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# Profile

## Introduction

Thailand (formerly Siam) is the only country in Southeast Asia that has never been conquered or colonized by a European nation. Since 1932, the country has been governed as a constitutional monarchy with an elected parliament, although the military has often intervened to take power. The latest military coup occurred in September 2006, followed by general elections in late 2007 and the subsequent formation of a new democratic government.



A strong U.S. ally since the end of World War II, Thailand has previously solicited assistance from the U.S. to help promote political stability in the country. More recently, the Thai government has struggled with a separatist insurgency in its southern provinces, where violence has escalated since 2004. Nationalist sentiments had some effect on the 2007 general elections, and efforts are ongoing to stabilize conflict in the southern region.<sup>1, 2</sup>

## Climate<sup>3, 4, 5, 6</sup>

Thailand's tropical climate is characterized by its monsoon cycle. During the rainy season, which spans from mid May through October (except in southern Thailand), cloudy southwest monsoons drench the country. The dry season begins in November with the advent of a cool, dry monsoon from the northeast, which lasts until mid March. Of course, the amount and duration of rain varies according to altitude and region. In the southern peninsula, over 2,500 mm (98 in) of rainfall yearly, compared to 1,500 mm (59 in) in the central, northern, and western parts of the country. Some of the southern peninsular areas near the Andaman Sea receive up to 4,000 mm (157 in) of



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<sup>1</sup> Frontpagemag.com. Bandow, Doug. "A Buddhist Threat to Religious Freedom." 10 September 2007. <http://frontpagemagazine.com/Articles/Read.aspx?GUID=88ABCC69-30DE-4A01-AC51-2F862E56AD45>

<sup>2</sup> International Herald Tribune. Mydans, Seth. "Thailand Set to Make Buddhism the State Religion." 24 May 2007. <http://www.iht.com/articles/2007/05/24/africa/thai.php>

<sup>3</sup> Mongabay.com. Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. Country Studies. "Thailand: Geography: Climate." 1987. [http://www.mongabay.com/reference/country\\_studies/thailand/GEOGRAPHY.html](http://www.mongabay.com/reference/country_studies/thailand/GEOGRAPHY.html)

<sup>4</sup> CIA World Factbook. Thailand. 6 March 2008. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/th.html>

<sup>5</sup> AsianInfo. "Thailand's Geography." c.2000. <http://www.asianinfo.org/asianinfo/thailand/pro-geography.htm>

<sup>6</sup> The Encyclopedia of Earth. Food and Agriculture Organization (Content source). Marty Matlock (Topic Editor). "Water Profile of Thailand." 8 February 2007. [http://www.eoearth.org/article/Water\\_profile\\_of\\_Thailand](http://www.eoearth.org/article/Water_profile_of_Thailand)

annual precipitation. Powerful thunderstorms occur throughout the transitional period between the rainy and dry seasons.

Temperatures, which range between 19° C (66° F) and 38° C (100° F) on average, start to climb around January. The southern Malay Peninsula is typically humid and hot, and because of the ocean's proximity, the dry season is shorter in this region.

## Geography

Thailand's geography is extremely diverse. Its extensive southern seashores lie in equatorial latitudes, whereas large areas of the north and northeast consist of semi-arid plateaus or rugged jungles and mountains.

### Area<sup>7</sup>

Thailand can be divided into two broad parts, a central mainland and a southern peninsula, which together encompass a total land area of 511,770 sq km (197,600 sq mi). The central mainland abuts the Gulf of Thailand to the south and shares borders with three countries: Cambodia on its southeastern edge 803 km (500 mi), Laos on its eastern and northeastern sides 1,754 km (1,090 mi), and Burma on its northwestern and western borders 1,800 km (1,118 mi).



Thailand's peninsular region is a long, relatively thin section of the Malay Peninsula, which Thailand partially shares on the west with Burma. South of the Burmese border, Thailand occupies the entire width of the peninsula to its southern border 506 km (314 mi) with Malaysia, which claims the remainder of the peninsula.

## Geographical Divisions<sup>8</sup>

### *Central Plain*

As a large drainage basin for the Chao Phraya River, Thailand's fertile central plain benefits from extensive water resources. Monsoon rains and the corresponding flooding of the Chao Phraya River and its tributaries support the region's intensive agricultural production. The central plain is the country's main rice-producing region and the most populated area of the country. At its southern end, the large delta of the Chao Phraya River comprises numerous waterways that empty into the Gulf of Thailand.

