US Forces Pacific Culture Guide





THAILAND

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U.S. AIR FORCE

PACIFIC AIR FORCES

About this Guide

This guide is designed to prepare you to deploy to culturally complex environments and achieve mission objectives. The fundamental information contained within will help you understand the cultural dimension of your assigned location and gain skills necessary for success.



The guide consists of 2 parts:

Part 1 "Culture General" introduces the foundational knowledge you need to operate effectively in any global environment – Southeast Asia in particular (Photo: AF Chief shows family photos to Thai youth).

Part 2 "Culture Specific" describes unique cultural features of Thai society. This section is designed to complement other pre-deployment training. It applies culture-general concepts to help increase your knowledge of your deployment location (Photo: Exercise Cope Tiger Commander dines with children in Udon Thani, Thailand).



For further information, visit the Air Force Culture and Language Center (AFCLC) website at http://culture.af.mil/ or contact AFCLC's Region Team at AFCLC.Region@us.af.mil.

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PART 1 – CULTURE GENERAL

What is Culture?

Fundamental to all aspects of human existence, culture shapes the way humans view life and functions as a tool we use to adapt to our social and physical environments. A culture is the sum of all of the beliefs, values, behaviors, and symbols that have meaning for a society. All human beings have culture, and individuals within a culture share a general set of beliefs and values.

Members of a culture also usually assign the same meanings to the symbols in that culture. A symbol is when one thing – an image, word, object, idea, or story – represents another thing. For example, the American flag is a physical and visual symbol of a core American value – freedom. At the same time, the story of George Washington admitting to having chopped down a cherry tree is also symbolic, representing the importance Americans place on personal honesty and leadership integrity.



Force Multiplier

The military services have learned through experience the importance of understanding other cultures. Unlike the 20th-century bipolar world order that dominated US strategy for nearly half a century, today the US military is operating in what we classify as asymmetric or irregular conflict zones where the notion of cross-cultural interactions is on the leading edge of our engagement strategies.

We have come to view the people themselves, rather than the political system or physical environment, as the decisive feature in conflict areas. Our primary objective hinges on influencing constructive change through peaceful means where possible. We achieve this endeavor by encouraging local nationals to focus on developing stable political, social, and

economic institutions that reflect their cultural beliefs and traditions.

Therefore, understanding the basic concepts of culture serves as a force multiplier. Achieving an awareness and respect of a society's values and beliefs enables deploying forces to build relationships with people from other cultures, positively influence their actions, and ultimately achieve mission success.

Cultural Domains

Culture is not just represented by the beliefs we carry internally, but also by our behaviors and by the systems members of a culture create to organize their lives. These systems, such as political or educational institutions, help us to live in a manner that is appropriate to our culture and encourages us to perpetuate that culture into the future.

We can organize these behaviors and systems into categories – what the Air Force refers to as "cultural domains" – in order to better understand the primary values and characteristics of a society. A cross-culturally competent military member can use these domains – which include kinship, language and communication, and social and political systems among others (see chart on next page) – as tools for understanding and adapting to any culture. For example, by understanding the ways different cultures define family or kinship, a deployed military member can more effectively interact with members of that culture.



Social Behaviors Across Cultures

While humankind shares basic behaviors, various groups enact or even group those behaviors differently across cultural boundaries. For example, all societies obtain food for survival, although agrarian societies generally produce their own food for limited consumption using very basic techniques.

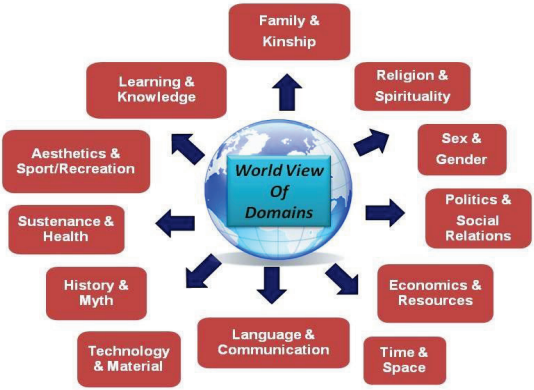
Conversely, industrialized nations have more sophisticated market economies, producing foodstuffs for universal consumption. Likewise, all cultures value history and tradition,

although they represent these concepts through a variety of unique forms of symbolism. While the dominant world religions share the belief in one God, their worship practices vary with their traditional historical development. Similarly, in many kin-based cultures where familial bonds are foundational to social identity, it is customary for family or friends to serve as godparents, while for other societies this practice is nearly non-existent.



Worldview

One of our basic human behaviors is the tendency to classify others as similar or different according to our cultural standard. As depicted in the chart below, we can apply the 12 cultural domains to help us compare similarities and differences across cultures. We evaluate others' behavior to determine if they are "people like me" or "people not like me." Consequently, we assume that individuals falling into the "like me" category share our perspectives and values.

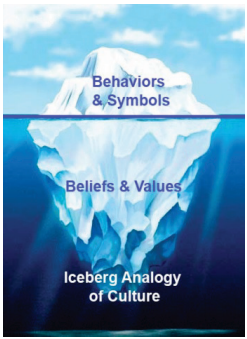


This collective perspective forms our worldview – how we see the world and understand our place in it. Your worldview functions as a lens through which you see and understand the world. It helps you to interpret your experiences and the values and behaviors of other people that you encounter. Consider your worldview as a way of framing behavior, providing an accountability standard for our actions and a logical explanation of why we individually or collectively act in a certain manner.

Cultural Belief System

An important component of a worldview is our belief system. A community's belief system sets its universal standards of what is good and bad, defines right and wrong behavior, and assigns a value of meaningful or meaningless. Our beliefs form the fundamental values we hold to be true – regardless of whether there is physical evidence to support these ideas. Beliefs are a central facet of human culture. They are shared views about world order and how the universe was physically and socially constructed.

While all people have beliefs, their specific components tend to vary depending upon respective world views. What people classify as good or bad, right or wrong depends on our deeply-held beliefs we started developing early in life that have help shape our characters. Likewise, these values are ingrained in our personalities and shape our behavior patterns and our self-identities. Because cultural beliefs are intensely held, they are difficult, though not impossible, to change.



Core Beliefs

Core beliefs shape and influence certain behaviors and also serve to rationalize those behaviors. Therefore, knowledge of individual or group beliefs can be useful in comprehending or making sense of their activities. We will use the iceberg model for classifying culture to illustrate two levels

of meaning, as depicted. Beliefs and values, portrayed by the deeper and greater level of the submerged iceberg, are seldom visible, but are indicated / hinted at / referenced by our behaviors and symbols (top level). It is important to recognize, though, that the parts of culture that are not visible (under the waterline) are informing and shaping what is being made visible (above the waterline).

In many cases, different worldviews may present behaviors that are contrary to our own beliefs, particularly in many regions where US forces deploy. Your ability to suspend judgment in order to understand another perspective is essential to establishing relationships with your host-nation counterparts. The ability to withhold your opinion and strive to understand a culture from a member of that culture's perspective is known as cultural relativism. It often involves taking an alternate perspective when interpreting others' behaviors and is critical to your ability to achieve mission success.

As you travel throughout Southeast Asia, you will encounter cultural patterns of meaning that are common across the region. What follows is a general description of 12 cultural domains which are used to frame those commonalities.

CULTURAL DOMAINS

1. History and Myth

History and myth are related concepts. History is a record of the past that is based on verifiable facts and events. Myth can act as a type of historical record, although it is usually a story which members of a culture use to explain community origins or important events that are not verifiable or which occurred prior to written language.



Southeast Asia includes 5 countries on the mainland (Burma, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam) and 5 maritime countries in

the North Pacific Ocean and the South China Sea (Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Brunei). As early as 150 BC, the scattered communities on the mainland traded with and paid tribute to the dominating kingdoms of China and India. China maintained a presence in Vietnam for over 1000 years, while's India's influence was felt mainly as its inhabitants spread Hinduism, Buddhism, and later Islam across the region. Southeast Asia's most famous ancient empire, the Khmer, ruled for 4 centuries beginning around 800 AD from its center at Angkor in Cambodia. Later, Thai kings expanded across the mainland, while a Hindu kingdom from India united the Indonesian archipelago.



China began to halt its expeditions to the region in mid-15th century, just as European nations began sending theirs. The Portuguese were the first to conquer a Southeast Asian settlement in 1511, although their influence in the region was short-lived. Observing their success, the Dutch and English moved into the area as well. The Europeans sought to acquire trade routes and territories, and from the 17th through the 19th centuries the Dutch worked to consolidate their power in today's Indonesia, the Spanish their control of the Philippines, the English their hold over Burma and Malaysia, and the French their control over Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. By the beginning of the 20th century, virtually all of Southeast Asia was controlled by colonial powers; only Thailand remained independent.

During World War II, Japan invaded and occupied portions of Malaysia, Burma, Thailand, and the Philippines. After the war, independence movements regained traction, and following years of struggle against the occupying Americans, the Philippines became the first country in Southeast Asia to gain its independence in 1946. Other countries endured years of instability and conflict on their way to independence. In Vietnam, communist rebels battled and defeated the French but then engaged the US in a controversial war. A civil war in Cambodia ended in the rise to power of the Khmer Rouge,

during whose reign in the late 1970s almost 2 million people died. A few years after the Dutch ceded power in Indonesia, a dictator took control in a coup and ruled for 32 years before resigning in 1998. Similarly, a military junta wielding absolute power has ruled Burma since 1962. Since the 1990s, Southeast Asia has largely enjoyed renewed stability. Both Thailand and Malaysia now have an affluent, educated middle class; Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam are well on the road to recovery from decades of conflict; and even Burma has recently held elections and initiated reform to a civilian democracy.

2. Political and Social Relations

Political relations are the ways in which members of a community organize leadership, power, and authority. Social relations are all of the ways in which individuals are linked to others in their community.



Differences in the physical environment affected the social and political structures that historically developed in Southeast Asia. Where people were nomadic or semi-nomadic, systems of government were less permanent and bureaucratic. In areas where populations were more settled, a reliable tax base allowed the development of more elaborate and permanent governing structures. These early states, though, often found it difficult to extend their authority into the remote highlands, where small tribal groups resided, and the islands, where some groups lived permanently in water communities of small boats.

Significant changes occurred in Southeast Asia around 2000 years ago as peoples from China and India began to move into the region (see *History and Myth*). New leaders formed new empires and states, and spiritual beliefs and practices changed as religious leaders introduced new religious traditions (see *Religion and Spirituality*).

Many colonial-era governments, fearing the threat that an educated class might hold, largely denied education and civil liberties to most Southeast Asians and discouraged political

activities. Political participation swelled around the time of independence, although many post-independence political structures in the region were dictatorial and repressive. While most countries are healing from their 20th century conflicts, many governments continue to reflect authoritarian elements. Elites across the region continue to seek to control access to the political system. They are typically from the country's dominant class, which is often comprised of members of a particular ethnic group.

Some countries, such as Vietnam and Cambodia, are somewhat ethnically homogenous, while others, such as the Philippines and Indonesia, are much more diverse. Many countries also have minority communities of ethnic Chinese and Indians. So-called hill tribes, minority groups with distinct ethnic and linguistic identities, are found in Burma, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, and the Philippines.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), formed in 1967, is a regional intergovernmental organization whose goal is to promote economic and political cooperation among its members, including the creation of a free trade community by 2015. ASEAN priorities include fostering economic and diplomatic relations with India and China, which have been strained due to longtime territorial disputes in the region. The European Union has a strong relationship with the organization and has taken steps to deepen trade and business links. The US also has close political, security, and economic relations with most of the member states.



The relationship between Japan and the countries of Southeast Asia has improved significantly since World War II, and Japan is a crucial economic and aid partner today.

3. Religion and Spirituality

Religion is a cultural belief system that provides meaning to members of a community. Religious and spiritual beliefs help

preserve the social order by defining proper behavior. They also create social unity by defining shared identity, offer individuals peace of mind, and explain the causes of events in a society.

The earliest populations of Southeast Asia were animists, which means they believed that many different spirits inhabited elements in the natural environment, such as trees and rocks, or were represented in natural phenomena, such as thunder and lightning, or represented deceased ancestors. In many areas today, these traditional beliefs are still very important, and many Southeast Asians incorporate them in their practice of Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity.

Indian traders and priests first brought Hinduism to Southeast Asia in the 1st century AD, where it eventually became the dominant religion in several kingdoms. In the 14th century the influence of Hinduism began to wane as people turned to Islam. Today, although there remain only small communities of Hindus in Indonesia, the Hindu principles of absolutism and hierarchy remain significant in politics across the region.

Indian merchants also brought Buddhism to Southeast Asia beginning in the 1st century AD where it became well established in Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Indonesia, and Malaysia. Later, Chinese immigrants introduced Buddhism to Vietnam and Singapore. Many Southeast Asian mainlanders are Buddhist today, although their beliefs and practices may also include some animist and Hindu traditions.



Chinese people spread the teachings of Confucius primarily in what is today Vietnam and Singapore. These teachings embody a complex belief system emphasizing stability, consensus, hierarchy, and authority that still influences ideas of social harmony across the region.

Islam reached Southeast Asia beginning in the 10th century through Muslim traders from the Middle East, China, and India,

with a large number of Southeast Asians converting to Islam beginning in the 14th century to escape the Hindu caste system. The largest population of Muslims in the world, approximately 234 million, lives in Indonesia today. Muslim minority communities in Thailand and the Philippines have historically suffered economic and political marginalization.

Christianity was introduced to the region by European colonizers beginning in the 16th century. Today, although parts of Indonesia have Christian communities, the Philippines is the only predominantly Christian country in Southeast Asia.

4. Family and Kinship

The domain of family and kinship refers to groups of people related through blood ties, marriage, or through strong emotional bonds that influence them to treat each other like family members (often called "fictive kin").



Family life is very important to Southeast Asians and relationships among family members are highly valued. As in the US, kinship is generally traced through both parents. Children are generally very respectful of their parents, and parents are devoted to their children, making economic or other sacrifices as a matter of course to ensure their well-being.

Traditionally, close proximity of kin was a valuable resource in Southeast Asia's agriculturally-based villages. Families were large and close-knit as individual members supported each other economically and socially and the rhythms of family and village life mirrored those of the agricultural cycle.

Family life in Southeast Asia has changed in recent decades as societies have become more economically and socially diverse due to industrialization and urbanization. Today, a much wider variety of occupations is open to both men and women, and the middle class is growing in cities across the region. Women have fewer children today than they did 3 decades ago, and

many households in the cities no longer contain 3 or 4 generations of extended family but are mostly nuclear families.

Many Southeast Asian countries that have large rural hinterlands, such as Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand, also have large metropolises, such as Jakarta, Manila, and Bangkok. In these sorts of countries, there is a sharp rural-urban divide in economic and educational opportunities that results in stark differences in rural and urban family life. In rural villages, extended families may remain intact whose activities revolve around agricultural production, while in urban centers the household is usually much smaller and family structures are much more diverse.

Although arranged marriages are much less common today, most Southeast Asians depend on their family's input when choosing a marriage partner. The ages of both the bride and groom have increased as young people postpone marriage to pursue economic and educational opportunities, and divorce rates have risen in recent decades. Of note, in Indonesia and Malaysia Muslim men are allowed to practice polygyny, or have more than one wife, if they can afford to support them all. For these Southeast Asians, matrimony and divorce are under the jurisdiction of Islamic law.

5. Sex and Gender



Sex refers to the biological/reproductive differences between males and females, while gender is a more flexible concept that refers to a culture's categorizing of masculine and feminine behaviors, symbols, and social roles.

Southeast Asia's dominant philosophies and religions (Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity) privilege the male's role as provider and stress female subordination. Despite most countries' commitment to gender equality, women across Southeast Asia may find participation in the business and political spheres difficult, and in some countries there is still a marked preference for sons over daughters.

Despite these challenges, there is widespread acceptance of women in the workplace, though women usually receive less pay than men. Industrialization has provided new opportunities for women, and many Southeast Asian women continue to work beyond marriage and children. Hundreds of thousands of Southeast Asian women even relocate to other countries to work as nurses and domestic workers.

Within the agricultural sector, women produce about 50% of food in the region and represent a significant share of the agricultural labor force. They are particularly involved in harvesting rice, tea production, and working on rubber and fruit plantations. Women generally have access to education and training, and in Thailand and the Philippines there are actually more post-secondary female graduates than males.

Opinion on sexual orientation and gender identity is most liberal in the Philippines, where homosexuality is legal and there have been attempts to pass anti-discrimination legislation to protect sexual minorities. But in many parts of Southeast Asia homosexuals suffer discrimination and stigmatization. Malaysia criminalizes homosexuality and cross-dressing, and in Indonesia transgender individuals are often the victims of violence and exploitation.

6. Language and Communication

Language is a system for sharing information symbolically, whereby words are used to represent ideas. Communication is defined as the cultural practice of sharing meaning in interaction, both verbally and non-verbally.



Southeast Asia is linguistically very diverse; of the approximately 6000 languages spoken in the world today, about 1000 of them are found in Southeast Asia. Many of the ancient indigenous languages that were present in the region have become extinct as a result of war, cultural and economic domination, and small population size.

The languages of mainland Southeast Asia belong to 3 groups: Austro-Asiatic (such as Cambodian and Vietnamese), Tai (such as Thai and Lao), and Tibeto-Burmese (including highland languages and Burmese). Languages that belong to these 3 groups are also found in India and China. Conversely, most of the languages spoken on the islands of Southeast Asia belong to the Austronesian family, a group of languages originating from southern China and Taiwan.

The colonial powers that controlled Southeast Asia until the 20th century primarily promoted and used their own languages including French, Dutch, English, and Spanish. Since independence, several states have named one local linguistic variety as the "standard," such as Bahasa Indonesian and Bangkok Thai, and promoted its use over both European and other local languages. Recently, after years of aggressively promoting their national languages, many Southeast Asian countries have re-introduced English as a language of instruction in school and allowed ethnic Chinese and Indians to attend school in their own languages.



