

When Times are Hard, Faith fills the Gaps—and the Merit Boxes



“It’s less a spiritual journey than an economic wishlist wrapped in incense.”

When the economy slows down, businesses cut costs, and families tighten their belts. But there’s one thing many Thais never stop doing: making merit.

From executives lighting lotus candles to street vendors tucking coins into donation boxes, merit-making remains a quiet constant across all walks of life. During the economic uncertainty of the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020, a nationwide survey by the Trade Policy and Strategy Office (TPSO) found that 45% of Thais continued making merit as usual—and another 11% did even more.

Who were they? Mostly government workers, employees, and those between jobs—the very people most affected by the downturn. When the world feels unstable, faith offers something solid.

A Barometer of Hope—Here and Everywhere

In many ways, the reasons people go to the temple speak volumes about the national mood. According to the same survey:

- 42% sought emotional strength to face daily life,
- 30% wished for luck and financial stability,

- 11% prayed for career and business success,
- and the rest hoped for blessings in health, love, family, and education.

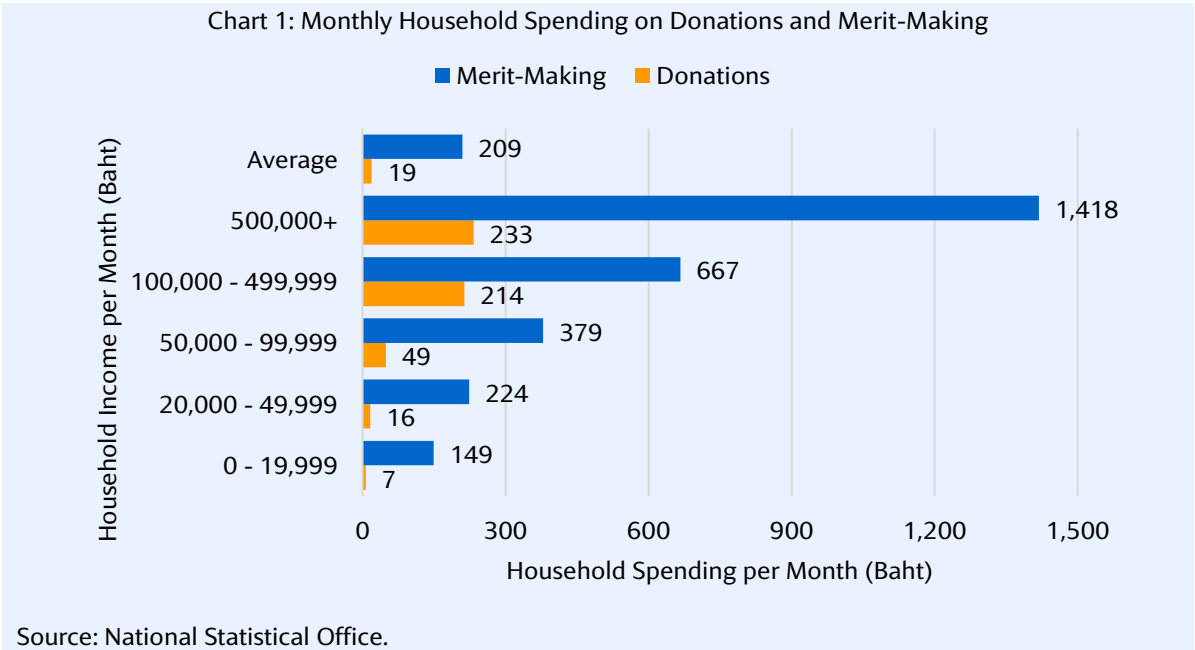
It’s less a spiritual journey than an economic wishlist wrapped in incense. The temple visit becomes more than religious practice—it becomes a reflection of people’s everyday anxieties, dreams, and attempts to reclaim some control in uncertain times. It’s not escapism. It’s resilience with ritual.

And this pattern isn’t unique to Thailand. After the 2008 global financial crisis, church donations in the U.S. held steady despite shrinking incomes. In India, temple offerings surged during droughts and economic downturns. Around the world, when economies falter, spiritual giving often remains resilient.

But Thailand stands apart. Here, the practice isn’t just a crisis response—it’s a daily rhythm. A way of life. Pandemic or not.

Giving Feels Good—Science Says So

Even beyond faith, there’s science behind giving. Elizabeth Dunn, a social psychologist from the University of British Columbia, found that spending



on others made people happier than spending on themselves—a truth Thai grandmothers in sarongs have long understood.