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<sup>7</sup> CIA World Factbook. "Thailand." 20 March 2008. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/th.html#Geo>

<sup>8</sup> Encyclopædia Britannica. "Thailand: Land." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-52646/Thailand>

### *Upland Plateau*

Comprising much of northeastern Thailand, the Khorat Plateau consists of largely impermeable tableland and low, rolling hills interspersed with shallow lakes. Extending to the Mekong River on its northern and eastern borders, this vast landscape slopes slightly to the southeast because of uplift from two crustal faultlines. The Cambodian plain lies to the south, and the Chao Phraya River valley and basin lie to the west.



© talkrabb / flickr.com  
The upland plateau

### *Mountains*

Mountains occupy Thailand's northern region and its western borderlands with Burma. As an extension of the tectonic activity that formed the Himalayas, the northern mountains are tall and rugged, with deep valleys.<sup>9</sup> This area is covered with thick forests, though much of it has been logged in recent decades. In the higher reaches, much of the terrain is formed from limestone, and grasslands and a variety of trees cover the lower elevations. Large wildlife sanctuaries are found in the forested hills and grasslands of the southern edge of the Dawna Range in the north.<sup>10</sup> Mountainous terrain is also found near the Cambodian border in southeastern Thailand.

### *Peninsular South*

Thailand shares the upper part of the Malay Peninsula with Burma (to the west), and its territory extends south to the border of Malaysia, which occupies the remainder of the peninsula. On its eastern shore, the peninsula faces the Gulf of Thailand, and to the west lies the Andaman Sea, which is part of the Indian Ocean.

## **Topographical Features**

### *Dangrek Range*<sup>11</sup>

The Dangrek Range is located in southeastern Thailand on the border of Cambodia. Forming the southern rim of the Khorat Plateau, these forest-covered hills range between 450–600 m (1,500–2,000 ft) in height. They run in an east–west direction, extending 320 km (200 mi) west from the Mekong River to the highlands around San Kamphaeng. On their northern side, the Dangrek Mountains slope gradually to the Mun River.

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<sup>9</sup> Encyclopædia Britannica. "Thailand: Land: Relief." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-52646/Thailand>

<sup>10</sup> The Encyclopedia of Earth. United Nations Environment Programme-World Conservation Monitoring Centre (Content Partner). Mark McGinley (Topic Editor). "Thung Yai Naresuan Wildlife Sanctuary, Thailand." 2008. [http://www.eoearth.org/article/Thung\\_Yai\\_Naresuan\\_Wildlife\\_Sanctuary,\\_Thailand](http://www.eoearth.org/article/Thung_Yai_Naresuan_Wildlife_Sanctuary,_Thailand)

<sup>11</sup> Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Dangrek Mountains." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9028705/Dangrek-Mountains>

### *Tanen Range*

Marked by steep ridges and deep valleys, the Tanen Range stretches along Thailand's northern and western border with Burma. The mountains of this range reach as high as 2,134 m (7,000 ft).<sup>12</sup> The area's foothills are carpeted with dense forests that include tracts of bamboo and large areas of teak, a hardwood that is often illegally logged due to its high commercial value.<sup>13</sup> Thais use the durable wood of the bamboo plant to construct houses, fences, furniture, and other structures. Also, young bamboo shoots are edible, and they supplement the diet of the people inhabiting this mountainous area.

### *Dawna Range*

The Dawna Range lies in western Thailand along the border with Burma. This chain of jagged mountains consists mostly of limestone and is covered with evergreen and deciduous forest at its upper elevations.<sup>14</sup> Grasslands and forests of bamboo, semi-evergreen, and tropical trees cover the lower areas. Wildlife species such as elephants, large cats, bears, and tapirs roam these mountains, and they benefit from the region's relative inaccessibility at higher elevations.<sup>15, 16</sup>



© holysmokes! / Flickr.com  
Ayutthaya in the valley of the Chao Phraya river

At the southern end of this range, the Three Pagodas Pass gives entry into Burma. Historically, this pass has functioned as the main route between the Chao Phraya Valley and southeastern Burma.<sup>17</sup> A number of wildlife refuges are also located in this area, including the Thung Yai Naresuan Wildlife Sanctuary, a World Heritage Site, and the adjacent Huai Kha Khaeng Sanctuary, which, together, combine to form Thailand's largest conservation site. To the north lies an additional refuge, the Umphang Wildlife Sanctuary.