Ancient Southeast Asians developed their own writing systems based on scripts from India and China. Today, Vietnamese, Malaysian, Indonesian, and Filipino, like English and most western European languages, use the Latin alphabet, while Burmese, Laotian, Thai, and Cambodian use writing systems derived from ancient Indian scripts.

Southeast Asians are rarely confrontational or highly demonstrative and emotional in their communication. They value respect as a key component in maintaining social harmony, and conveying respect is a significant aspect of both verbal and non-verbal communication. For example, proper greetings, such as pressing the palms together and slightly bowing as is common in Thailand, are extremely important across Southeast Asia.

7. Learning and Knowledge

All cultures require that the older generation transmit important information to the younger generation. This information can be strictly factual (for example, how to fulfill subsistence and health requirements) and culturally traditional (the beliefs, behaviors, and symbols that have meaning to the community). This knowledge transfer may occur through structured, formalized systems such as schools or through informal learning by watching adults or peers.

Throughout their history, the cultures of Southeast Asia have willingly borrowed and adapted ideas, practices, and institutions from beyond the region. This willingness is evident in the history of education. Prior to colonization, both Hindu and Muslim traders and migrants from India and beyond brought their own traditions of education to the region, and local Southeast Asian communities adopted these curricula and educational methods to their needs.



Later, during the colonial period, the European powers were largely uninterested in providing education to Southeast Asians because they viewed them principally as agricultural laborers. If the colonial powers did provide educational opportunities, they were largely confined to members of privileged groups.

Still later, as populations across the region began to resist colonization, the lack of educational opportunities became a topic around which to rally. In many countries, local activists adopted western educational methods but also drew on local traditions to devise new educational opportunities through which they articulated their arguments for independence.

Today, education in Southeast Asia is viewed as both a tool for developing the region and as a human right. Consequently, in most countries education is open to every citizen regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, or socio-economic background. Rapidly growing populations challenge most national governments in

their goals of providing 12 years of basic education to all, often forcing a sacrifice in the quality of services. Students in both urban and rural areas often suffer from a lack of adequate classrooms, teachers, and good text books, although primary school enrollment averages an excellent 93% in the region.

8. Time and Space

In every society, people occupy space and time in ways that are not directly linked to physical survival. In most western cultures, people tend to be preoccupied with strict time management, devoting less effort to relationship-building. Conversely, in most Southeast Asian cultures establishing and maintaining relationships within the group can take precedence over accomplishing a task in the most efficient manner.

Southeast Asians' emphasis on the well-being of the group and maintaining social harmony often means people will deliberately avoid embarrassment of themselves and others, a strategy often referred to as "saving face." Many Southeast Asians try to manage their time efficiently while still showing respect to their co-workers and maintaining "face."



Time is maximized by multi-tasking, and engagements usually start when scheduled. Networking is very important in Southeast Asia, and new contacts are often best made through a high status third party who knows both parties well. Only after the establishment of a good rapport can business negotiations proceed.

Public and private spaces often overlap in a way that is unfamiliar to Americans. Shop owners may also live at their place of business, so entering into a public space can also mean entry into an individual's private space. Consequently, customers and clients should always show proper respect.

9. Aesthetics and Recreation

Every culture has its own forms of creative expression that are guided by aesthetic principles of imagination, beauty, skill and style. Most of Southeast Asia's forms of creative expression, such as art, architecture, dance, music, and theater, reflect the diversity of cultures and ethnicities of the region as well as the influence of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. Ancient and elaborate Hindu temples and highly symbolic statues of Buddha are found in many countries. Similarly, across Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines, Islamic art and architecture intermingle with examples of Hindu and local animist traditions.



Traditional classical dance and theater are enjoying a revival after some forms came close to extinction during the wars and conflicts of the 20th century. These traditions trace back to the ancient kingdoms of the region and often include dancers dressed in elaborate masks and costumes. Ancient forms of shadow-puppet theater, in which paper puppets are manipulated against a lighted backdrop, are also popular in several countries.

Combat sports of Asian and Western origins are popular in Southeast Asia today. With the end of the colonial-era ban on martial arts, indigenous forms such as *Pentjak Silat* and *Bersilat* combined with other Asian forms to make up *Muay Thai*, *Pencak Silat* and *Kali*, the main components of today's Mixed Martial Art fighting.

The Southeast Asian Games are an important regional sporting event. These biennial games bring together over 4,000 athletes for 11 days of competition in the Olympic sports and promote regional cooperation and understanding.

10. Sustenance and Health

Societies have different methods of transforming natural resources into food. These methods can shape residence patterns, family structures and economics. Theories of disease

and healing practices exist in all cultures and serve as adaptive responses to disease and illness.

As expected from Southeast Asia's location on the water, more fish is consumed than any other form of animal protein. Rice, a grain that has been cultivated in the region for thousands of years, is the primary food staple. Everyday meals are typically simple, consisting of chopped pieces of meat and vegetables that are fried or steamed and served with rice, often accompanied by spicy chili condiments. Influences from India and China are obvious in popular dishes such as spicy curries and rice noodle soups. Members of Muslim communities in Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines typically do not eat pork or drink alcohol.

Malaria, HIV/AIDS, and the lack of clean drinking water are the main health concerns in Southeast Asia. With an estimated 15% of worldwide cases coming from the region, malaria is a major problem. The HIV/AIDS epidemic was delayed in reaching Southeast Asia but turned into a major cause of death throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Since then, due to successful HIV prevention programs including those aimed at sex workers and their clients, transmission rates have steadily declined, and recent HIV/AIDS incidence rates have been similar to those of the US. Access to clean water has increased in most regions but in Cambodia and Laos half of the population still lacks access to clean drinking water.



All countries are faced with the rise of non-communicable diseases among their aging populations, and most face the threat of emerging infectious diseases, such as the avian flu.

The countries of Southeast Asia confront many challenges in providing health care for their growing populations. Rapid but unequal socioeconomic development has resulted in significant disparities in health and access to healthcare. Despite these

challenges, most countries have experienced a continual increase in life expectancy since the 1950s.

11. Economics and Resources

This domain refers to beliefs regarding appropriate ways for a society to produce, distribute, and consume goods and services. Most Southeast Asian communities practiced wet-rice and slash-and-burn agriculture for centuries before the arrival of Europeans in the 16th century. In addition, Southeast Asia's geographical location between China and India as well as its position on navigable waterways which connect the West and Middle East with Asia and Australia made the area an important center of trade well before European presence.

With European expansion into the area came the introduction of plantations and the mechanization of agriculture as well as the entry of the region into the global marketplace. Worldwide demand for rice increased dramatically in the 19th century, further changing the agricultural landscape of the region. Today, all 3 agriculture types – wet-rice, slash-and-burn, and plantation – are still practiced in the region and all have caused serious ecological damage such as massive deforestation and an increase in the production of greenhouse gases.

Beginning in the 20th century the region experienced a dramatic industrialization process with growth rates exceeding even those of developed nations. Explosive growth in exports such as textiles, electronics, auto parts, and petroleum lead to double-digit economic growth, greatly increasing local GDPs. Though roughly 1/3 of the population currently lives below the poverty line, regional economies have grown and now supply both skilled and semi-skilled workers to other countries.



The 2008 global financial crisis caused damage to the economies of Southeast Asia. While the financial sector did not engage in high-risk lending practices, there was a severe drop

in exports due to a global reduction in spending from which the countries are still recovering.

12. Technology and Material

Societies use technology to transform their physical world, and culture heavily influences the development and use of technology. After the colonial period, the countries of Southeast Asia have expanded at different rates and currently experience varied levels of economic development. Their places in the global market range from Singapore, which has the third-highest GDP world-wide, to Burma and Cambodia which are ranked among the poorest countries in the world.



Prior to colonial rule, the region's inhabitants were expert farmers, having adopted domesticated rice from India and China and developed complex rice-farming techniques, or mariners who traded across the region. European colonists brought additional skills in metalworking, agriculture, sailing, and navigation. The introduction of commercial agriculture, mining, and an export-based economy during the colonial period placed Southeast Asia on its current technological path.

Southeast Asian nations are generally open to trade and investment, having transformed from inward-looking economies dominated by agriculture to outward-looking, market-oriented economies in just a few years. As China's "backyard," Southeast Asia is often seen as the site of economic competition between China and the US and between India and Japan. Despite lingering mistrust of China because of several unresolved maritime territorial disputes, some Southeast Asian nations welcome China's investment in infrastructure, energy, agriculture, and mining. About 15% of Southeast Asia's total trade is conducted with China. By comparison, about 12% of Southeast Asia's trade is conducted with the US.

Now that we have introduced general concepts that characterize Southeast Asian society at large, we will focus on specific features of Thai society.

PART 2 – CULTURE SPECIFIC

1. HISTORY AND MYTH

Overview

As the only nation in Southeast Asia to avoid direct European colonization, the Kingdom of Thailand (known as Siam for much of its history) traces its founding to 1238 and its present monarchy to 1782. Since converting from an absolute to a constitutional monarchy in 1932, Thailand has experienced a series of coups and military dictatorships interspersed with periods of democratic governance.

Prehistoric Thailand

Scientists believe humans have lived in the territory of modern-day Thailand for at least 40,000 years. Archaeological evidence at Ban Chiang in northeast Thailand suggests that by 2000 BC inhabitants engaged in wet-rice agriculture, animal domestication, bronze metalwork, and ceramics manufacture.

Early History

The Mon and Khmer ethnic groups were early settlers in the region. In the first millennium AD, the ancestors of the modern Thai people, called the Tai, gradually migrated from southern China through Vietnam and Laos into Thailand.



Between the 6th and 9th centuries, a Mon civilization called Dvaravati dominated Thailand's central plains as Indian culture and religion arrived through trade routes (see p. 3 of *Religion and Spirituality*). From the 9th- 13th centuries, the Khmer Kingdom expanded from its capital at Angkor, Cambodia into much of present-day Thailand. Greatly influenced by the Khmer's Hindu- and Buddhist-based ceremonies, dance, and literature, Tai people formed several small city-states within the Khmer Kingdom by the 12th century (Photo: 10th century Khmer sculpture).

Sukhothai Period

Thailand's founding, in 1238, occurred when Tai leaders declared independence from the Khmer, establishing the first Tai-speaking kingdom at Sukhothai in central Thailand. To distinguish themselves from other Tai groups still under foreign rule, these people called themselves ***Thai***, meaning "free." Of note, Sukhothai King Ramkhamhaeng, The Great, developed a writing system that became the basis of the modern Thai alphabet (see p. 1 of *Language and Communication*). Meanwhile, in the northern part of Thailand, the Tai Kingdom of Lanna with its capital at Chiang Mai became an independent city-state in 1296.

Thai concepts of monarchy have their origins in Sukhothai, founded in the early part of the 13th century and generally regarded as the first truly independent Thai kingdom. Here, particularly under the reign of King Ramkhamhaeng the Great (1275-1317), was born the ideal of a paternalistic ruler alert to the needs of his people and aware of the fact that his duty was to guide them, a view markedly different from the divine kingship practiced by the Khmers.

The paternalistic ideal was at times lost during the long Ayutthaya period, when Khmer influence regarding kingship reappeared and the monarch became a lofty, inaccessible figure, rarely seen by most citizens. Nevertheless, the 4-century era witnessed the reigns of some remarkable rulers whose achievements were far reaching.

Ayutthaya Period

Founded in 1350, the Kingdom of Ayutthaya expanded in subsequent decades, capturing Angkor, Cambodia in 1431 and absorbing the Kingdom of Sukhothai in 1438. The Kingdom of Ayutthaya adopted many aspects of the Khmer's Hindu-influenced culture, including the idea that the ruler is divine (Photo: Ruins of a Buddhist temple at Ayutthaya).



At its greatest extent, the Kingdom of Ayutthaya covered most of present-day Thailand plus parts of Cambodia, Laos, and Burma. Aspects of Ayutthaya culture had long-lasting impact. In 1360,

the king declared Theravada Buddhism the official religion (see p. 2 of *Religion and Spirituality*). In addition, he combined Hindu texts and Thai customs to produce legal codes that remained in effect through the late 19th century.

The Kingdom exchanged diplomats and benefitted from strong commercial ties with many European and Asian countries – including England, France, the Netherlands, India, Japan, and China – in the 16th and 17th centuries. Anti-European feelings arose in the late 17th century due to 2 reasons: the growing presence of French Christian missionaries (see p. 7 of *Religion and Spirituality*) and the appearance of European warships off the Kingdom's coast. The Kingdom expelled the French in 1688 and strictly limited contact with other Western nations for the next 150 years.

Fall of Ayutthaya: Beginning in the 16th century, the Kingdom experienced repeated conflicts with neighboring Burma. After repeated attempts, Burmese forces invaded in 1765 and lay siege to Ayutthaya. In 1767, the Burmese sacked and burned the city, leaving it in ruins and taking thousands of prisoners.



Thonburi Period

Two years later, a Chinese-Thai general later known as Taksin the Great (pictured) engaged and defeated the Burmese, in the process re-establishing Thai control of the region. After promoting himself king, Taksin established his capital at Thonburi, across the river from Bangkok. Although Taksin enjoyed diplomatic relations with many countries, he especially encouraged Chinese merchants and craftsmen to settle in the new capital. While Taksin successfully extended the each of Thai control to Lanna, Cambodia, and much of Laos, his increasingly erratic behavior disturbed his followers. In 1782, General Chao Phraya Chakri led a group of followers in Taksin's overthrow.

The Rise of Modern Thailand

General Chakri took the throne in 1782, becoming King Rama I and establishing the monarchy that endures today. As a first act,

he moved his court to Bangkok. Later, he worked to expand his kingdom in addition to reestablishing court rituals and issuing legal codes. Rama I took a particular interest in reinvigorating Buddhism. To this end, he modified the Buddhist monastery system and constructed Bangkok's famed Temple of the Emerald Buddha (see p. 3 of *Religion and Spirituality*).



While Chakri's successors pursued diplomatic and trade relations with several countries, historians credit the actions of Mongkut or King Rama IV (reigned 1851-1868) (pictured previous page) as having the greatest impact on Thailand's historical trajectory. Through successful treaty negotiations, Rama IV avoided colonization by a Western country while embracing many new ideas and innovations that spurred Thailand's modernization.

Basis of Modern Thailand

Modernization continued when Chulalongkorn or King Rama V (reigned 1869-1910) (pictured) implemented significant reforms. These included the abolishment of slavery and the system of forced labor; the introduction of a conscription-based army; the centralization of the state administration; and the establishment of courts of law. Forced by Britain and France to renounce its claims in Cambodia, Burma, Laos, and Malaysia, the Kingdom managed to retain its independence during this period by acting as buffer between the British and French colonies on either side.



King Rama VI (reigned 1910-1925) supported educational reforms and opened Thailand's first university (see p. 1 of *Learning and Knowledge*). To integrate the Kingdom's Chinese population, Rama VI identified a standard Thai dialect (see p. 1 of *Language and Communication*) that all students were required to read, write, and speak. A number of Thai resented the Chinese residents because they dominated government positions and the rice trade. To promote unity, Rama VI pursued policies intended to inculcate loyalty to nation, religion (Buddhism), and king among all of Thailand's residents.

The Shift to Constitutional Rule

Economic hardships during the 1930s fueled popular discontent with the monarchy. Meanwhile, a rising middle class grew frustrated with its exclusion from political decision-making. In 1932, Western-oriented, nationalist government officials and army officers led a coup against King Rama VII that ended the absolute monarchy. Agreeing to transfer power to a constitution-based system of government, Rama VII signed Thailand's first constitution.

Since 1932, kings of Thailand have exercised their constitutional legislative powers through a bicameral National Assembly, which currently comprises a House of Representatives elected by popular vote and a senate, with one half elected and the other half appointed through the constitutional process. Thai kings exercise executive powers through the cabinet headed by a prime minister, and judicial powers through the law courts.



The First Military Dictatorship

Six years later, democracy had not yet taken root, and the military was becoming more politically assertive. In 1938, Army Field Marshal Phibunsongkhram (known as "Phibun" – pictured) took control as a military dictator, a position he would hold through most of World War II.

A staunch nationalist, Phibun pursued an anti-Chinese, pro-Japanese agenda. His government heavily taxed Chinese-owned businesses while subsidizing Thai-owned ones. While strengthening relations with Japan, Phibun attempted to reclaim territory in Laos and Cambodia that Thailand had earlier ceded to France.

World War II

In December 1941, shortly before Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, Japanese forces landed on the isthmus connecting Thailand and the Malay Peninsula. Seeking passage across Thai territory in order to attack the British in Malaya and Burma, the Japanese engaged Thai troops. Having few other options,

Thailand surrendered. Encouraged by a string of Japanese victories against the US and its allies in the following months, Phibun signed a mutual defense pact with Japan. Although Thailand declared war on the US and Britain in early 1942, the Thai ambassador in Washington never delivered the declaration. Consequently, the US did not declare war on Thailand. Instead, the US supported a "Free Thai" movement by training Thai for anti-Japanese underground activities.



During the war, Japan stationed some 150,000 troops in Thailand. Among other activities, the Japanese built the so-called "death railway" to Burma across the River Kwai (pictured) using Allied prisoners of war. Thai public opinion eventually turned against the Japanese, forcing Phibun to resign his office in 1944, a full year before Japan surrendered and World War II officially ended.

Immediate Postwar Years

Thailand's initial postwar years were tumultuous. In 1946, Thailand's teenaged king died under unclear circumstances. Political opponents then hampered the newly-elected civilian Prime Minister (PM) in the ensuing investigation. In 1947, the military toppled the civilian government, setting the stage for Phibun's return as PM in 1948.