In her experiments, participants who gave were consistently happier than those who didn't. And similar findings have emerged from Canada to South Africa to Uganda: across cultures, generosity correlates with happiness more than income or bonuses.

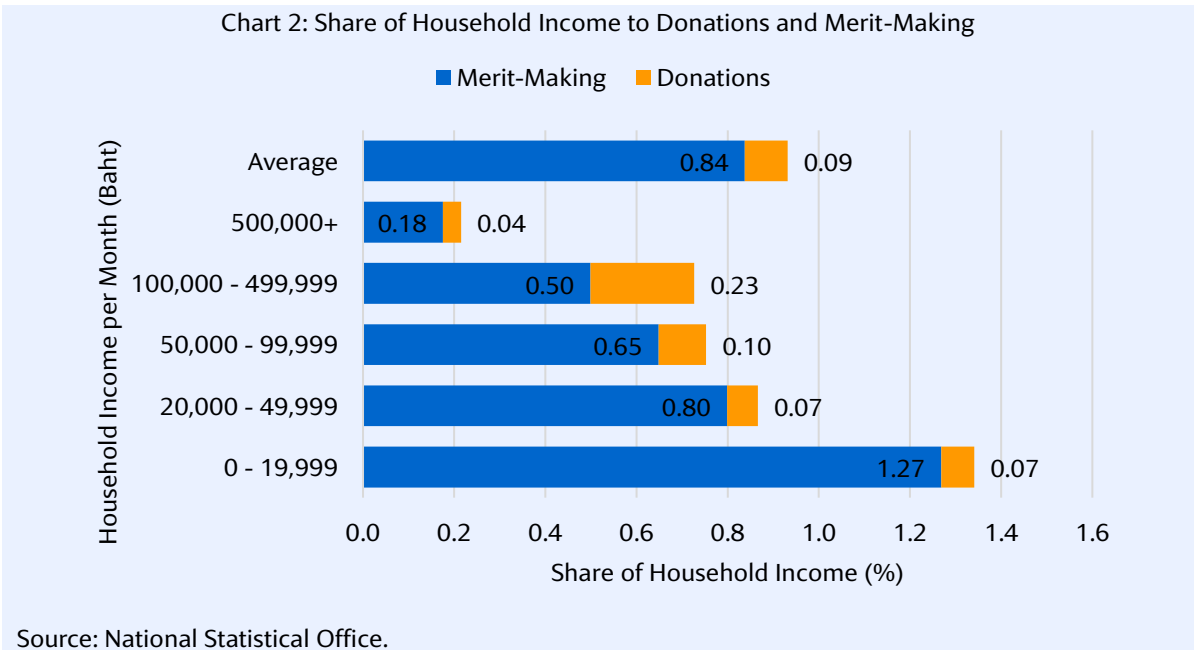
Thailand doesn't need academic validation. Here, generosity is cultural muscle memory—a quiet force that uplifts communities, fosters emotional

well-being, and keeps spirits high and the future—no matter how uncertain—a little more hopeful.

Faith and Finance: A Modern Blend, with a Thai Twist

While merit-making is deeply spiritual, it's also evolving with the times. Temples now display QR codes for e-donations.

Thailand isn't alone in modernizing faith. In Europe, churches accept tap-and-go donations. In Japan, some temples offer virtual incense via smartphone apps. But here, the blend of tradition and technology feels natural, not novel. Faith



adapts—not just to survive, but to remain relevant in daily life.

Rather than seeing this as commercialization, we might view it as innovation with reverence.

One Coin, One Blessing, One Belief

So while GDP may dip, the merit boxes still fill. Because in Thailand, faith isn't just for the next life—it helps carry us through this one. It's a source of strength, comfort, and continuity. A small act that says: "Tomorrow will be better."

The next time you see someone placing a coin into a temple box, think of it not as superstition—but as Thailand's most enduring form of emotional resilience. One coin. One blessing. One hopeful step forward.

In a world searching for certainty, this quiet act of giving may be Thailand's most consistent form of therapy—and perhaps, its most meaningful form of growth.

But that doesn't mean faith has never been betrayed. Mismanaged temple finances—or those who exploit belief for personal gain—can shake the trust of even the most devoted. For some, it raises difficult questions about the very system they once believed in.

And yet, faith itself never lies. Because faith is, at its core, hope—quietly born in ordinary people who still wish to see the world just a little better than yesterday.

Pornpawee Thammavichai

Pornpawee.Thammavichai@bangkokbank.com

Strategic Outlook and
Transformation Management
Office of the President