

OCA 2025

Off-Campus Activity
Northern Thailand Study Trip 2025

Chiang Rai - Bangkok
21-27 August, 2025



VOLUNTEER ACTIVITIES WITH CHILDREN AT MAE-KOK FOUNDATION, CHIANG RAI PROVINCE, THE MOST NORTHERN PART OF THAILAND.

OCA 2025: Building Bridges in Thailand

Celebrating its 51st year, the Off-Campus Activity (OCA) continues to strengthen ties between Japan and Thailand.

This year's Northern Thailand Study Trip 2025 brought Japanese students to Chiang Rai and Bangkok for a week of cultural exchange and learning.

Highlights included a homestay at the Mae-Kok Foundation, exploring Lanna arts and traditions, learning about sustainable coffee and tea cultivation, and visiting the Golden Triangle. Students also participated in creative workshops at Mae Fah Luang University. They concluded their journey in Bangkok, presenting their group study at Chulalongkorn University on lifestyle differences between Thai and Japanese students.

The program closed with a lively networking reception, reconnecting OCA Alumni and celebrating over five decades of friendship and exchange.

Friendships Beyond Borders

Where Hearts and Cultures Meet

Together Across Nations

More Than A Journey, A Shared Home



51 Years of OCA: Strengthening Ties Between Japan and Thailand.

For over half a century, the Off-Campus Activity (OCA) has been a cultural bridge between Japan and Thailand. What began as a student exchange program has grown into a rich tradition of friendship, learning, and collaboration. Through cultural exchanges, academic presentations, historical site visits, and community service, OCA continues to nurture mutual understanding between the two nations.

This year, under the theme “OCA 2025: Northern Thailand Study Trip,” Japanese university students spent a memorable seven days in Thailand. Their journey began in Chiang Rai, where they stayed at a homestay hosted by the Mae-Kok Foundation.

Mae-Kok Foundation: A Home of Hope

At the heart of Chiang Rai, the **Mae-Kok Foundation** provides not only shelter but also love and care for children who have lost their parents—or whose parents are serving prison sentences for drug-related offenses. For these children, the foundation is more than just a home; it is a place where they can find safety, warmth, and the joy of childhood.

In late 2024, devastating floods swept away the girls’ dormitory. **Thanks to the OCA program and the MRA Foundation**, a new dormitory is being constructed, providing the children with a safe place to live and learn. Beyond infrastructure, the support extended to include **essential supplies, dry food, toys, and learning activities.**

During their recent visit, Thai and Japanese students brought laughter and learning by **teaching, playing games, and simply spending time with the children.** These moments of connection remind us that while funding and facilities are vital, it is love, companionship, and human warmth that truly transform lives.





Brewing Change in the Highlands: Sustainability in Action

Beyond cultural exchange, one of the most eye-opening parts of the OCA trip was the opportunity to witness **sustainable development efforts in northern Thailand's highland and border communities**. For decades, these areas were plagued by shifting cultivation, widespread opium farming, deforestation, and drug trafficking. Today, however, many villages have embraced a new path—one that blends economic opportunity with environmental stewardship.

Coffee and tea cultivation have become symbols of this transformation. By introducing high-value crops, communities not only protect fragile ecosystems but also **create stable livelihoods** that enable families to thrive without resorting to destructive or illegal activities. The shift has ripple effects, ranging from forest preservation to improved education and health outcomes, as households gain greater financial security.

During their study trip, students explored this development model firsthand. They visited **local coffee shops and roasting facilities**, learning how raw beans are turned into thriving small businesses that attract both locals and tourists. Workshops on **coffee cupping**—the professional art of tasting and evaluating coffee—offered more than just a sensory experience; they highlighted the importance of **value-added skills** in raising product standards and accessing global markets.

What stood out most was how these initiatives combined **economic empowerment, cultural pride, and environmental care**. The students saw that sustainability isn't just about protecting nature—it's about creating opportunities for people to live with dignity, stability, and hope. By turning challenges into opportunities, northern Thai communities are proving that sustainable growth is not just possible, but deeply rewarding.

The Golden Triangle: From Opium Trade to Cultural Crossroads

No visit to northern Thailand is complete without experiencing the **Golden Triangle**, where the borders of **Thailand, Myanmar, and Laos** converge along the **Mekong River**.

Historically, this region gained notoriety as a center of the **opium trade**, producing large quantities of raw opium that fueled both regional economies and international drug markets. While the illicit trade once dominated local livelihoods, cross-border cooperation and government-led development initiatives have gradually transformed the area.