Military Rule & Anti-Communism

Because China had come under communist control, Phibun's anti-Chinese stance shifted to include anti-communism. To prevent a feared communist insurgency in Thailand, Phibun (pictured) took several steps. First, he aligned his government closely with the US, receiving in return substantial economic and military aid that fueled the military's rapid growth. In addition, he provided troops to support United Nations (UN) forces fighting the North Korean communist regime during the Korean War. Internally, he closely monitored and even restrained Chinese residents in Thailand.

Phibun's term ended abruptly in 1957 when Field Marshall Sarit Dhanaraj deposed him in a coup. Despite brief periods of civilian

leadership, the military effectively retained control of the country through 1973. During this time, Thailand's foreign policy focused on anti-communism. Thailand provided US forces a staging area for the war in Vietnam, where more than 11,000 Thai troops served by 1969. Because of this support, Thailand received huge revenues from the US that enabled economic development but also contributed to the growth of corruption. While the government laid plans for transition to a popularly-elected government in the early 1970s, popular discontent, particularly among impoverished groups, grew.

Demonstrations against Military Rule

Three issues fueled demonstrations in 1973: the public's dissatisfaction with the government, a fear that the monarchy was vulnerable to being overthrown, and growing anti-Americanism. In October 1973, some 250,000 people gathered in Bangkok, prompting government forces to fire on them, killing 75. The king stepped in, forcing government leaders to resign or go into exile. Despite this move, the subsequent period of parliamentary democracy was brief. Following elections, 2 separate coalition governments were unable to stabilize the situation.

In October 1976, security forces again violently suppressed demonstrations, killing hundreds of students and arresting many more. With communist governments ruling Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam, there was fear of communism's spread to Thailand.



The military stepped in again, suspending the constitution, banning political parties, and declaring martial law (Photo: Bangkok's Democracy Monument, site of the protests).

A Cycle of Coups

The 1976 coup polarized the country, causing many opposition members to join insurgencies and the Communist Party of Thailand. In response, the new government became even more repressive, supporting strict censorship, tightly controlling the labor unions, and purging suspected communists from the civil service and the educational system.

The new government, led by Prime Minister Thanin Kraivichien, a strident anticommunist (pictured), was more repressive in many ways than the earlier military regimes. Strict censorship continued, and the regime tightly controlled labor unions and purged suspected communists from the civil service and educational institutions. As a result, many students joined the communist insurgency. Thanin was replaced in 1977 by General Kriangsak Chomanand. He promulgated a new constitution in December 1978 with a popularly elected House of Representatives and an appointed Senate, but the military controlled cabinet and Senate appointments. Economic instability, however, brought down the Kriangsak government in March 1980.



Despite these measures, political stability remained elusive. The monarchy mediated a power-sharing agreement between the military and parliament in 1980, yet the cycle of coup/reform/new elections kept repeating. The government quelled most dissent in the 1980s by granting amnesty to all communist insurgents. Nevertheless, students and democratic activists continued to protest the government's authoritarian actions. In 1991, Thailand saw its 17th coup since 1932.

Multiparty Democracy

While demonstrations and repression again followed the 1991 coup, the 1992 elections signaled the beginning of Thailand's most democratic period. With no party winning the simple majority in the 1992, 1995, and 1996 elections, majority parties formed successful coalitions. By 1996, for the first time in Thailand's history, more Senators were civilians than military members. In 1997, Thailand published a new constitution.

Financial Turmoil: A major Asian financial crisis in 1997 caused the sudden devaluation of the Thai currency (the ***baht*** – see p. 1 of *Economics and Resources*). Despite the economy's failure to rebound quickly, Thailand retained its democratic process as power transferred between civilian leaders without the military's interference.

Thaksin Shinawatra

In the 2001 election, Thaksin Shinawatra's (known as "Thaksin") Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party took power as leader of a coalition. A Chinese-Thai from the North, Thaksin (pictured) was a multi-millionaire entrepreneur who cultivated influence in Thailand's business world, not with the military and monarchy. In addition, his focus on providing affordable healthcare to Thailand's rural poor provided him broad-based support. As PM, Thaksin launched an intensive anti-drug campaign and stepped up the fight against terrorist violence. When Islamic militants in the Malay Muslim South carried out coordinated attacks on police bases in 2004, Thaksin ordered the use of military force to suppress the insurgency (see p. 9 of *Political and Social Relations*). The strategy exacerbated the conflict and intensified the violence, influencing Thailand's royal family and key military figures to criticize its effectiveness.



Anti-Thaksin "Yellow Shirts"

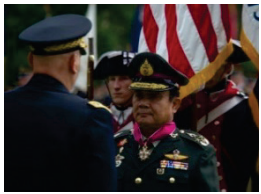
In 2005, the TRT increased its dominance, winning 75% of the vote and forming a single-party government for the first time in Thailand's history. In Thaksin's 2nd term as PM, evidence of corruption emerged. Protestors nicknamed "Yellow Shirts" (see p. 6 of *Political and Social Relations*) called for Thaksin's resignation. Since he no longer held the loyalty of many military leaders, Thaksin was not able to order the military to suppress the demonstrations. Instead, he called for a snap election which the opposition parties boycotted, resulting in the Supreme Court invalidating the results. While Thaksin was at the UN in New York in 2007, the military staged another coup, suspended the 1997 constitution, and set up a military-controlled regime. These events signaled the end of Thailand's longest democratic period.

Although initially welcomed in Bangkok, the coup leaders declined in popularity after violence with Islamic separatists in the South flared and progress toward a new constitution was slow. In a clear rejection of the coup, voters gave their support to a restoration of Thaksin's banned TRT in December 2007 elections.

Democracy was restored, yet Yellow Shirts began demonstrating again in mid-2008, claiming the new PM was a puppet for the exiled Thaksin. Consequently, the parliament elected a different PM, Thaksin's brother-in-law. Despite this change, protests continued and gradually became increasingly violent. When the PM rejected the army's call for new elections, the Constitutional Court removed the new PM from office. In just over 2 years, Thailand had 5 PMs.

Pro-Thaksin "Red Shirts"

Thaksin's supporters, the "Red Shirts" (see p. 6 of *Political and Social Relations*), periodically held demonstrations through 2009. In early 2010 the Supreme Court stripped Thaksin's family of half its wealth, stating he had acquired it illegally while in office. Objecting to these and other judicial acts they deemed undemocratic, Red Shirts paralyzed Bangkok with protests. The subsequent military crackdown resulted in the deaths of nearly 100 Red Shirts. In mid-2011 elections, the Phak Puea Thai party headed by Yingluck Shinawatra, Thaksin's sister, won a landslide victory. As the 1st female PM, Yingluck was popular among rural people, although many Thai saw her as her brother's puppet.



Thailand's Latest Coup

In late 2012, Yellow Shirts called for Yingluck's ouster. The situation escalated in 2013 when Yingluck's government attempted to pass a bill granting amnesty to Thaksin. Some 200,000 people gathered in Bangkok to demonstrate against Yingluck and Thaksin. Yingluck dissolved parliament and called for new elections in February 2014. After the election was disrupted, the courts ruled the results invalid. Before the rescheduled elections could take place, the Constitutional Court in early May ordered Yingluck to leave office and appointed an acting PM. On May 20, Army General Prayuth Chan-ocha ("Prayuth") declared martial law. Two days later the military staged a bloodless coup, suspending the constitution and naming Prayuth head of a military council to lead the country (see p. 3-4 of *Political and Social Relations*) (Photo: Prayuth receives the US Legion of Merit from US Army General Odierno in 2013).

King Rama IX

Bhumibol Adulyadej ("Strength of the Land, Incomparable Power"), grandson of Chulalongkorn, King Rama V, was born in 1927 in Massachusetts while his father was attending Harvard University. After spending World War II in Switzerland, Bhumibol took the throne as King Rama IX in 1946 and reigned until his death in October 2016. Although it was 1951 before he permanently returned to Bangkok to assume his duties, he quickly became a beloved figure and is the world's longest-serving head-of-state.

Myth Overview

In contrast to history, which is supposed to be an objective record of the past based on verifiable facts, myths embody a culture's values and often explain the origins of humans and the natural world. Myths are important because they provide a sense of unique heritage and identity. In Thailand, myths are used to convey moral lessons based on Buddhist teachings or tell of the gods' participation in historical events. Yet others use animals to represent desirable human characteristics.

Myths of Himapan Forest and Rajasiha the Mighty

Popular in Thai mythology is the legend of Himapan Forest, a fictitious woodland in the Himalayas believed to exist below the mythical Buddhist heaven invisible to mortals. The fabled forest is home to a great number of mythical beasts that represent exemplary Thai traits. Some of these creatures are half human and beast; others a pairing of dissimilar animals.

There are also a variety of stories in classical Buddhist mythology pertaining to Rajasiha, a mighty lion living in India's Himalayan jungle. The Thai adapted this customary Indian legend to their own cultural traditions. As a symbol of authority and power, the Rajasiha is depicted on the emblem of the Thai Ministry of Interior – the overseer of the central provisional government. During the coronation of Ayutthayian kings, a lion's skin was used for the king to sit on as a symbol of royal authority and might.

2. POLITICAL AND SOCIAL RELATIONS

Official Name
Kingdom of Thailand
Ratcha Anachak Thai
ราชอาณาจักรไทย (Thai)



Political Borders
Cambodia: 499 mi
Laos: 1,090 mi
Burma: 1,118 mi
Malaysia: 314 mi
Coastline 2,000 mi

Capital
Bangkok

Demographics
Experts estimate Thailand's population at about 68 million, making it the world's 21st most populous country. Thailand's annual population growth has slowed significantly in recent years, reaching its present rate of just 0.32% per year. This low growth trend is due to several factors including dramatically decreased fertility rates due to successful family planning programs (see p. 3 of *Sex and Gender*) and the effects of an HIV/AIDS epidemic lasting over 2 decades (see p. 6 of *Sustenance and Health*). Approximately 50% of the population lives in urban areas.



Flag
Officially adopted in 1917, the Thai flag consists of 5 horizontal red, white, and blue stripes. Red represents the nation and the blood of life. White symbolizes Buddhism, Thailand's predominant religion (see p. 1 of *Religion and Spirituality*). The double-width center blue band symbolizes Thailand's monarchy.

Geography

With most of its territory in the middle of mainland Southeast Asia, Thailand also extends down the Malay Peninsula on the Isthmus of Kra. Thailand shares a border with Laos to the Northeast and East, Cambodia to the Southeast, Malaysia to the South, and Burma to the West and Northwest. The southern coast of Thailand faces the Gulf of Thailand, while the Isthmus of Kra is bordered on the East by the Gulf of Thailand and on the West by the Andaman Sea. Several small islands in the Gulf and Andaman also belong to Thailand, including Phuket, a well-known tourist destination. Thailand's total land area is about 198,000 sq mi – slightly smaller than Texas (Photo: Mu Ko Ang Thong National Park in the Gulf of Thailand).



Thailand has 4 main geographical regions with distinct topographical features. While the upland Khorat Plateau dominates the Northeast, steep, forested mountains characterize the continental highlands of the Northwest. Here, Thailand's highest peak, Doi Inthanon, rises 8,415 ft. Known as Thailand's "rice bowl," the central plains of the Chao Phraya River basin are home to several cities, including Bangkok, Samut Prakan, and Nonthaburi. The southern Isthmus of Kra comprises low hills covered in dense rainforests.

Climate

Thailand's tropical climate has 3 distinct seasons: a rainy season characterized by southwest monsoons (June through mid-November), a dry and cool season (November through February), and a hot season (March through May). The Gulf of Thailand coast experiences a slightly different weather pattern, characterized by monsoonal rains coming from the northeast between October and January. While the North may experience lower temperatures during the cool season, temperatures in the South are consistently warm throughout the year. Temperatures in the central plains range from 73°F- 90°F during the rainy season, 68°F-86°F in the cool season, and 77°F-95°F in the hot season.

Natural Hazards



Thailand is vulnerable to several types of natural hazards. The Northeast is most susceptible to drought, while the plateau, the central valley, and the southern coastal areas experience flash floods caused by heavy monsoonal rains and exacerbated by deforestation (see "Environmental Issues" below). In 2011, Thailand suffered severe flooding that affected over 75% of the country, killing more than 815 people and causing over $45 billion in economic loss. The flooding was the worst in over 5 decades, crippling the manufacturing industry and causing global shortages of several goods (see p. 1 of *Economics and Resources*) (Photo: US Navy helicopter flies over flooding in 2011).

Tsunamis, large ocean waves caused by earthquakes and other geologic disturbances, threaten Thailand's shores. In December 2004, a massive tsunami generated by an undersea earthquake off the coast of Indonesia struck southern Thailand and neighboring countries. More than 230,000 people (over 5,300 in Thailand) were killed and much of Thailand's tourism infrastructure along the Andaman Sea coastline was destroyed.

Environmental Issues

Deforestation due to illegal logging and commercial farming causes environmental degradation across Thailand. Negative outcomes include loss of biodiversity and soil erosion, resulting in increased flooding and landslides. Farm, industry, and untreated sewage run-off contaminate Thailand's water supply, often causing disease outbreaks. Depletion of Bangkok's water table often results in land sinkage. Urban areas suffer air and noise pollution.

Government

Between 1932 and May 2014, Thailand had a constitutional monarchy consisting of a parliamentary government marked by periods of military dictatorship. In 2014, the Royal Thai Army staged a coup, declared martial law, dissolved the elected government, and suspended the 2007 constitution while maintaining the monarchy (see p. 9 of *History and Myth*).

Following the death of King Rama IX, Privy Council head, Prem Tinsulanonda, was appointed Regent pending ascension of the Crown Prince. Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkornhas became King Maha Vajiralongkorn Bodindradebayavarangkun (Rama X) in December 2016, succeeding his deceased father.

In July 2014, the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) endorsed an interim constitution effective until the next election (currently unscheduled) that gives considerable power to the military government. In addition to establishing a new Cabinet and legislature, the interim constitution created a National Reform Committee to propose political improvements. It also established a Constitution Drafting Commission charged with delivering a permanent constitution by July 2015. With the powers granted it in the interim constitution, the NCPO remains politically active. For example, it collaborates with the Prime Minister (PM) and his Cabinet in all peacekeeping and security matters.

Executive Branch

According to the dissolved 2007 constitution, executive power resided in the PM, who led the Council of Ministers and was head-of-government. Elected by the legislature and formally appointed by the King, the PM was typically the leader of the majority political party at the time of a national election.

Royal Thai Army Commander Prayuth Chan-ocha currently serves as PM after dissolving previous PM Yingluck Shinawatra's democratically-elected government in the May 2014 coup (see p. 9 of *History and Myth*) with the King's endorsement. Since assuming office, Prayuth has approved the arrest of academics, dissidents, and rival politicians, among other repressive acts.

Legislative Branch



The dissolved 2007 constitution established Thailand's legislature as a 2-chamber parliament called the National Assembly (pictured), consisting of a 500-seat House of Representatives and 150-seat Senate. While legislation originated in the House, the Senate ultimately controlled most

legislative powers, including amending the constitution, appointing positions in government, approving declarations of war, and modifying and passing legislation. As head-of-state, Thailand's King approved bills passed by the Senate.



In May 2014, the NCPO dissolved the National Assembly and temporarily assumed all legislative power. With the interim constitution, the NCPO created a provisional 1-chamber National Legislative Assembly that consists of 250 members appointed by the NCPO. The NCPO has filled a majority of the seats (120) with military officers, while it hand-picked the remaining members from public, private, civil, academic, and professional sectors. Potential members are ineligible if they have been associated with a political party in the last 3 years – a restriction designed to re-engineer Thailand's political landscape (Photo: A member of Thailand's Military Security force).

Judicial Branch

The judiciary includes a 3-level court system consisting of the Supreme Court, a Constitutional Court, and Supreme Administrative Courts and collectively known as the Courts of Justice. As the highest court, the Supreme Court is the final court of appeal for both civil and criminal cases. A system of lower courts of first instance and courts of appeal oversee minor cases. Both the Judicial Commission and the King may appoint judges followed by confirmation from the Senate.

The judicial branch continues to operate under NCPO oversight following the May 2014 coup. Granted the power to keep "public order" under the interim constitution, the NCPO ultimately controls all judiciary actions through its ability to overturn verdicts and control other court actions.

Political Climate

Since becoming a constitutional monarchy in 1932, Thailand has endured a series of military coups, the most recent occurring in May 2014 (see p. 4-9 of *History and Myth*). This ongoing political instability is linked to a long-standing class-based, regional, and ideological divide between Thailand's urban, conservative, and

wealthy elite who live largely in Bangkok, and its poorer, more rural population, many of whom live in the country's North.

Typically supportive of both the monarchy and the military, the urban elite were the driving force behind the "Yellow Shirts" campaign that drove PM Thaksin out of office in 2007 (see p. 8-9 of *History and Myth*). Generally, the Yellow Shirts favor a weak centralized government backed by a powerful military and an elite faction of bureaucrats.

Pro-Thaksin supporters called the "Red Shirts" were behind mass demonstrations in 2009 and 2010 that eventually resulted in Thaksin's sister, Yingluck, becoming PM in 2011. The Red Shirts generally resent the control of the Bangkok elite, prefer decentralized government power, seek more affordable healthcare, and desire increased aid to rural communities.

Clashes between the 2 groups escalated into vigorous street protests in recent years, resulting in the worst demonstration violence in decades. In an effort to curtail violent protest, Thailand's current military government has declared martial law, imposed a night curfew, arrested both Red and Yellow Shirt leaders, and limited public gatherings to 5 or fewer people. Compounding the political instability is pervading anxiety concerning the succession of King Rama X (see p. 10 of *History and Myth*). Since the death of his father, Rama X has disregarded the provisions of the Thai constitution and it's conventions to a level unprecedented in the modern history of the nation. These actions have caused concern among pro-democracy forces.

