monks, doctors — to talk about what it means to live well and, apparently, die well.

They also have the Life Journey Booth, which serves as a roadmap through the stages of life — aging, illness, and the final stage, a good death — it provides practical services and information for each step of the way.

And finally, the Friends Eat zone. This is a collection of food stalls where you are encouraged to bring a friend, a lover, or a relative for a meal you want to share before you die. It uses the most basic human ritual — eating together — to trigger deep conversations about what we value the most.

10:32 - 12:31

So now, I want to bring this down to a personal level. I recently participated in a series called 'Activate City Challenge' — a park creator training held at the Faculty of Architecture, Chiang Mai University. For four intense days in March 2026, we were trained to become park creators. We studied urban health frameworks, participatory design — which was very fun, by the way — and analysed the city through the lens of city ecology and people. We even did field studies at prototype sites like urban vegetable gardens and the old railway park.

This culminated in a pitch. My team pitched a project called CMU After Dark: Hidden Stories of the Campus. ('CMU' stands for Chiang Mai University.) We wanted to nudge people to walk more, but we didn't want it to feel like exercise — exercise without knowing it's exercise. We wanted it to feel like an adventure. Our idea: a night walking tour that weaves together ghost stories and the rich urban history of Chiang Mai and the university. By making the walk fun, mysterious, and culturally engaging, we transform the university campus into a healthy space that people want to explore on foot — for roughly an hour and a half.

Pitching this taught me that ThaiHealth isn't just looking for parks. They are looking for a participatory process that connects people to their city through

stories. We are taking this idea to Chiang Mai Design Week this December 2026, so if you want to be with us — just wait and see. By launching during a major cultural festival like Chiang Mai Design Week, we aren't just pitching a health project. We are pitching a cultural experience. We want to show that to move a person's feet, you first have to capture their imagination.

12:31 - 13:06

To wrap up, Thailand's ThaiHealth model proves that culture is a vital health tool. Whether it's a national meme, a documentary on office life, or a student-led ghost tour at Design Week — these are all cultural interventions. It is a triangle that moves the mountain: knowledge, social movement, and political support. When we use creative energy to reshape social norms, we create a society that is not just un-sick, but truly well.

13:07 - 13:21

Thank you for listening to this episode. This episode was commissioned by the Asia-Europe Foundation Culture 360. I'm Chanintorn Pensute. Until next time — keep walking, keep storytelling, and stay healthy. Goodbye, everyone.