Today, the Golden Triangle is not only a **tourist destination** but also a symbol of how geopolitics, economics, and sustainable development intersect.

The opposite side, of the Lao PDR, the **Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone (GTSEZ) in Bokeo Province**, sits on land historically known for opium production. Established in 2007 through a partnership with a Chinese-owned company, the zone aims to drive economic growth by leveraging its strategic cross-border location, featuring casinos, hotels, and commercial facilities.

The region's **geoeconomic significance** lies in its strategic location as a trade and transport hub linking Southeast Asia's inland markets. Infrastructure development, cross-border tourism, and agricultural diversification—especially in coffee, tea, and handicrafts—have generated new revenue streams for communities that were historically dependent on opium cultivation.

Students visiting the area gained firsthand insights into how historical challenges shape contemporary economic strategies, illustrating the delicate balance between heritage, development, and global market forces.





Exploring the Greater Mekong: Culture, Sustainability, and Innovation at Mae Fah Luang University

The itinerary also included a visit to **Mae Fah Luang University (MFU)**, one of northern Thailand's most renowned regional universities. Known for its **English-medium instruction**, MFU attracts students not only from Thailand but also from across the **Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS)**, creating a vibrant, multicultural academic community.

The university places a strong emphasis on research and development initiatives focused on GMS studies, addressing topics such as the SDGs, sustainable agriculture, cross-border trade, logistics, and cultural preservation.

Students first explored the **MFU Botanical Garden**, then the **Mekong Basin Civilization Museum** on campus, which offers insights into the region's history, culture, and economic development, providing important context for understanding the sub-region's challenges and opportunities.

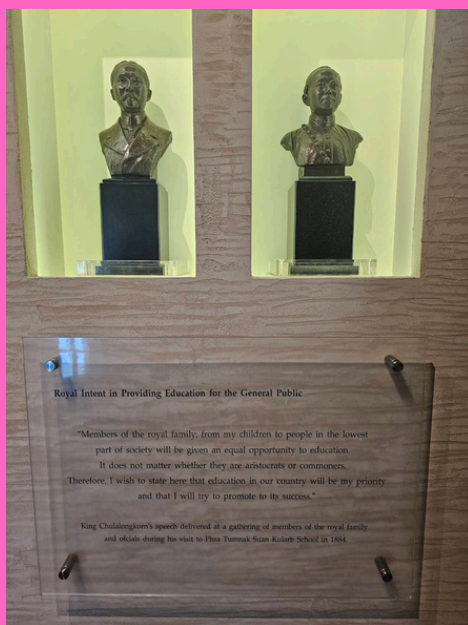
Following, students participated in a **bag Painting Workshop**, blending traditional Thai motifs with contemporary designs. This hands-on activity highlighted how MFU fosters both academic excellence and cultural creativity, showing that heritage can be preserved while inspiring modern economic, artistic, and regional identity.



Celebrating 5 decades of OCA: Research and Connections in Bangkok.

The journey culminated in Bangkok, where students presented their research at Chulalongkorn University's Faculty of Economics, the very institution that cooperated with the OCA program 50 years ago. Their study, titled "Differences in the Lifestyles of Japanese and Thai Students: Living Costs, Spending Behavior, and Savings," offered insightful comparisons of student life across cultures, reflecting the program's long-standing commitment to academic exchange and cross-cultural understanding.

The week concluded with a heartwarming networking reception, bringing together Thai OCA Alumni and participants to celebrate five decades of cultural exchange, lifelong friendships, and collaborative learning. This finale underscored the enduring impact of a program that, for half a century, has bridged nations, fostered knowledge, and inspired young minds.





Memories that last a lifetime...

*As the OCA - Northern Thailand Study Trip 2025 program drew to a close, it became clear that its impact goes far beyond sightseeing and academic presentations. For both Japanese and Thai students, it was a journey of **connection, understanding, and shared growth**—from the mountains of Chiang Rai to the banks of the Mekong, from classrooms and workshops to the heart of Bangkok. They witnessed how communities transform challenges into opportunities, how heritage and innovation can coexist, and how collaboration can foster sustainable futures. Most importantly, they experienced **the power of human connection**: the laughter of children at the Mae-Kok Foundation, the shared curiosity in coffee workshops, and the friendships formed across borders. Fifty-one years since its inception by the Faculty of Economics, OCA continues to be more than a program—it is a bridge between nations, a classroom without walls, and a celebration of **curiosity, empathy, and cultural understanding**. The memories, lessons, and relationships forged on this journey will remain with participants long after they return home, inspiring them to carry forward the **spirit of exchange, learning, and kindness in every corner of their lives**.*

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