Defense



Thailand's armed forces consist of ground, maritime, and air branches, with a joint strength of approximately 306,000 active duty and 245,000 reserve personnel. The armed forces are charged with defending the monarchy against both foreign and domestic threats, ensuring public order, and aiding in disaster relief and peacekeeping operations (Photo: Royal Thai and US Marines during an exercise in Thailand).

In addition, the forces ensure national defense, including operations against Malay Muslim insurgents in the South and incursions from Burma in the West and North (see "Security" below).

The military plays a significant role in Thai politics, having orchestrated several coups over the years (see p. 4-9 of *History and Myth*). As the largest military unit, the Royal Thai Army is the dominant service whose commander-in-chief wields considerably more political power than the other 2 service chiefs. This notion is evidenced by recent appointment of Royal Thai Army Commander Prayuth Chan-ocha as Thailand's Prime Minister (see "Executive Branch" above) (Photo: US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Martin E. Dempsey speaks with Thailand's Joint Chiefs during a visit to Bangkok in 2012).



Royal Thai Army (RTA): The RTA is a well-equipped, well-trained force of 190,000 active-duty troops. It has 4 regional commands, 2 Special Forces units, 13 maneuver divisions and brigades (including mechanized, light, and aviation), numerous combat support divisions, and 4 combat service support divisions for economic development.

Royal Thai Navy (RTN): Consisting of 71,000 active-duty personnel, the RTN is a well-equipped force of naval aviation, marine, and coastal defense units. It has 11 principal surface combatants, 84 patrol and coastal combatants, 17 mine warfare and countermeasure vessels, and 14 logistics and support vessels.



Royal Thai Air Force (RTAF): The RTAF consists of 45,000 active-duty personnel and has 4 air divisions with 76 fighters/interceptors, 95 fixed-wing attack aircraft, and 20 squadrons (Photo: A RTAF F-16 conducting a tactical flight in 2013).

Thai Air Force Rank Insignia



Security Issues



Thailand's security concerns focus on 3 main issues: an influx of refugees from neighboring Cambodia, Laos, and Burma; an ongoing insurgency in the southern provinces; and clashes on the Burmese border (Photo: Royal Thai Army soldiers).

Malay Muslim Insurgency: Thailand's main security concern is sectarian violence in its Malay Muslim majority southern provinces. Since 2004, clashes between insurgents and the Thai military have left around 6,500 dead and over 11,000 wounded. The insurgency comprises individuals and groups with varied agendas: separatists, members of organized crime syndicates, Islamic radicals, and corrupt police forces. While the movement's overarching motivation remains unclear, there is some speculation that its overall goal may be to create an autonomous Islamic state.

The Thai government responded harshly to the insurgency, declaring martial law in the region when the violence flared in 2004 (see p. 8 of *History and Myth*). Since then, critics charge the Thai government has mistreated suspects and fueled local resentment with its counter-insurgency tactics. Although peace talks between the government and the insurgents began in 2013 under Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra, talk stalled after the military overthrew her government in 2014.

Thai-Burmese Border: Thailand has a long, tense history with Burma (see p. 3 of *History and Myth*). The 1,100 mi Thai-Burmese border is a major security concern, plagued by clashes between the Thai military and various armed Burmese groups including insurgents, drug-traffickers, and refugees.

The most significant clashes are skirmishes between the Thai military and Burmese ethnic minority rebel groups who oppose the central Burmese government. Living in Burma's mountainous border region, some of these rebel groups regularly smuggle illegal drugs into Thailand, further exacerbating Thai-Burmese tensions.

Foreign Relations

Thailand's foreign relations center on its relationship with the US, lucrative trade relationships with several countries, and its role in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Relations with the US: US-Thai relations were formally established in 1954 and cemented through Thailand's support of US operations during the Korean and Vietnam wars (see p. 6 of *History and Myth*). More recently, Thailand provided support to US operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. The US in turn provides Thailand financial assistance for the purchase of weapons and other military equipment along with training for Thai military members and police officers. Further, the US and Thailand collaborate in regional intelligence gathering and in military exercises (Photo: A Thai soldier shows US troops how a constrictor kills its prey during Cobra Gold exercises, the largest multilateral military exercises in Asia).



Thailand provides the US access to strategic military facilities, including the U-Tapao Royal Thai Navy Airfield and the Sattahip Royal Thai Naval Base. These facilties enable logistical support for US relief operations in Southeast Asia and for US forces serving in the Middle East. Following the 2014 coup, the US suspended some funding to Thailand, including freezing military assistance and training programs.

Relations with China: Thailand has strong ties with China, which has sold weapons and other equipment to the Thai military since 1980. Bilateral trade has boomed since a 2010 China-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement. In 2011 the Chinese and Thai militaries launched joint patrols along the Mekong River after Burmese insurgents attacked 2 cargo ships and killed 13 Chinese sailors. Further, Thailand has served as a mediator between China and ASEAN nations engaged in territorial disputes.

Relations with Burma: Some 150,000 Burmese refugees live in Thailand. While the Thai government has been tolerant of the displaced population, frustration with their long-term presence plus a seemingly unending flow of new arrivals has caused the Thai government to close its borders with Burma periodically



(Photo: A Thai-Burmese border checkpoint in Mae Sai, Thailand).

Thailand promotes an economic relationship with Burma as a way to encourage Burmese political stability. For example, Thailand financed much of Burma's natural gas infrastructure, while becoming the primary importer of Burmese natural resources and encouraging investment in Burma. Thailand seeks to further improve relations by supporting the inclusion of Burma in regional security initiatives, such as the Cobra Gold exercises (see "Relations with the US" above).

Relations with Malaysia: Violence associated with the Malay Muslim insurgency has heightened tensions with Malaysia. The Malaysian government does not support the insurgency and has developed joint initiatives with Thailand to help counter extremist groups. Nevertheless, some Malaysians criticize the Thai government's harsh response to the insurgency, citing human rights violations. Meanwhile, the Thai government occasionally has accused the Malaysian government of allowing insurgents passage across its border.

Relations with ASEAN: As the largest and one of the most economically developed nations in Southeast Asia, Thailand takes a leadership role within ASEAN (consists of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Brunei Darussalam, Vietnam, Laos, Burma, and Cambodia). Despite some intermittent tensions, Thailand maintains close economic and political relations with its ASEAN counterparts. Having much to gain from regional economic integration, Thailand supports the long-planned ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) (see p. 4 of *Economics and Resources*).

Ethnic Groups

Approximately 75% of Thailand's population are ethnic Thai, a group which divides broadly by dialect and region. Sub-groups include the Central Thai, Northern Thai, Southern Thai (also known as the Thai Pak-Thai), and the Northeastern Thai (also known as the Thai-Lao). While members of all Thai groups speak regional Thai dialects, standard Thai is based on the Central Thai dialect (see p. 1 of *Language and Communication*).

Chinese-Thai: About 14% of the population is ethnic Chinese, primarily descendants of Chinese immigrants who arrived in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (see p. 4 of *History and Myth*). Most have assimilated fully into Thai society, many by intermarrying with the Thai. Today, many Chinese-Thai are successful businesspeople, controlling much of the country's wealth (see "Thaksin Shinawatra," p. 8 in *History and Myth*).

Thai Malays: Thailand's southern provinces are home to the Thai Malays. Making up about 3% of Thailand's population, the Thai Malays are members of the Malay ethnic group that is predominant in neighboring Malaysia. In contrast to the majority Thai population, most Thai Malays are Muslim and Malay speakers, although most also speak Thai.

Hill Tribes: About 1% of the population are members of about 20 indigenous minority groups known as "hill tribes," predominantly residing in Thailand's mountainous North. The largest tribes are the Karen (or Kariang), Hmong (or Meo), Yao (or Mien), Lahu (or Messur), Akha (or Ekaw), Lisu (or Lisaw), and Lawa – each having a distinct culture and language (Photos: Members of the Kayan, a Karen subgroup).



Other Groups: Thailand is also home to small groups of other non-Thai peoples, including Khmer (Cambodians), Vietnamese, and Indians. Thailand further hosts about 500,000 refugees and stateless people, mostly displaced from neighboring Burma, Laos, and Cambodia.

Social Relations

Before King Rama V's reforms in the late 19th century (see p. 4 of *History and Myth*), Thai society was stratified and hierarchical. Citizens received economic, legal, and social privileges based on their rank and status, which ranged from slave, peasant, and artisan to government official and royalty.

Today, Thai society affords its citizens more social mobility, although it remains hierarchical. In addition to occupation, wealth, and family connections, education also defines a person's position in the social hierarchy. At the pinnacle of Thai society are the king and royal family, followed by Buddhist monks (see p. 5 of *Religion and Spirituality*). Thai admire all successful people and have a high regard for civil servants and teachers. Manual laborers have the lowest social status (Photo: Thai men show respect for a Buddhist monk).



Significant disparities in wealth, infrastructure, and services between city and village reflect a pronounced rural-urban divide often revealed through political schisms (see "Political Climate" above). The majority rural population further divides into more prosperous central plains farmers and poorer northern subsistence farmers.

Other social cleavages follow ethnic lines. Fearing further marginalization, Thai Malays historically resist Thai nationalist rhetoric and control. Instead, the Muslim-majority provinces seek some autonomy through a separate regional economy and education system (see p. 5 of *Learning and Knowledge*).

Finally, Thailand's northern hill tribes exist on the fringes of Thai society. Most members are poor, living in rural, isolated communities where they pursue a subsistence agricultural lifestyle. Although the Thai government has implemented economic development programs in these regions, some members must earn their livelihoods solely through the intermittent sale of handicrafts, jewelry, and textiles to Western tourists (see p. 5 of *Aesthetics and Recreation).*

3. RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY



Overview

Along with nation and king, Buddhism is a traditional pillar of Thai society (see p. 4 of *History and Myth*). According to the 2010 census, 93% of Thailand's population is Buddhist, mostly of the Theravada school of Buddhism. About 5% of Thai are Muslims who reside in Thailand's far southern provinces. About 0.7% of the population identifies as Christian. Followers of the Baha'i faith (a monotheistic religion founded by Bahá'u'lláh in 19th-century Persia), Hindus, and Sikhs together make up another 0.7% of the population (Photo: Bangkok's famed Wat Phra Kaew or Temple of the Emerald Buddha).

Thailand's 2007 constitution and other laws protect religious freedom and forbid discrimination based on religious belief. Thailand's government officially recognizes 5 religious groups: Buddhists, Muslims, Brahmin-Hindus, Sikhs, and Christians. The constitution names no official religion, requiring the state to promote harmony among followers of all religions. Nevertheless, it also specifies that the state shall patronize and protect Buddhism while requiring the monarch to be Buddhist. Consequently, although the government is officially secular, Buddhist organizations, education, temples, and the Buddhist monkhood receive significant state support.

Thai are typically very tolerant of other faiths, although ongoing separatist violence (see p. 9 of *Political and Social Relations*) has caused some tensions between Thai Buddhist and Malay Muslim communities in the southern Muslim-majority provinces. Since ethnic and religious identities are interlinked for both groups, this violence is perhaps as much ethnic-based as religious. Regardless of their origins, such violent events negatively impact both groups' ability to engage in religious activities (see "Religion and the Law" below).

The Region's Early Spiritual Landscape

Many early inhabitants of Southeast Asia practiced animism, the belief that a spirit or consciousness resides in all objects, both animate and inanimate. Animism promotes the notion that all natural objects—for example, trees and animals—are sacred, and this conviction establishes a close connection between animists and their environment. Some local religious traditions also recognized guardian spirits that inhabited homes, gardens, and rice fields, while others acknowledged spirits of the dead who could help or hinder the living.

The Origins of Buddhism

Buddhism traces its beginning to around 500 BC, when Siddhartha Gautama, a South Asian prince, attained spiritual insight through meditation. Buddhists believe that humans are fated to suffer, that suffering is caused by greed or desire, and can be stopped by following a spiritual path that includes unselfish living and meditation. Buddhists' ultimate goal is to achieve nirvana, a state of peace and unity with the universe.

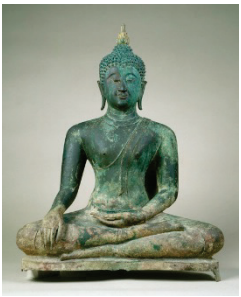


Although Buddhism is based on a substantial set of scriptures, it does not focus on the worship of a god or gods. Instead, it emphasizes ethical and moral instruction to help people follow a spiritual path. Buddhism also offers an explanation of life after death, specifically, that humans proceed through cycles of birth, death, and rebirth or reincarnation.

Several centuries after its founding, Buddhism split into 2 main streams: Mahayana and Theravada. Although the 2 traditions embrace and practice the same core teachings, they differ in several monastic rules and academic points. As the dominant form of Buddhism in China, Japan, and South Korea today, Mahayana Buddhism encompasses a variety of schools. Buddhism's 2nd stream, Theravada, focuses more strictly on scripture and is considered the more orthodox form of Buddhism. It is the predominant form of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Laos, Burma, and Thailand today.

The Spread of Buddhism in Thailand

During the early centuries of the first millennium AD, Indian traders on their way to China carried Hindu and Buddhist beliefs and practices to Thailand. Members of Thailand's Mon ethnic group became the first inhabitants of Southeast Asia to adopt Buddhism. Between the 6th and 9th centuries, Buddhism spread through the Dvaravati kingdoms of central Thailand (see p. 1 of *History and Myth*).



Meanwhile, the Theravada school of Buddhism gained influence on Sri Lanka, an island off the southeast coast of India, which became the center of the Theravada movement in the 10th century. By the 13th century, Sri Lanka's Theravada missionary monks were spreading the religion in Southeast Asia, including the Tai kingdoms of Sukhothai and Lanna (see p. 2 of *History and Myth*) (Photo: Sukhothai Period depiction of the Buddha).

In 1360, Theravada Buddhism became the state religion of the Kingdom of Ayutthaya (see p. 2 in *History and Myth*). When Ayutthaya leaders conquered the Khmer capital of Angkor (see p. 2 of *History and Myth*), they incorporated certain Hindu ideas and practices into Theravada Buddhism. Over the next 400 years of the Ayutthaya Period, Theravada Buddhism took deep root in Thai society. As the monkhood (***sangha***) was established, the temple became the center of community life.

Like previous rulers, those of the Chakri dynasty, which began in 1782 and continues to this day (see p. 3 of *History and Myth*), adopted Buddhism as the state religion. The dynasty's first king, Rama I, issued religious laws, re-established Buddhist court rituals, reorganized the *sangha*, and constructed Bangkok's Temple of the Emerald Buddha.

Subsequent monarchs instituted other changes. A Buddhist monk for 27 years before he took the throne, King Rama IV disapproved of prevailing Buddhist practices, even calling them superstitious beliefs.

Consequently, he started a new fundamentalist Buddhist sect in the 1830s. Although adoption of the sect's philosophy was not widespread, his other reforms, such as those institutionalizing the *sangha*'s hierarchy, were significant.

Rama V's *Sangha* Law of 1902 further solidified the relationship between the *sangha* and the state by formalizing the hierarchy of monks with the king in Bangkok at its apex and bringing disparate regional forms of Buddhism under his authority. Later, the 1932 switch from an absolute to a constitutional monarchy (see p. 4 in *History and Myth*) formally recognized the monarchy, Buddhism, and nation as the pillars of Thai society.

Buddhism Today

Today, Thailand's king is both head-of-state and protector of Theravada Buddhism. Although religion is a regular part of everyday life for many Thai Buddhists, most do not focus on achieving nirvana or enlightenment. Instead, most followers look to Theravada Buddhism as a guide for living.

Specifically, the faithful follow Buddhism's instructions to take the so-called Middle Way between extreme self-denial and sensual indulgence, to avoid evil, and to acquire ***bun*** or merit. To obtain *bun*, followers may perform a variety of acts, generally trying to live according to the Buddhist ethical code. They may also perform good deeds, give alms or shelter to monks, provide offerings at a temple, perform worship regularly, or enter the monkhood temporarily (see "The Monkhood" below).



The *Wat*: This term refers to a Buddhist temple complex that typically includes prayer rooms, libraries, meeting halls, healthcare and education facilities, guesthouses, living quarters for monks, and a crematoria and/or buildings to house the cremated remains of departed family members (Photo: Buddhist *wat* in Chiang Mai). Almost every community in Thailand has a ***wat***.



Worship: Buddhist temples do not hold formal, collective, regularly-scheduled worship services. Instead, followers worship by chanting, praying, or performing other acts of devotion before an image of the Buddha when it is convenient for them. Some followers may assemble at the *wat* on special occasions, such as during certain phases of the moon or for festivals. On such occasions, a monk may preach a short sermon while followers engage in meditation, make lotus bud offerings, and burn candles or incense at altars (Photo: Shrine at Wat Kham Chanot in Udon Thani province).

The Monkhood: Traditionally, all Thai males spent at least a few months of their lives as Buddhist monks, often during childhood or before marrying (see p. 3 of *Family and Kinship*). While fewer males follow this practice today, ordination ceremonies continue to be important community events.

After education and ordination, during which they take 227 vows associated with piety and celibacy, monks typically live in a *wat* and administer its many activities. In addition, they may spend considerable time studying scriptures, meditating, collecting alms from the community (pictured), and carrying out rituals, such as weddings and funerals. Some monks work as missionaries in the northern border areas among the hill tribes (see p. 12 of *Political and Social Relations*). Still others focus on alleviating social injustice, protecting the environment, and participating in interfaith dialogues. Of note, while Buddhist monk is traditionally a male-only occupation, females may enter the *sangha* as nuns, although they have fewer roles and responsibilities and enjoy less respect and prestige than their male colleagues.



Beliefs and Rituals from Other Traditions: Thailand's form of Theravada Buddhism contains elements from other religious traditions such as Southeast Asia's animist "spirit houses" constructed to distract harmful spirits from homes (see p. 2 of *Family and Kinship*). The Thai court engages Brahmin-Hindu religious specialists to carry out certain rituals. Many Thai regularly visit shrines dedicated to Hindu deities, such as the 4-faced Hindu creation god Brahma (pictured) or the elephant-head deity, Ganesha. Finally, the Thai tradition of consulting astrologers (see p. 4 of *Family and Kinship*) has Hindu-Brahmin roots.



Islam

Islam has a long history in Southeast Asia. Arab and Persian Muslims on their way to East Asia probably first brought Islam to the Malay Peninsula not long after Islam's founding in the 6th century. By the 10th century, several city-states on the Malay Peninsula controlled regional trade and extended Muslim influence in the region. By the 1400s, most of peninsular Malaysia was Muslim.

The Malay inhabitants of southern Thailand converted to Islam during the 14th and 15th centuries. Over the next 400 years, Thai kingdoms and Malay states contested control of the region. Although the Thai state eventually prevailed, it was 1909 before the present Thai-Malaysian border was set. Despite centuries of dominion by Thai Buddhists, Malay Muslims in the southern provinces have largely retained their own language and religion.



While most Muslims in the southern provinces are ethnic Malay, Muslims in other parts of the country include ethnic Thai as well as descendants of immigrants from South Asia, China, Cambodia, and Indonesia. Like 85% of the world's Muslims, most of them in Thailand identify with the Sunni sect (Photo: Mosque in Chiang Rai).

Christianity

Christian missionaries first arrived in Thailand in the 16th century but were expelled in 1688 when a pro-Christian Ayutthaya king was forced from the throne. In 1785, King Rama I (see p. 3 of *History and Myth*) invited Catholic missionaries to return. While their schools and hospitals had a significant influence on Thailand's educational and healthcare systems, their religious influence in ensuing years was much smaller. Christian missionaries have had the most success among Thailand's ethnic minorities, including Chinese Thai and members of Thailand's hill tribes (see p. 12 of *Political and Social Relations*).

Religion and Education

By law, both primary and secondary level students must attend religious education classes. Public school lessons generally provide an overview of Thailand's officially recognized religions. Students in pursuit of in-depth studies need to receive private religious instruction (Photo: Figure at Bangkok's Temple of the Emerald Buddha).



Islamic Education: Government schools in Thailand's Muslim-majority southern provinces offer Islamic education as part of the national curriculum. Even so, some Muslim Malays reject the state-sponsored curriculum, viewing it as an effort to impose Thai Buddhist culture on the region. Consequently, many Muslim students take advantage of other Islamic education opportunities (see p. 5 of *Learning and Knowledge*).

Religion and the Law

Although the government subsidizes activities of the 5 recognized religious communities, its primary support goes to the Buddhist community and then to the Muslim. Those subsidies are used to support Buddhist monks and Muslim clerics and fund the renovation and repair of Buddhist temples and Islamic mosques. While the government provides no support to non-Muslim, non-Buddhist clergy, it supports the restoration of their religious buildings.

Despite the government's official support to all religions, human rights groups accuse the government of preferential treatment of Buddhist communities. For example, the government has provided armed escorts to Buddhist monks and protection of Buddhist temples in the southern Muslim majority provinces, support that some Malay Muslims perceive as the militarization of Buddhist temples. Other observers charge that government forces have abused Malay Muslim suspects, including committing extrajudicial killing, arbitrary detention, and torture.

Visiting a *Wat*

Both Buddhists and Non-Buddhists alike are welcome temple visitors. All guests should dress modestly – long pants for men and long skirts/pants for women. Women should also wear blouses that cover their shoulders. All visitors must remove their shoes before entering, remain quiet inside, and refrain from touching any artwork. Photography is usually allowed, but visitors should always ask first. Although monks may choose to engage visitors in conversation, monks should not be interrupted during prayer or meditation. It is proper to show respect to monks by ensuring the level of one's head remains below that of the monks. For example, visitors should not stand above a seated monk. This rule holds true even outside the temple: if a monk is seated on a bus, a fellow traveler should never stand so that he looms over him.

Thai regard all Buddhist statues and images as sacred, treating them with great respect and expect non-Buddhists to do the same. Inappropriate treatment includes climbing on a statue, using a foot to point at a statue, or using a statue or image as a backdrop for a photo. Anyone who commits a disrespectful act against a Buddhist statue or image is subject to punishment, including imprisonment.

4. FAMILY AND KINSHIP

Overview
Traditional Thai family and village organization emphasized respect for elders while privileging men over women. Historically, most Thai lived in rural areas where traditional values such as respect, obligation, and harmony infused family life. In recent decades, many Thai have moved to urban areas seeking education and employment. While many urban dwellers retain strong ties to their rural roots and kin, others have totally adapted to urban life.

Residence
In rural areas, extended families consisting of multiple generations traditionally live in one house together or in separate houses grouped in a compound. In urban areas, households typically comprise nuclear families (2 parents and their children) residing in multi-family apartment buildings. Typical home décor includes statues of the Buddha and pictures of the royal family.



Traditional: A traditional Thai home (pictured) stands on stilts so that the family's living quarters always remain above flood waters. The home is typically constructed of bamboo or teak wood with a thatched roof. A balcony or space beneath the home serves as a kitchen, storage area, workspace, or livestock pen. The living quarters typically consist of 1 large room with movable partitions. Residents fold and stack bedding in a corner during the day and bring it out at night. Otherwise, the room is largely unfurnished.

Modern: Most modern homes and apartment buildings are constructed of brick and concrete. Many urban families experience cramped living conditions in single-room apartments. Residents often cook on their balconies and share a bathroom with other apartments. Some Thai live in houseboats called "floating homes" on rivers and canals.

Spirit Houses: Many residences – even many office buildings and hotels – feature a traditional "spirit house" (pictured). This small, doll house-like structure is usually mounted on a pedestal or placed on a shelf. It provides a residence for the spirits of the land's previous dwellers. Thai offer food, beverages, and flowers before the house to appease and maintain good relations with the spirits.



Family Structure

Family is a central focus of life in Thailand, providing a strong sense of continuity and security. Like Thai society itself (see p. 13 of *Political and Social Relations*), Thai families are hierarchical. The oldest male is typically head of the household, while younger members must show proper deference to older relatives. Thai generally feel a strong obligation to kin. In addition to caring for the elderly, this obligation includes extending hospitality to visiting relatives and assisting even distant kin find jobs or finance their education.

In urban areas, a child typically lives with his parents until marriage, at which point the couple moves into separate quarters. In rural areas, newlyweds often continue to live with the bride's parents until their first child is born. Although all adult children expect to care for their elderly parents, the eldest son also typically provides financial support. Traditionally, the youngest daughter inherited her parents' home. In return, she and her husband assumed responsibility for her parents' day-to-day care in their old age.

Children

Thai treasure their children and tend to pamper the younger ones. Even so, Thai also teach children their place in the family hierarchy from a young age. Family members typically share childcare duties, teaching children to respect and obey their older siblings, parents, and grandparents. Children may assume responsibilities such as tending to younger siblings or livestock around age 8, then gradually acquire more roles and responsibilities. As they grow older, children learn other duties and obligations towards the family.

Birth: Thai typically incorporate animist, Brahmin-Hindu, and Buddhist rituals and traditions (see p. 6 of *Religion and Spirituality*) to celebrate a child's birth. Believing that evil spirits are particularly interested in small children, Thai engage in certain strategies to divert the spirits' interest. Shortly after birth, many families hold a ceremony to promote and strengthen the baby's ***khwan***, its life force or soul, so that the spirits cannot steal the baby during its vulnerable first month of life. During this period, Thai may also speak of a baby's ugliness instead of its beauty as another way of warding off the spirits (Photo: Elderly woman with small child).



Approximately 1 month after birth, the parents take the baby to a Buddhist temple for another *khwan*-promoting ceremony. At this time, a monk cuts or shave the child's hair and places it in a bowl with lotus buds or other flowers as an offering. Family members then tie cotton thread around the baby's wrist and offer prayers.

Initiation into the Monkhood: Historically, some young boys entered a Buddhist monastery (see p. 5 of *Religion and Spirituality*) as a ***samanen*** (novice monk) between the ages of 8 and 10 in order to receive an education (see p. 1 of *Learning and Knowledge*). Today, both young boys and young men may receive temporary ordination and enter a monastery for few weeks or months of prayer and scripture study. At age 21, a young man may receive the higher ordination and become a full monk (see p. 5 of *Religion and Spirituality*).

Birthdays

According to Thai astrology, time divides into 12-year cycles, each associated with a particular animal. Instead of celebrating annual birthdays, Thai traditionally commemorate a person's birth-year animal every 12 years. In other words, Thai celebrate when a person turns 12, 24, 36, etc., with the 60th year celebration the most important.

Naming Conventions

Parents often consult an astrologer for an appropriate and prestigious name for their newborn. The astrologer notes the day, month, and year of the birth and consults a chart to determine the starting letter of the name. He then suggests a name beginning with that letter.

Family members rarely call the child by their legal name for 2 reasons. First, Thai names are typically too long for easy use (see p. 4 of *Language and Communication*). Second, Thai traditionally engage in strategies to confuse any evil spirits who might want to kidnap the child. Consequently, parents almost always give their children short nicknames, such as ***Lek*** (small) and ***Moo*** ("pig" as in chubby). Most Thai retain these nicknames for their entire lives.

Marriage

Traditionally, most marriages were arranged, and potential marriage partners had little contact beforehand. Today, young people choose their own partners. While a couple in a rural area may have a long period of chaperoned courtship, young people in urban areas may engage in group socialization or even Western-style dating. Once he has identified a potential partner, a young man must become acquainted with the young woman's family members and earn their approval.

If he wishes to marry, the groom then sends his parents to announce his intentions to the bride's family. Once the families agree to the union, the couple may consult a Buddhist monk or an astrologer to determine a wedding date and time that will promise good fortune.

Brideprice: Brideprice is a payment that the groom's family makes to the bride's in order to compensate for the loss of the bride's labor and presence. Today this brideprice usually includes cash, gold, or a diamond ring that the bride's parents pass onto the couple as a wedding gift.

Weddings: A typical Thai wedding celebration involves several elements, including blessings by a Buddhist monk, a wedding ceremony, and a reception. Although Buddhist monks play important roles in most Thai weddings, they are not licensed to grant a marriage contract. Consequently, couples must visit a local government office to legally record the marriage.



The night before the wedding, the couple usually visits a Buddhist temple and offers money or gifts as offerings. On the wedding day, monks come to the bride's house to bless her and offer prayers. Although brides traditionally wear a pink dress, some now wear a Western-style white gown (pictured). Grooms usually wear a suit or pants with a traditional high-neck jacket called ***sua phra ratchathan*** (see p. 1 of *Aesthetics and Recreation*).

During the ceremony, a white garland is placed over the head of the bride and groom, and their wrists are tied loosely together with white thread to symbolize their unity. Family and friends pour water over the couple's hands from a conch to wish them happiness. Today, many couples also exchange rings according to Western tradition.

Receptions vary in size and style and often include a meal with toasts and speeches. In urban areas they may occur at home or in a hotel ballroom. In rural areas, they often take place on a specially-built pavilion or stage. To cover the high costs, wedding invitations often include an envelope for monetary gifts. Other common gifts for the couple are household items.

Divorce: Separation and divorce are common in Thailand and do not carry a social stigma. From 2005-2014 the divorce rate increased 27%, representing a 35% divorce rate for new marriages. This increase is attributed to the stress facing new couples when they are separated from their families and the economic independence of women in double income households (see p. 1 of *Sex and Gender).*

Death

Thai Buddhists typically memorialize the passing of a loved one by cremating then burying the remains. Many Thai believe that the deceased's spirit lingers near the body after death. Consequently, loved ones do not leave the deceased alone until the remains have been buried.

According to Buddhist custom, the deceased body is washed and dressed. A Buddhist monk ties the deceased's palms together before his chest in the ***wai*** greeting (see p. 3 of *Language and Communication*). He also places a coin in the deceased's mouth so that the spirit may buy release from purgatory. The deceased is then placed in a white coffin. Family members may place candles, incense, and money into the coffin, then decorate it with flowers and photographs.

The coffin remains in the home or in a Buddhist temple's funeral building for up to 7 days. During this time, monks chant prayers while mourners sit in silence and burn incense. Colleagues and friends may visit to extend condolences and provide meals to family members.



Following this period, an elder family member leads a procession accompanying the coffin to the temple's crematorium (pictured). After cremation, family members place the ashes in their burial vault at the temple. At this point the mood lightens as guests celebrate the life of the deceased with food and music. The family may offer prayers for the deceased an additional 100 days to help the deceased's soul gain merit in the next life (see p. 4 of *Religion and Spirituality*).

In line with Islamic tradition, Malay Muslims in Thailand's southern provinces (see p. 12 in *Political and Social Relations*) bury their loved ones as soon as possible after death. The deceased is bathed and wrapped in a white cloth, then carried to a mosque for prayers and services. Afterwards, the shrouded body is buried in a cemetery.

5. SEX AND GENDER

Overview

Traditional Thai family and village organization privileged men over women. Although they often controlled household finances, women were considered their husbands' possessions. Women's status began to change beginning in the 20th century when they acquired equal education and voting rights. Today, women hold prominent positions in government and business. Despite government programs to empower women and establish gender equality, women remain underrepresented in politics, experience gender discrimination at work, and suffer high rates of domestic violence.

Gender Roles and Work

Domestic Work: Women in Thailand traditionally held responsibility for their children's care and all housework. By contrast, responsibility for other chores, such as farm labor, varied by geographic location. For example, men planted the crops in northern Thailand, while this responsibility fell to women in the central plains.

Even if they work outside the home today, Thai women continue to hold primary responsibility for their children's care, the housework, and the care of elderly and ill family members.

Labor Force: About 64% of Thai women work outside the home, compared to 57% in the US. Women work in all sectors, including agriculture, manufacturing, and services but are particularly well-represented in the tourism and hospitality industries. Of note, women work in construction (pictured) and other physical labor-intensive jobs at higher rates than in most Western countries. Further, over half of Thailand's university graduates are women (see p. 4 of *Learning and Knowledge*). These women often occupy influential positions in business, medicine, politics, government, and education.



Despite this high participation in the labor force, women typically receive less pay and work longer hours than their male counterparts. Many women work in family-owned business yet receive no wages. Nearly one-third of women who work in agriculture earn below subsistence levels.

Gender and the Law

The presently-suspended 2007 constitution stipulates equal gender rights, while legislation specifies equal education and inheritance rights. Some laws and practices support gender disparities. For example, women may legally own land and jointly control marital property, yet few women hold formal title to land. Instead, land is usually registered in the husband's name, even if the wife inherited the land from her family.

Many Thai men support so-called "minor wives" or mistresses in addition to their lawful wives. This practice has some official support before the law: while a wife's unfaithfulness is ample grounds for a husband to demand divorce, a woman must present further justification than her husband's adultery to demand divorce from him.

Gender and Politics



Although Thailand became the first Asian nation to grant women full voting rights in 1932, it was 1982 before women achieved the right to become a ***phuyaiban*** (village chief). As Thailand's first female Prime Minister, Yingluck Shinawatra (pictured with President Obama) served from 2011 to 2014 (see p. 9 of *History and Myth*). In 2014, women held 16% of Parliament seats, compared to 18% in the US House of Representatives. However, that number decreased to 5% post coup.

Gender Based Violence (GBV)

Rape and sexual harassment are illegal in Thailand, yet vaguely worded laws make prosecution difficult. A 2016 survey indicated that over 40% of households experienced instances of domestic violence. Some observers credit these high rates to Thailand's tradition of male privilege. Recent efforts to diminish GBV include measures to create new models of manhood based on equality and respect.

Sex and Procreation

Most Thai consider intimacy a private matter. While women are expected to abstain from sex until marriage, male promiscuity is tolerated if not openly acknowledged (see "Gender and the Law" above). Thai consider nudity inappropriate in all but the most private contexts. They seldom wear revealing clothing in public with the exception of urban areas like Bangkok where some younger females prefer short dresses and miniskirts.

Before 1970, Thai women bore an average of 6 children each. Successful family planning programs begun in the 1970s resulted in a significant reduction in fertility: by the 1990s the average Thai woman gave birth to 2.2 children. Fertility continued to decline in subsequent years. Since the mid-2000s, Thailand's fertility rate has hovered around 1.5 children per woman, a rate below the average 2.1 children born per woman required to maintain the current population (see p. 1 of *Political and Social Relations*).

Prostitution

Prostitution is illegal yet openly and widely practiced, comprising an estimated 7% of Thailand's GDP and involving around 200,000 sex workers. Many bars, massage parlors, and other venues serve as thinly disguised fronts for prostitution. Although some foreigners travel to Thailand to engage in "sex tourism," local demand also supports the practice. Child prostitution is a serious problem, involving perhaps 30,000 children under the age of 16. US military personnel are prohibited from patronizing businesses tied to prostitution or human trafficking.



HIV/AIDS: Thailand faced a serious HIV/AIDS epidemic in the 1990s when almost 36% of female sex workers were HIV positive. Through a widespread safe sex campaign targeting prostitutes and their clients, Thailand successfully reduced HIV infection among female sex workers (see p. 6 *of Sustenance and Health*) to 20% by 2007. The HIV-infection rate in the country has fallen from 24,000 patients in 2001 to 6,900 in 2015.

LGBT Issues

Thailand has a reputation of relative openness to homosexuality: gay and lesbian activity became legal in 1956; Thailand's tourism authority specifically welcomes homosexual visitors; and Thailand is 1 of only 7 Asian signatories to the United Nation's declaration of LGBT rights. Further, activists are moving toward their goal of making Thailand the first Asian country to adopt a same-sex partnership law.

Nevertheless, homosexuals do not enjoy societal acceptance. Some suffer discrimination, bullying, and violence. A 2013 study found that 1/3 of surveyed homosexual students suffered physical abuse because of their orientation. Consequently, a number of homosexuals withhold their sexual preference.

Thailand's transgender ***kathoeys*** ("lady boys"), well-known for their shows in nightclubs and on television, are accepted but often ridiculed. Generally, transgender people face severe discrimination in all employment but the entertainment and sex work industries, are vulnerable to violence from the police, and face difficulties securing health insurance.

Sex Trafficking and Forced Labor

Thailand is a notorious destination, source, and transit point for human trafficking. Members of Thailand's ethnic minorities and citizens of neighboring countries are at particular risk of exploitation. Despite plans to bring the country in compliance with minimum international standards to eliminate human trafficking, Thailand has shown little significant improvement in recent years. Observers note that this lack of improvement is due at least in part to corrupt government officials who collaborate with labor brokers and sex traffickers.

Although female victims are typically exploited in the sex industry, many male victims are forced to labor in the fishing industry. In 2016, an estimated 425,000 or 0.63% of Thailand's population lived in modern slavery.

6. LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

Language Overview

Spoken by about 96% of the population, Standard Thai is Thailand's national language. It is the primary language of instruction in schools and dominates print and broadcast media. Many Thai, including members of minority groups (see p. 12 of *Political and Social Relations*) such as Chinese-Thai, Thai Malays, hill tribespeople, and refugees from neighboring countries, speak additional languages. These include Chinese, Malay, Lao, and Mon-Khmer, among others. Further, the Thai language itself encompasses several regional dialects such as Northern Thai (or Kammüang) and Southern Thai (or Pak Tai). In total, scholars estimate that Thailand's inhabitants speak 74 different languages.

Standard Thai

Based on the Central Thai dialect, Standard Thai is a member of the Tai group of the Tai-Kadai language family that also includes Lao, the national language of neighboring Laos. Like Chinese, Thai is a tonal language – it uses tone or pitch to alter the meaning of individual syllables and words. Standard Thai has 5 tones: low, mid, falling, high, and rising. Depending on the tone used, Thai words can have several different meanings. For example, the Thai word ***mai*** can alternatively mean "no," "new," "burn," or "wood" depending on the speaker's tone.



Writing System: According to tradition, the Thai writing system traces its roots to the 13th century when a Sukhothai Period king (see p. 2 of *History and Myth*) adapted the ancient Indian-based Khmer (Cambodian) alphabet to the Thai language (Photo: 13th century Thai script). The modern Thai alphabet is syllabic, consisting of 44 consonants and 15 vowels, which means that written Thai, like English, uses symbols to represent sounds. It does not consist of characters that represent entire words or ideas, like in written Chinese.

Thai write from left to right in horizontal lines, with no spaces between words. Instead, spaces are used to indicate the end of a sentence or a clause. Writers place vowels above, below, before, or after a consonant to modify it. The appropriate tone of the written syllable is indicated in various ways depending on the (1) length of the vowel (short or long) (2) use of a tonal marker (3) type of consonant used (low, mid, high) (4) and whether the syllable is open or closed. Of note, although Thai often use Arabic numerals to express dates, they often utilize their own system of numbers. For example, in this system ๑indicates 1.

The Thai government recently instituted The Royal Thai General System of Transcription (RTGS) to standardize the transliteration of Thai words into the Latin alphabet. Although RTGS is used on official documents, maps, and most road signs, locally-produced renderings are rarely standardized, consequently exhibiting significant variations.

English

Residents of large urban centers, such as Bangkok and Samut Prakan, are likely to understand some English. It is a compulsory subject in school (see p. 2 of *Learning and Knowledge*), and students who attend elite institutions become the most proficient English speakers. Consequently, many Thai view English as a language of the middle and upper classes. Some street signs include English translations (pictured).



Communication Overview

Communicating competently in Thailand requires not only knowledge of Thai, but also the ability to interact effectively. This broad notion of competence includes paralanguage (rate of speech, volume, intonation), nonverbal communication (personal space, touch, gestures), and interaction management (conversation initiation, turn-taking, and termination). When used properly, these forms of communication help to ensure that statements are interpreted as the speaker intends.

Communication Style

Thailand is often called the “land of smiles,” reflecting the Thai tendency to prioritize harmony and agreement in interaction. Thai tend to have cheerful and gentle dispositions and pride themselves on their ability to make others feel at ease. In addition, Thai try to incorporate ***sà nùk*** (fun and enjoyment) in all aspects of life, including tedious or difficult tasks. In this way, Thai seek to avoid loneliness and encourage positive work environments.

Due to their desire to “save face” (avoid embarrassment to themselves or others), Thai rarely express strong opinions and avoid negative subjects in conversation. Thai consider raised voices, angry tones, and loss of temper in public to be rude.

Thai typically treat people of different age, wealth, educational backgrounds, and political positions with varying levels of respect. Because royal family members are at the pinnacle of Thai society (see p. 13 of *Political and Social Relations*), Thai are extremely deferential toward them. They are also very respectful of Buddhist monks, public officials, civil servants, and teachers. Thai use various forms of greeting and address to communicate these different levels of respect.

Greetings

Thailand’s most common greeting is the ***wai***, performed by bringing flat palms together at chest level and bowing the head slightly. The *wai* can communicate numerous messages, ranging from respect, apology, gratitude, and politeness to greetings and farewells (Photo: A US Airman exchanges a *wai* with a Thai woman).



Thai also use the *wai* to acknowledge different status within Thai society. Thai of lower status always initiate the *wai* with a person of higher status. Further, Thai place their hands higher on the chest to symbolize greater respect. Royal family members and monks do not return the *wai*. While some younger and more educated Thai shake hands in greeting, the custom remains largely uncommon and limited to foreign nationals.

Forms of Address

In their hierarchical society (see p. 13 of *Political and Social Relations*), Thai commonly use titles to signify role and status. Every relationship, whether societal, family, or work, comprises an elder or higher status position (***pôo yài)*** and a younger or junior position (***pôo nóy***). Thai use the former term to address parents, public officials, bosses, and others and use the latter term to address anyone subservient or of lower status to the *pôo yài* (Photo: Thai girl performing a *wai* before Buddhist monks).



The use of these terms also reflects the obedience and respect owed the elder: the junior must never criticize or question the elder. Even in business contexts, junior employees typically do not speak up in meetings, performing all tasks assigned to them without question. Thai may use other forms to show respect to their conversation partner – women use the term ***kâ*** and men use ***kráp*** to indicate respect for their conversation partners.

Names: Thai rarely use their full legal names to address each other (see p. 4 of *Family and Kinship*). Instead, they mostly address one another using the first name (or a shortened version of it) or a short, one-syllable nickname, often prefaced by the polite, gender-neutral term ***khun***. It is proper to greet Johnathan Wesley as "*khun* John." In addressing someone of higher status, the proper term is ***taan***, as in "*taan* Prayuth" for Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha. Thai use last names only on formal occasions or in written communications.

Conversational Topics

Thai typically begin conversations with general questions concerning occupation, age, and place of birth. They refrain from asking about family and other personal topics until familiarity is established. Generally, Thai avoid questions regarding income and wealth, although in some specific contexts, it is acceptable in order to determine the other person's status. In addition, Thai generally consider criticism of religion or Buddhist monks in particular to be extremely rude.

Despite these social constraints, Thai do appreciate inoffensive humor, especially enjoying jokes that do not insult or embarrass someone. Of note, Thai enjoy speaking about food, often demonstrating interest and concern for another person by asking if he has eaten.

***Lèse Majesté* Laws:** First enacted in 1908, Thailand's strict *lèse majesté* laws make it illegal to publicly criticize, insult, or threaten the monarchy. Since no definition for "insult to the monarchy" exists, the laws enjoy very broad interpretation in court. For example, a court recently ruled that the laws apply to all members of Thailand's monarchy, both living and dead. Any Thai may file a *lèse majesté* complaint against anyone, including a foreign national. The number of charges filed against academic, political, and media figures has increased since 2006, with over 10,000 instances of *lèse majesté* complaints in recent years. The police take these complaints very seriously, investigating all charges. Offenders may receive as many as 15 years' imprisonment (Illustration: Portrait of current King Rama IX as a young man).



Gestures

Thai typically do not use gestures to augment conversations. Foreign nationals may use them while speaking with Thai but should avoid aggressive body language. In particular, Thai consider it rude to point an index finger at someone else.

Because they consider the feet to be the lowest and dirtiest body part, Thai refrain from showing their soles and using their feet to point. In addition, Thai never allow their feet to touch sacred items, such as a statue of the Buddha (see p. 8 of *Religion and Spirituality*) or even images of the king. Because they consider the head the most sacred part of the body, Thai never touch another's head or pass anything over it (see p. 3 of *Time and Space*).

Language Training Resources

Please view the Air Force Culture and Language Center website at http://culture.af.mil for language training resources. Click on the Menu tab in the upper right, then Resources.

Useful Words and Phrases

English	Romanized Thai	*Thai*
Hello	sa wat di (khrap / kha)	สวัสดี (ครับ / ค่า)
My name is___	phom chue___ (male) / dì-chan chue___ (female)	ผมชื่อ (male)/ ดิฉันชื่อ (female)
What's your name?	khun chue a-rai?	คุณชื่ออะไร?
Can you speak English?	khun phut pasa ang-grìt dai rue plao?	คุณพูดภาษาอังกฤษได้หรือเปล่า?
Nice to meet you	Yin di thi dai ru jak	ยินดีที่ได้รู้จัก
Yes	Krab / Kha	(ครับ / ค่า)
No	mai / mai chai	ไม่ / ไม่ใช่
Thank you	Khob khun	ขอบคุณ
Ok	tok long	ตกลง
Excuse me/ I'm sorry	kho thot (khrap/ kha) / (phom / dichan) sia jai	ขอโทษ (ครับ/ค่า) (ผม / ดิฉัน) เสียใจ
Please	ga roo naa	กรุณา
Can someone assist us?	ja mi krai chuay phuak rao dai mai?	จะมีใครช่วยพวกเราได้ไหม
How do you say___ in Thai?	phasa thai ___ phut wa yang-rai?	ภาษาไทย ___ พูดว่าอย่างไร
I want___	(phom / dichan) tong kan___	(ผม / ดิฉัน) ต้องการ__
I do not want___	(phom / dichan) mai tong kan___	(ผม / ดิฉัน) ไม่ต้องการ__
Do you have___?	khun mi ___ mai?	คุณมี ___ ไหม
What?	a rai?	อะไร
When?	muea rai?	เมื่อไหร่
Where?	thi nai?	ที่ไหน
Who?	khrai?	ใคร

7. LEARNING AND KNOWLEDGE

Literacy

- Total population over age 15 who can read and write: 97%
- Male: 97%
- Female: 97% (2015 estimate)

Education before the 20th Century

Formal education in Thailand dates to the 13th century, when Buddhist monks provided moral and literary education to elite males (see p. 3 of *Religion and Spirituality*). This system of education prevailed until the late 19th century, when King Rama V began to introduce far-ranging reforms to spur Thailand's modernization (see p. 4 of *History and Myth*).

As part of these reforms, the king created Thailand's first formal Ministry of Education in 1887, thereby establishing a secular system of education catering primarily to elite males. Some of these new schools emphasized instruction in English with the goal of preparing students for overseas study in European and American universities.



20th Century Education

Continuing on his father's reform path, King Rama VI in 1917 established Thailand's first university, Chulalongkorn University, named after his father. Further reforms in the 1920s introduced 4 years of compulsory primary school and opened education to all citizens, including females and non-elites. With the goal of inculcating loyalty among all Thai citizens, a new curriculum required students to read, write, and speak Standard Thai (see p. 1 of *Language and Communication*). By the late 1930s, almost all children of appropriate age attended at least 4 years of primary school. Over the next decades, the Thai education system grew rapidly to include secondary and tertiary institutions, monastic schools, and military and police academies. By 2011, Thailand had achieved the highest literacy rate among the 10 ASEAN member nations (Photo: Chemistry building at the Chulalongkorn University in 1939).

Modern Education System

In early 2009, the government instituted a program guaranteeing 15 years of free public education. The official language of instruction of Thailand's public school system is Thai. In primary school, children begin learning English while many schools and universities offer programs of study entirely in English.

The structure and quality of education in Thailand varies by region. In Thailand's southern provinces, schools incorporate an Islamic curriculum to accommodate the Muslim-majority population (see "Religious Education" below). In the rural North and Northeast, members of minority groups and refugees (see p. 12 of *Political and Social Relations*) often lack access to quality education. This deficit is mainly due to their geographic isolation and lack of Standard Thai language skills (see p. 1 of *Language and Communication*). Public schools across the country are often understaffed, resulting in large class sizes and limited one-on-one student-teacher interaction.

Most instruction is lecture-based, focusing on memorization of facts rather than the analysis of material. Some experts criticize the education system as inefficient, suggesting that students are forced to study too many subjects simultaneously. Critics also claim school subjects do not match labor market demands, resulting in high unemployment among graduates.

Pre-Primary and Primary: Although not compulsory, 78% of Thai children attend pre-primary school. Intended for children 5 and younger, several types of facilities offer pre-primary education, including child development centers, private academies, and public schools (Photo: US Marine poses with Thai children).



Consisting of 6 grades and starting at age 6, primary school (***Prathom***), is compulsory, with 92% of children of the appropriate age enrolling. Rather than individual subjects, the curriculum focuses on core competency areas including basic skills (math and Thai), life experiences (science and social studies), character development (art, ethics, and physical education), work

experiences (technology and vocational skills), and special education. The latter includes English and elective subjects tailored to local needs.

Due to recent reforms, students receive instruction in English beginning in the first grade. To advance to the next grade, students must pass examinations in math and Thai at the end of the 3rd grade and in math, Thai, science, and English at the end of the 6th grade.

Secondary: Admission to the top public secondary schools is based on rigorous entrance exams. About 86% of primary school graduates move onto lower secondary school. Known as ***Matayom 1-3***, lower secondary or middle school (grades 7-9) is compulsory.

Middle school general education includes 5 main subject areas, including Thai and foreign languages (most often English), science and math, social studies, arts, and vocational education. Students who wish to continue onto upper secondary school (***Matayom 4-6)*** must pass an entrance examination encompassing math, Thai, science, English, and social studies.



Upper secondary or high school (grades 10-12), provides either general (academic) or vocational education. The general or academic track prepares students for university entrance examinations, requiring them to pass a final examination to graduate. By contrast, vocational programs prepare students for employment upon graduation and often include training in private sector work sites where students receive on-the-job instruction. Of those enrolled in upper secondary school, approximately 60% enroll in the general education track and 40% pursue vocational programs (Photo: High school students sing during a flag raising ceremony).

Post-Secondary

Approximately 53% of high school students pursue higher education at one of Thailand's 170 universities, institutes of technology, teachers' colleges, vocational and technical colleges, or other institutions such as nursing colleges and police and military academies. Most institutions are highly selective and require entrance exams. Thailand has 2 "open" universities that require no entrance exams, collectively enrolling over 2 million students, some in online programs.

Technical and professional institutes offer 2-year Associate degrees. Most universities offer 4-6 year bachelor degrees, 2 year master's degrees, and 2-5 year doctoral degrees.

Regional Disparities in Higher Education: Students from Thailand's remote, rural areas of the North, Northeast, and South have historically lacked access to higher education. To combat regional disparities in access, many universities have adopted a quota system that allocates a number of guaranteed places to students from specific regions. Several large universities, many located in Bangkok, have also established regional branches in an attempt to better serve rural inhabitants.

Religious Education



By law, primary and secondary students in both public and private schools must attend religious education classes. These lessons largely provide historical, cultural, and philosophical overviews of Thailand's 5 officially recognized religions (Buddhism, Islam, Brahmin-Hinduism, Sikhism, and Christianity – see p. 1 of *Religion and Spirituality*). Some local school systems provide additional religious studies courses in conjunction with the Supreme Sangha Council (Buddhist studies) and the Central Islamic Committee of Thailand (Islamic studies). The government provides some financial support to Buddhist and Islamic institutions of higher education (Photo: School in Thailand's central Lopburi Province).

Islamic Education: Government schools in Thailand's southern Muslim majority provinces offer Islamic religious studies within the framework of the national curriculum. Nevertheless, some Muslim Malays prefer their own Islamic educational institutions. In these cases, the public school system may accept credit from approved external courses. Private Islamic institutions include traditional ***pondoks***, or private Islamic day schools, which offer an Islamic curriculum to students of all ages. Some private Islamic schools also offer non-Qur'anic subjects, such as foreign language. Mosques often offer ***tadika***, after-school religious instruction for primary-aged children.

Recent Reforms

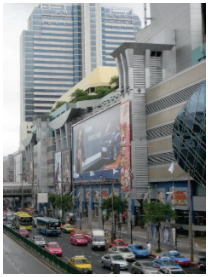
Fueled by the promise of regional economic integration through the planned ASEAN Economic Community (see p. 4 in *Economics and Resources*), Thailand is reforming its education system to promote higher quality learning. Enacted in 2008, the Second 15-year Long Range Plan for Higher Education is expected to expand access to higher education to rural communities and improve educational quality standards by 2022. The plan includes a larger education budget, and provisions for improving research capacity, reforming administrative systems, and expanding curricula (Photo: A primary school classroom in Thailand's eastern Nakhon Phanom Province).



Seeking to improve regional academic mobility, Thailand has recently promoted the ASEAN International Mobility for Students (AIMS) program. Its aim is to standardize regional educational quality and allows students of member nations to easily transfer between Southeast Asian schools. Currently, 7 Thai universities and 52 regional institutions are implementing the AIMS program. Of note, Thailand's recent political turmoil (see p. 9 of *History and Myth*) threatens to stall planned educational reforms. It remains unclear if and how future administrations will prioritize Thailand's educational system in the future.

8. TIME AND SPACE

Overview
Thai customarily emphasize community, wellness, and quality of life over personal achievement and material wealth. They also value loyalty and trust among employees and colleagues, taking the time to build strong business relationships. Social status and gender dictate appropriate space and body contact during interactions (Photo: Bangkok street).



Time and Work
Thailand's work week runs from Monday-Friday. Business hours vary by establishment type: most banks are open from 9:30am-3:30pm while private businesses operate from 9:00am-5:00pm, except on public holidays. Post offices are open from 8:00am-4:30pm Monday-Friday and 9:00am-1:00pm on weekends. Although most stores are open from 10:00am-10:00pm 7 days a week, local convenience stores typically open earlier and close after midnight. Museums are typically open from 9:00am-4:00pm daily, closing 1 day per week.

Working Environment: Many Thai businesses are family-owned. Employees tend to be very loyal, often devoting their entire careers to one company. Managers, in turn, are obligated to their employees. In addition to meeting their work-related needs, managers also typically support their employees' general welfare. Benefits include defending employees when they've made a mistake, presiding over their weddings, and helping their relatives find jobs. Almost half of the Thai workforce averages a 48 hour work week. The self-employed and workers in manufacturing and other labor-intensive industries average even longer work weeks.

Time Zone: Thailand observes Indochina Time (ICT) which is 7 hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) and 12 hours ahead of Eastern Standard Time (EST). Thailand does not observe daylight saving time.

Date Notation: Thai use the Western (Gregorian) and the Buddhist calendars concurrently. Because it begins with Buddha's death in 543 BC, the Buddhist calendar is 543 years ahead of the Western calendar. Thus, the year 2000 in the Western calendar is also the year 2543 BE (Buddhist Era).

National Anthem: The Thai National Anthem is played on all television and radio stations at 8:00am and 6:00pm daily. When in public, foreign nationals should stand and remain quiet during the anthem. Moviegoers must rise for the King's Royal Anthem, played before all film screenings (Photo: Pictures of King Rama IX on Bangkok's Thai Military Bank).



Time and Business

Generally, business interactions tend to progress at a slower pace in Thailand than in the US for several reasons. First, Thai prefer to build personal relationships and establish trust before doing business. Thai generally make business decisions after lengthy negotiations held over multiple meetings. In addition, several levels of firm management must approve the proceedings. Information typically flows slowly between managerial tiers, further delaying progress. Thus, initial meetings may consist solely of polite conversation, yielding few results or plans of action. A number of Thai prefer to work later in the evening and conduct fruitful business discussions during meals and other casual settings.

Thai behave in business settings in a manner that permits them to "save face" (see p. 3 *of Language and Communication*) and communicate respect. For example, Thai admire punctuality because it communicates respect, but in reality, they are typically not punctual. In addition, Thai reject confrontational behavior in interactions, valuing instead tact and harmony. Accordingly, a foreign national should never assign blame or directly criticize a Thai colleague in a public forum. Instead, he should only provide constructive feedback in a 1-to-1 setting.

Personal Space

The distance speakers maintain while conversing varies by setting and the nature of the relationship. When speaking with strangers, Thai tend to remain at least an arm's length apart. By contrast, friends and family typically stand much closer. When in the presence of people of higher social status, Thai prefer to occupy a lower physical plane (see p. 8 of *Religion and Spirituality*). For example, a worker may walk in a bent position if his employer is seated, while waiters may stoop when serving restaurant customers. Further, when walking with an elder or superior, Thai may trail a few paces behind.

Touch

Close friends and family members commonly touch one another while speaking. Similarly, friends of the same gender may hold hands in public, indicating their platonic friendship. Thai women are especially affectionate with female friends, often linking arms and sitting close to one another. Thai with higher social status may touch subordinates to demonstrate kindness or concern. Of note, Thai consider displays of affection between people of the opposite sex inappropriate. Foreign nationals should avoid all physical contact with members of the opposite sex, especially in rural areas. Thai also view the head as the most sacred part of the body (see p. 5 of *Language and Communication*) and, therefore, never touch another's head or pass anything over it. Even clothing associated with the head must be treated with respect. Patting a small child's head to show affection is the only exception to this custom. Women must never touch Buddhist monks (pictured). If they must give a monk an object, they should pass it to the monk through a male intermediary.



Eye Contact

Thai typically maintain direct eye contact when speaking with friends, acquaintances, and strangers, as they consider a lack of eye contact a sign of insincerity. However, in conversations with an elder or superior, a subordinate may bow his head and engage only in occasional eye contact to demonstrate respect.

Photographs

Foreign nationals should seek permission before taking photographs. Although photography is usually permitted on the grounds of Buddhist temples, it may be prohibited inside.

Driving

With 38 fatalities per 100,000 people in 2010, Thailand has the world's 3rd highest traffic-related death rate. Drivers tend to be aggressive, often ignoring speed limits or traveling against the normal flow of traffic. Many streets in Bangkok are unmarked and highly congested, while roads in rural areas are often poorly lit. Of note, Thai drive on the left side of the road.

National Holidays

- January 1: New Year's Day
- February/March: Makha Bucha Day*
- April 6: Chakri Memorial Day (commemorates King Rama I – see p. 3 of *History and Myth*)
- April 13-15: Songkran (Traditional New Year's)
- May: Royal Ploughing Ceremony Day (marks the beginning of the rice growing season)
- May/June: Visakha Bucha* (see p. 2 of *Aesthetics and Recreation*)
- May 1: Labor Day
- May 5: Coronation Day
- July: Asalha Bucha Day*
- August 12: The Queen of Thailand's Birthday
- August 12: Mother's Day
- October 23: Chulalongkorn Day (commemorates King Rama V – see p. 4 of *History and Myth*)
- December 5: The King of Thailand's Birthday
- December 5: Father's Day
- December 10: Constitution Day
- December 31: New Year's Eve

* Commemoration in honor of the Buddha

9. AESTHETICS AND RECREATION

Overview

Thai enjoy diverse artistic and recreational activities, often incorporating ***sà nùk*** (fun and enjoyment – see p. 3 of *Language and Communication*) into a range of traditions, from energetic martial arts to intricate dance and colorful crafts. Many activities reflect regional cultural and religious influences.

Dress and Appearance

Traditional: Made of silk and cotton, Thai clothing historically varied by region. Today, many Thai wear a variety of traditional styles on both formal and informal occasions. For special occasions, women often wear a ***pasin***, a full-length silk version of a ***sarong*** (a length of fabric wrapped around the waist). The *pasin* sometimes is paired with a long-sleeved silk blouse and/or sash draped over one shoulder. Men wear a ***sua phra ratchathan***, a short- or long-sleeved high-necked cotton or silk jacket, usually white, with black trousers. They may add a colorful silk cummerbund during very special occasions.



In rural areas, some Thai wear traditional dress on a daily basis. Around their waists, men may wear a ***phakoma***, a rectangular piece of cloth that serves as a towel, handkerchief, and head protection against the sun. Rural women may wear a *sarong* with a simple blouse or wear tie-dyed clothes called ***mawn khwaan***. Thailand's hill tribes have their own distinctive traditional styles, including intricate headdresses (pictured).

Modern: Western-style clothing is common in Bangkok and other urban areas. Businessmen and women wear Western-style suits and dresses, while younger people prefer jeans and T-shirts. School children usually wear uniforms. Of note, most Thai consider revealing clothing such as shorts or low-cut or tight clothing inappropriate. Urban dwellers and foreign nationals typically wear swimsuits, while some Thai prefer to swim fully clothed.

Recreation

In rural areas, social life revolves around festivals and Buddhist temple events. Many city-dwellers travel to their home villages to participate in these occasions. Because they have limited socializing space at home (see p. 1 of *Family and Kinship*), urban Thai enjoy meeting their family and friends at restaurants, bars, or other venues. Other popular pastimes in the city include visiting Internet cafes, shopping, and watching movies and television. Many Thai enjoy traditional medicine-based massages (see p. 3-4 of *Sustenance and Health*).

Festivals: Thai celebrate diverse holidays and festivals that commemorate historic and religious events, honor the monarchy, mark agricultural phases, or simply promote *sà nùk*. One important holiday is ***Visakh Bucha,*** a remembrance of the Buddha's birth, death, and enlightenment (see p. 2 of *Religion and Spirituality*). Thai celebrate the Queen's and King's birthdays by decorating with pictures of the royal family, flags, and flowers and honoring their own mothers and fathers (see p. 4 of *Time and Space* for a list of national holidays.)

Sports and Games



Muay Thai: Based on an ancient form of military combat, ***muay thai*** (Thai boxing, pictured) is the national sport of Thailand. Boxers use knees, elbows, shins, and feet to deliver blows to all body parts except the head or groin. Unlike American boxing, Thai boxers may clinch, a technique in which boxers hold an opponent while delivering blows. *Muay thai* matches involve several traditions, including a dance-like pre-match ritual honoring trainers and supporters.

Other sports: Other sports unique to Thailand include ***krabi-krabong***, a traditional form of fencing utilizing various swords and clubs, and ***sepak takraw***, a competitive form of kick volleyball played with small rattan balls. Football (soccer) is also popular, with several active national and youth leagues. Badminton, table tennis, volleyball, and basketball are played widely. Golf has received increased interest in recent years with the success of Tiger Woods, whose mother is Thai.

Games and Activities: Thai enjoy playing board games such as ***makruk***, similar to chess. Other popular activities include kite-flying and kite-fighting, in which teams attempt to 'snag' an opponent's kite. Some villages in eastern Thailand hold amateur rocketry competitions before the annual rainy season.

Music

Traditional: Unlike Western music, classical Thai music is non-harmonic and typically delivered with several instruments simultaneously playing variations of a melody. Instruments are numerous and varied and include the ***ranad*** (curved xylophone), ***glong*** (drums), and ***ching*** (cymbals). Although different ensembles combine varied types and numbers of instruments, they almost always include a ***khawng wong***, a set of tuned gongs arranged in a semi-circle.

Modern: Modern Thai artists, such as soloist Thongchai "Pi Bird" Macintyre and the group Carabao often blend traditional sounds with pop or rock. Other modern genres include ***luk thung,*** which uses electric guitars and keyboards and is comparable to American country music, and ***mor lam***, a fast-paced pop-Thai mix played with ***khaen*** (bamboo mouth organs) and ***phin*** (small guitars).

Dance and Theater

Classical dance (pictured), once performed solely for the royal court, is often part of weddings, festivals, and other special occasions. Thai also enjoy Western-style dancing as well as ***ramwong***, a Thai folk dance popularized during World War II.



Dance-dramas: Traditional dance is featured prominently in theatrical productions known as dance-dramas. ***Khon*** showcases segments of ***Ramakien*** (see textbox next page) with energetic dances performed by dancers in colorful costumes and masks. ***Lakhon*** combines graceful movements with ***jātakas*** (stories from past lives of the Buddha) and traditional folklore. ***Likay***, a casual, opera-style performance, often features humorous or rowdy pieces focused on modern topics such as politics or social issues.

Nang yai: This is a type of traditional shadow-puppet theater popular in southern Thailand. During performances, skilled puppeteers manipulate 3-6 foot tall puppets so that they cast shadows on a white screen. Performers use songs, chants, and music to tell a folktale or legend.

Cinema

Thailand's film industry dates to the 1920s. The first Thai film to win the Cannes Film Festival Golden Palm award was titled *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* from 2010. Another well-known Thai film was the 2013 comedy *Pee Mak*, one of Asia's highest grossing films of all time.

Literature

Thai written literature dates to the 12th century when Buddhist monks composed poetry praising rulers, exploring Buddhist philosophy, and promoting morals and values. One of Thailand's best-known works of literature is the 19th-century epic poem *Phra Aphaimani.* Contemporary Thai literature often centers on love and family. Some authors explore how modernization and Western influences affect Thailand, focusing on corruption, globalization, or inequality.

Ramakien – Thailand's National Epic

Ramakien is an adaptation of the ancient Hindu epic poem *Ramayana*. In the Hindu version, King Rama is a reincarnation of the Hindu deity Vishnu. The story recounts Rama's efforts to save his wife Sita from the demon Ravana. Thai people adopted the story in the first millennium AD, adapting it to their Buddhist beliefs and values. Consequently, in the Thai version, first documented in the 18th century, Rama represents a former life of the Buddha. The morals and principles highlighted in the poem – including justice, hospitality, gratitude, integrity, reverence for kings, respect for elders, and honor for the dead – remain important cultural values today.

Arts and Crafts
Early Thai artisans labored to honor the Buddha and to gain religious merit (see p. 4 of *Religion and Spirituality*). Although many modern artists are inspired by religious themes, others incorporate political and social themes in their work.

Buddha Statues: Statues of the Buddha are common in Thailand. Made of bronze, stone, wood, ivory, stucco, terracotta, or ceramic, they vary in style and appearance. Statues display the Buddha in a variety of poses and positions (sitting, walking, or lying) and using various hand gestures and finger postures (***mudras***). These poses and gestures may symbolize a characteristic of the Buddha or refer to specific events in his life. These characteristics or events include the Buddha teaching, bestowing charity, reassuring, or meditating, among others. All images of the Buddha are considered sacred (see p. 8 of *Religion and Spirituality*) and may not be removed or destroyed without the government's permission. Worn statues often are refinished or used to fashion new pieces.

Architecture: Thailand is renowned for the architecture of its Buddhist temples (see p. 4 of *Religion and Spirituality*). Usually separated from the outside world by enclosing walls, temple buildings typically have intricate decorative features such as high pitched roofs, carved doors and window sills, and murals. Temple architecture and decoration often feature glass, gold leaf, mother of pearl inlay, porcelain, and other fine materials.



Other Arts and Crafts: Thailand has an ancient tradition of pottery-making. Its celadon (green ceramic) and lacquerware products were traded throughout Asia. Thailand is also known for its neilloware (silver engraving), gemstone cutting, woven bamboo and rattan baskets, and high quality silk. Members of Thailand's hill tribes (see p. 12 of *Political and Social Relations*) produce embroidered and woven cotton textiles (pictured) that they fashion into clothing, scarves, purses, pillows and other products.

10. SUSTENANCE AND HEALTH

Sustenance Overview

The cuisine of Thailand incorporates a variety of flavors and traditions from Southeast Asia, China, and Europe. Thai cuisine varies widely by region, from spicy in the Northeast and South to mild in the central lowlands. Of note, the most well-known Thai food originated with the monarchy's palace chefs.

Dining Customs

Rural Thai often eat while sitting on the floor on straw mats (pictured). By contrast, many urban residents sit in chairs at Western-style tables. Dinner is the main meal of the day, which the family usually enjoys together. Breakfast and lunch are typically simpler affairs. At meals, each individual receives a portion of rice and shares several other dishes with the group. Thai customarily use a fork held in the left hand to push food onto a spoon held in the right hand, from which they eat. Thai rarely use knives as most food is served in bite-sized pieces. Thai use chopsticks to consume a few dishes such as noodles or spring rolls.



Diet

Rice (***khaao***) is the most common staple. Its importance is evident in the Thai language: the Thai word for "eat", ***kin khaao,*** also means "to eat rice." Northern Thai prepare sticky (glutinous) rice, while long-grain jasmine rice is common elsewhere. Another common staple are noodles (***kway***, ***tiaw***, or ***bamee***) made from rice, egg, wheat, or bean starch.

Seafood, poultry, and pork are common proteins, although rural Thai may also eat snake, turtle, deer, or frog. A variety of vegetables including onion, pepper, mushroom, and bean sprouts are featured in many dishes. Thai also enjoy tropical fruits such as mango, pineapple, and native South/Southeast Asian jackfruit, rambatan, and durian – a fruit with an odor so strong, it is sometimes banned from hotels or public transit.

Meals and Popular Dishes

Although Thai cuisine varies regionally, most meals combine spicy, sour, sweet, and mild flavors. Breakfast traditionally includes rice porridge, ***khaao tom*** (rice with minced meat, fish sauce, and dried chilies) or a vegetable omelet. Lunch is often a rice or noodle dish. Typical dinners include rice, soup, salad, and a stir-fry or curry entrée. Thai also commonly eat several snacks throughout the day, such as fruit served with salt or chili powder, fruit drinks, or noodles.

Popular dishes include ***pad thai***, stir-fried rice noodles with meat, lime juice, garlic, chilies, bean sprouts, and crushed peanuts; ***plaa pao***, grilled peppered fish; ***kaeng khio wann***, green curry with chicken or beef; ***som tam***, a salad with spicy chilies, green papaya, and lime juice; and ***tom yum***, a spicy soup flavored with lemongrass, kaffir lime leaves, and galangal, an aromatic ginger (Photo: *tom yum* with catfish). Thai use many different sauces and condiments such as chilies, fish sauce, ground peanuts, and vinegar to complement their dishes.



Sweets: Typically served as a snack and not as dessert, Thai sweets usually incorporate a variety of creams or syrups. Some include combinations unusual to Westerners, like red bean and corn ice cream or gelatin with coconut and spring onions. Other sweets include banana fritters, pumpkin custard, mango sticky rice with coconut cream, and syrup over crushed ice.

Dining Out: City dwellers in particular enjoy eating out. Urban areas offer a range of choices, from restaurants featuring international cuisine to simple noodle shops. When Thai eat out, the person who extends the invitation generally pays the entire bill. Tipping is uncommon except in high-end restaurants. Fast food and coffee shops are becoming widespread and are popular among younger Thai.

Street vendors: Common in urban areas, street vendors sell a range of food items from full meals to simple snacks. The food is typically of high quality, authentically Thai, and enjoyed by rich and poor alike. Some vendors sell specialties such as fried ants, grasshoppers, silkworms and cockroaches (Photo: A US Marine eats a cooked insect during 2012 Cobra Gold exercises).



Beverages

Thai enjoy a variety of beverages. While they typically drink tea without milk or sugar, Thai prefer coffee flavored with chicory and may drink it black or with condensed milk. Many Thai also enjoy fruit juices flavored with syrup and salt, such as ***naam manao*** (iced lime juice with sugar). Because beer and wine are heavily taxed (see "Modern Healthcare System" below), many Thai prefer more inexpensive brandy, whiskey, and rice liquors.

Health Overview

Since the 2002 introduction of universal coverage, 99% of Thai citizens now have health insurance, and Thailand has seen a steady decrease in maternal and infant mortality rates. Meanwhile, life expectancy at birth has risen to 75 years, significantly higher than the regional average and the global average of 71. While government healthcare spending has increased substantially in recent years, disparities in healthcare quality and availability persist between rural and urban areas.

Traditional Medicine

Traditional medicine consists of the knowledge, practices, and skills derived from a native population's beliefs, experiences, and theories. Thai traditional medicine (TTM) aims to achieve balance in the body by considering the 4 environmental (earth, fire, wind, and water) and certain seasonal elements. Primary therapies include therapeutic massage**,** herbal steam baths, traditional midwifery, and herbal, animal, or mineral-based medications.

Over centuries, practitioners have standardized and passed along TTM to succeeding generations, although TTM suffered a decline in popularity following the arrival of Western medicine. After renewed interest and international encouragement in the 1970s, TTM enjoyed resurgence and is now a separate branch of the official healthcare system. Many Thai, particularly in rural areas, use TTM as part or all of their healthcare practices.

TTM practitioners must receive a degree from an accredited university or certified institution, then pass examinations and complete an apprenticeship before obtaining a license. Although only certified TTM practitioners historically prescribed TTM treatments, health officials are beginning to incorporate TTM practices into the Western-style medical system. Thus, medical staff are trained on TTM treatments and the use of herbal medicines (Photo: Medicinal herb garden at a Thai hospital).



Modern Healthcare System

In 2002, Thailand introduced its Universal Health Coverage Scheme (UCS), also known as the "30 Baht Plan." USC quadrupled government healthcare funding and reduced individual costs to a 30-baht ($.75) copay, a fee which was later waived completely. The scheme succeeded in substantially decreasing infant mortality in rural areas. It also provided the poor access to reproductive and primary healthcare and reduced mortality rates due to infectious diseases.

Experts generally praise Thailand’s innovative healthcare system, which focuses mainly on primary healthcare, along with its progressive health promotion program. The latter utilizes tobacco and alcohol taxes to finance health promotion activities. Despite its successes, critics argue the scheme may be unable to match increased demand. Critics also point to disparities between the various healthcare plans within the scheme. For example, some high quality services are available only at expensive private institutions.

Health Challenges

Thailand faces several challenges in the delivery of healthcare. In 2012, it is estimated that the country had just 0.5 physicians per 1,000 people, below the regional average of 0.6 per 1,000 people and far lower than the US average of 2.5. Since most doctors practice in the cities, many hospitals and clinics in rural areas lack qualified personnel. Likewise, many Thai doctors specialize, thereby limiting the number of general practitioners available to treat routine ailments. Emergency transportation is inefficient and hampered by heavy congestion in major cities.

As healthcare's overall quality has increased, rates of most infectious diseases have declined significantly. While malaria and tuberculosis remain threatening in some remote areas, just 18% of all deaths in 2014 were due to communicable diseases, compared to the regional average of 40%.

As is common in countries with ageing populations (see p. 1 of *Political and Social Relations*), the incidence of noncommunicable diseases in Thailand has increased. In 2014, 71% of all of deaths were attributed to stroke, heart disease, diabetes, lung disease, and other such diseases. Obesity and alcohol and drug abuse rates are also increasing. Despite heavy-handed enforcement policies, abuse of methamphetamines in pill form (***ya ba***) remains high.



Injuries resulting in death occur at a higher rate than the regional average. Thailand has the 2nd highest incidence of death by road accidents in the world (see p. 4 of *Time and Space*) (Photo: Hospital in Kamphaeng Phet Province).

Refugees and Migrant Workers: An estimated 3.9 million migrant workers and about 650,000 refugees, asylum-seekers, and stateless people reside in Thailand. Migrants are now able to immediately buy and access the country's universal health care. HIV prevalence among migrants to Thailand is up to four times the rate of HIV prevalence found among the general Thai population. Migrants in Thailand are also more likely to suffer from communicable diseases.

Medical Tourism

Thailand has become the world's foremost destination for "medical tourism," a form of travel undertaken solely for healthcare procedures. Individuals from Asia, Europe, and the Middle East travel to Thailand to purchase treatments and procedures ranging from plastic and cosmetic surgery to open heart surgery. These patients typically pay a fraction of the cost charged in their home countries. Many patients stay in Thailand to recuperate post procedure, since accommodations are typically inexpensive. Although medical tourism supports Thailand's economy, critics accuse medical tourists of monopolizing services and resources intended for Thai patients.

HIV/AIDS: Through its safe-sex campaign and provision of antiretroviral treatment to infected pregnant women, Thailand has successfully slowed its HIV/AIDS epidemic. The number of annual new HIV infections has declined steadily from a high of 143,000 in 1991 to 61,000 in 2001, 24,000 by 2009, and approximately 6,900 in 2016. Experts estimate that 440,000 adults live with HIV in Thailand today. Others estimate a slightly higher prevalence rate of 1.1% of the adult population. Regardless of the exact figures, Thailand's HIV/AIDS infection rate remains significantly higher than the regional average.

Over the past decade, HIV infection patterns have changed: the virus is now spreading rapidly among homosexual men, transgender people, and male sex workers (see p. 3 of *Sex and Gender*). Approximately 50% of new HIV infections are among these groups, and studies estimate that 29% of homosexual men in Bangkok are HIV positive. To fight this alarmingly high infection rate, in 2014 Thailand began offering free antiretroviral drugs to all HIV patients, including undocumented migrants. Efforts to expand the state's HIV/AIDS monitoring and treatment systems are hampered by many men's reluctance to report suspected infection due to their fear of social exclusion or discrimination on the job.

11. ECONOMICS AND RESOURCES

Overview

Prior to 1960, Thailand's economy was based largely on the production of rice and other crops for domestic consumption. By the 1980s, Thailand began to develop a manufacturing infrastructure supporting new export policies. The rapid pace of industrialization in the 1980s and 90s took a toll on the environment. Large swaths of land were transformed as the government built hydroelectric complexes to meet growing energy needs. Consequently, thousands of people were displaced and natural flood patterns and forests disrupted.

Because industries relied heavily on foreign investment, a sudden decline in Thailand's currency, the ***baht***, in 1997 spurred a debt-fueled financial crisis that spread through much of Asia. Meanwhile, Thailand's export-oriented growth strategy left the country vulnerable to foreign economic issues. Hit hard by the 2007 global economic recession, industries experienced severe drops in profit as Thailand's exports significantly shrank (Photo: Bangkok street).



Economic recovery began but then slowed after record-setting floods destroyed Bangkok's manufacturing centers in 2011, crippling the manufacturing industry for over a year (see p. 3 of *Political and Social Relations*). To prevent future economic loss, the government allocated $12 billion in flood mitigation projects and $75 billion in infrastructure development. Due to recent political unrest (see p. 9 of *History and Myth*), spending on infrastructure has been suspended with economic growth remaining slow.

In spite of these setbacks, the standard of living in Thailand has steadily increased over the last decade. While slow, the economy is growing as unemployment remains extremely low at 0.9% - currently the 4th lowest in the world. Even though Thailand still ranks poorly on the income inequality index, its poverty rate decreased from 43% in 2000 to 10.4% in 2016.

Today, about 88% of the impoverished live in the rural North, Northeast, and Deep South. Although the government raised the daily minimum wage to 300 *baht* (currently about $9) in 2013, the cost of living (food, fuel, and utilities) has risen as well. Further, household debt has increased, attributed to easy access to credit cards and incentives introduced to spur domestic spending after the 2011 floods. Despite its fragile political state (see p. 5-6 of *Political and Social Relations*), slow economic growth, and wealth disparities, Thailand remains the world's 21st largest economy and the 2nd largest in Southeast Asia behind Indonesia.

Services

Accounting for 55% of GDP and 49% of employment, the services sector is the largest component of Thailand's economy. Primary services include wholesale and retail sales, tourism, banking, and finance. The majority of both wholesale and retail establishments are small, family-owned shops.

Tourism: The tourism industry is vital to Thailand's economy. Accounting for over 18% of the country's GDP and 8% of all employment. Chinese, residents of ASEAN countries, Russians, Japanese, South Koreans, Indians, French, British, and Americans accounted for the majority of visitors. Although tourism has slowed since the May 2014 coup (see p. 9 of *History and Myth*), the industry has historically recovered quickly after similar events. Thai officials report numbers of arrivals in 2016 as 32,588,303 (Photo: Phuket, a popular tourist destination).

Industry



Thailand's economic growth in the 1980s and 90s was primarily due to industrial activities. Despite recent growth in the services sector, the industrial sector remains significant. It is only slightly smaller than the services sector, accounting for 36% of GDP and 23% of employment.

Manufacturing: Accounting for 27% of GDP, manufacturing is the foremost component of Thailand's industrial sector. The majority of Thai companies specialize in food and beverage processing (25%), followed by apparel (18%) and textile (18%)

production. Other goods include motor vehicles, computer parts, and electrical machinery. Although some large-scale businesses exist, 94% of establishments are small-scale, employing fewer than 15 workers.

Construction: Construction currently accounts for about 2.8% of GDP and 6% of employment. Projects include private-sector housing development and large-scale public infrastructure development. Projects also include rail and highway extensions, as well as the construction of deep seaports and other coastal improvements.

Agriculture

Consisting of farming, fishing, and forestry, the agricultural sector was traditionally the backbone of Thailand's economy. Despite the recent expansion of the service and industry sectors, agriculture still accounts for 29% of employment and 9% of GDP. The majority of agricultural production occurs on small, family-owned farms (pictured).



Farming: About 36% of Thailand's territory is suitable for cultivation, with the largest concentrations of farmland in the northern, northeastern, and central regions. While most farms only cultivate crops, about 1/3 also produce livestock. Important food crops include rice, cassava (a tuberous starchy root), rubber, corn, sugarcane, coconuts, and soybeans.

Fishing: Thailand is the world's 3rd largest seafood exporter, having a fishing industry worth about $6 billion. Profitable harvests include shrimp, squid, and tuna. Recently, the industry has come under international scrutiny for dismal working conditions. Fishermen typically toil extremely long hours, averaging 62 hours per week. Migrant workers, some of whom are victims of trafficking (see p. 4 of *Sex and Gender*), often endure slave-like conditions, working for little or no pay and under constant threat of violence.

Forestry: After widespread deforestation in the 1980s and 90s, the government banned logging in natural forests.

Consequently, the timber industry remains small, consisting mostly of teak and rubberwood production from planted forests.

Currency

Thailand's currency is the *baht* (฿), issued in 5 banknote values (20, 50, 100, 500, 1,000), and 4 coin values (1, 2, 5, 10). 1฿ is subdivided into 100 satang (cents), issued in 5 coin values (1, 5, 10, 25, 50). Although exchange rates vary, $1 has averaged about 34฿ over the past 5 years. Thai prefer cash for everyday purchases, although some locales accept credit cards.

Foreign Trade

In 2016, exports totaled $190 billion and imports $196.4 billion. Exports primarily included electronics, cars, computer parts, electrical appliances, heavy machinery, textiles, fishery products, rice, and rubber. The largest buyers of Thai goods included the US (11%), China (10%), Japan (9%), Hong Kong (6%), Malaysia (5%), and Australia (5%). Imports amounted to $171.3 billion and included capital goods, raw materials, consumer goods, and fuels purchased from China (20%), Japan (15%), the US (7%), and Malaysia (6%).

ASEAN Economic Community

Using the European Union as its model, the ASEAN Economic Community united 10 member nations (see p. 11 of *Political and Social Relations*) as a single market by late 2015. This union facilitates movement of goods, services, capital, and labor among member nations.



Foreign Aid

Thailand receives financial assistance from the US, the UK, Australia, Japan, and others to supports its military and for disaster relief, humanitarian assistance, and infrastructure projects. After the 2014 coup, some donors suspended assistance while others are reviewed their aid portfolios amidst concerns for Thailand's future stability (see p. 3-4 of *Political and Social Relations*) (Photo: US Navy delivers equipment in the Gulf of Thailand). Thailand received a total of $711,465 in disbursed aid from the United States government in 2017, a decrease of 504% from the last reported total in 2016 ($4.3 million).

12. TECHNOLOGY AND MATERIAL

Overview
Thailand has one of the best developed physical infrastructures in Southeast Asia. While mobile phone service extends throughout the country, reliable Internet connectivity is limited to urban areas.

Transportation
Thailand has a far-reaching and efficient public transit system. In and around Bangkok, for example, travelers have the option of traveling by bus, subway, "sky" train (above-ground rail system), or long-tail boats that navigate the city's many canals.

Usually fast and efficient, buses are a common means of transit between cities. Of note, long-distance overnight buses historically have had high accident rates (see p. 4 of *Time and Space*), due to drivers' aggressive habits and use of stimulants.

In rural areas, ***songthaews*** (open vans equipped with benches for passengers) and share-taxis (air-conditioned minibuses) supplement the bus networks. Ferries provide access to all major islands. Widely-available taxis come in various forms, including ***tuk-tuks*** (pictured - 3-wheeled, open sided vehicles), ***samlors*** (tricycle rickshaws), and motorbikes. Of note, taxi drivers do not usually expect tips.



Roadways: Thailand had about 242,335 mi of roadways in 2016, nearly all paved, with plenty of multi-lane highways. Inspired by the probable increase in intra-regional trade brought by the 2015 ASEAN Economic Community (see p. 4 of *Economics and Resources*), Thailand has expanded and repaired its road system which consisted of 112,000 mi in 2006. The signs on major routes typically include both English and Thai. Roads in more rural areas are less well-marked. With 543 vehicles per 1,000 people in 2016, Thai automobile ownership levels were well below the US rate of 812.

Railways: Although slower, railways are a safe alternative to Thailand's buses for long distance travel. The 4 main routes are the North, Northeast, East, and South, with Bangkok serving as the main hub. In 2014, Thailand had only about 2,500 mi of railways, compared to 16,900 mi in Japan. All railways are controlled by the State Railway of Thailand.

Ports and Waterways: Major seaports are Bangkok, Laem Chabang, Ranong, Phuket, and Songkhla. In addition, Thailand has about 2,500 mi of inland waterways navigable by small boats. Bangkok's Chao Phraya River and Khlong Saen Saeb canal transport over 360,000 passengers daily.



Airways: Thailand has 101 airports and airstrips, of which 63 have paved runways. The primary international transit hub is Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi Airport, which is linked by shuttle to Don Muang Airport, serving low-cost carriers and domestic flights. Other major international hubs include Chiang Mai International Airport, Mae Fah Luang–Chiang Rai International Airport, Hat Yai International Airport, and Phuket International Airport. Thailand's 2 major airlines are Thai Airways and Bangkok Airways (Photo: Thai Airways passenger jet).

Energy

Thailand is the world's 24th largest energy producer, generating 85% of its electricity from fossil fuels and the remainder through hydroelectric plants, renewables, and imports. Thailand is also the leading producer of biofuels in Southeast Asia, including biodiesel from palm oil and ethanol from molasses and cassava.

Thailand is the world's 22nd largest energy consumer and 2nd largest in Southeast Asia behind Indonesia. Experts expect energy consumption to increase by 75% in the coming decades as the economy continues to grow and as society becomes more affluent. To meet the growing demand, Thailand is expanding oil and gas production in the Gulf of Thailand and working to develop alternative energy sources.

Media

Following the 2014 coup (see p. 9 of *History and Myth*), the Thai military gained control of the media, blocking any commentary deemed divisive, defamatory, or subversive to the government or monarchy. Military censorship persists, while many media outlets perform self-censorship.

Newspapers are popular in Thailand. With a circulation of over 1 million daily, the ***Thai Rath*** ("Thai State") is the largest**.** The 2nd best-selling paper is the ***Daily News,*** followed by ***Khao Sod*** ("Fresh News") and ***Matichon***. English-language newspapers include ***The Nation*** and ***Bangkok Post***. The latter was founded in 1946 and is Thailand's oldest newspaper.

TV and Radio: Thailand has 6 state-controlled TV channels providing primarily Thai-language programming and countless satellite channels, some providing international programming. The publicly-owned Mass Communication Organization of Thailand (MCOT) is the largest broadcaster. The CTH Public Company Limited (CTH) and the privately-owned TrueVisions also have extensive reach. Thailand has more than 500 AM and FM radio stations.

Telecommunications



Thailand's telecommunications infrastructure is well developed in major urban centers but remains less developed in rural parts of the North and Northeast. Most of the country has access to mobile phone networks. Notably, Thailand has more mobile phone subscriptions (97.1 million) than people (68.2 million), indicating some subscribers own multiple accounts. Mobile carriers include Advanced Info Service, CAT Telecom, Total Access Communication (DTAC), and True Move (True Corporation) (Photo: A village woman uses a cell phone).

Internet: About 40% of Thai are regular Internet users. Broadband (wired) Internet is available in large cities, although many rural areas have yet to gain access. About 70% of users access the Internet using mobile phones, while the rest use pre-paid dial-up cards, Internet cafes, and computers at home.

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