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<sup>12</sup> Dictionary.com. "Tanen Taunggyi." c.2008. [http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/tanen taunggyi](http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/tanen%20taunggyi)

<sup>13</sup> GORP. Kaplan, Daniel. "Thai Refugee Camps: Beyond the Beaten Path." c.1999–2008. <http://gorp.away.com/gorp/location/asia/kaplan/refugee.htm>

<sup>14</sup> Jumbo Travel Centre. "Kanchanaburi Overview." c.1999–2004. <http://www.jumboriverkwai.com/index.cfm?menuid=211>

<sup>15</sup> Blackwell Synergy. Biotropica, the Journal of Tropical Biology and Conservation, Vol. 40, No. 3. Abstract. Steinmetz, Robert, and Wanlop Chutipong, Naret Seuaturien, Erb Chirngsaard. "Community Structure of Large Mammals in Tropical Montane and Lowland Forest in the Tenasserim-Dawna Mountains, Thailand." 2007. <http://www.blackwell-synergy.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1744-7429.2007.00367.x>

<sup>16</sup> University of Minnesota. Department of Fisheries, Wildlife and Conservation Biology. Smith, James L.D., and Peter Cutter. "Assessing the Status of Tigers in the Western Forest Complex of Thailand and Developing a Landscape Scale Management Plan." October 2002. <http://www.savethetigerfund.org/AM/Template.cfm?Section=Home&TEMPLATE=/CM/ContentDisplay.cfm&CONTENTID=8697>

<sup>17</sup> Questia. The Columbia Encyclopedia. "Three Pagodas Pass." c.2004. <http://www.questia.com/library/encyclopedia/three-pagodas-pass.jsp>

The entire southern area of the Dawna Range consists of mountains or high hills, dense forests of various kinds of trees, and grasslands.<sup>18</sup> In general, the forests that once covered Thailand's mountainous areas, including the Dawna Range, have been severely diminished due to land clearing and logging.

### *Khorat Plateau*<sup>19, 20</sup>

Ranging from 90–200 m (300–650 ft) above sea level, the Khorat Plateau covers 155,000 sq km (60,000 sq mi) of northeastern Thailand. The predominantly dry landscape is marked by small, shallow lakes and rolling, low-elevation hills. The soil of this area is poor in quality and does not sustain widespread agriculture, although peanuts, cotton, rice, and hemp are cultivated on small farms in some areas. Two rivers, the Mae Nam Chi and the Mae Nam Mun, drain the plateau as they flow toward the southeast, where they eventually stream into the Mekong River.



© Maciej Radoszewski  
Khorat Plateau

The Thais in this area use the rivers' floodwaters to irrigate their fields. However, flooding in this region is generally unpredictable, even in the rainy season, which lasts from April to November. When it does occur, it is often abrupt and extensive because of the area's impermeable soils, and the water tends to be brackish. As regional deforestation and cultivation have increased, flooding has become increasingly problematic.<sup>21</sup>

### *Chao Phraya Valley*

Running north to south through the central plain, the valley surrounding the banks of the Chao Phraya River is Thailand's primary rice-producing region. Near the southern coast, the valley gives way to a broader delta region that empties the waters of the Chao Phraya into the Gulf. The many canals and waterways that intersect the delta are used to irrigate the surrounding fields and transport goods and people.<sup>22</sup>

In the central region's early history, the rich soils of the valley's fertile floodplain drew settlers there to farm. As early as the 12th century, several trading and rice-growing states

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<sup>18</sup> The Encyclopedia of Earth. United Nations Environment Programme-World Conservation Monitoring Centre (Content Partner). Mark McGinley (Topic Editor). "Thung Yai Naresuan Wildlife Sanctuary, Thailand." 2008. [http://www.eoearth.org/article/Thung\\_Yai\\_Naresuan\\_Wildlife\\_Sanctuary,\\_Thailand](http://www.eoearth.org/article/Thung_Yai_Naresuan_Wildlife_Sanctuary,_Thailand)

<sup>19</sup> Mongabay.com. Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. *Country Studies: Thailand*. "Geography: Regions." 1987.

[http://www.mongabay.com/reference/country\\_studies/thailand/GEOGRAPHY.html](http://www.mongabay.com/reference/country_studies/thailand/GEOGRAPHY.html)

<sup>20</sup> Encyclopædia Britannica. "Khorat Plateau." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9045338/Khorat-Plateau>

<sup>21</sup> Encyclopædia Britannica. "Thailand: Land: Drainage." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-52647/Thailand>

<sup>22</sup> Questia. The Columbia Encyclopedia. "Chao Phraya." c.2004. [http://www.questia.com/library/encyclopedia/chao\\_phraya.jsp](http://www.questia.com/library/encyclopedia/chao_phraya.jsp)

thrived in the upper valley. In the 14th century, the kingdom of Ayutthaya, initially located at the southern end of the region, began to extend its control throughout the river valley. The Ayutthaya heralded the advent of a series of kingdoms in the Chao Phraya Valley that grew as a result of their commerce with foreign nations, driven mainly by the valley's large-scale rice cultivation.<sup>23</sup>

### *Mangrove Forests and Swamps*<sup>24, 25</sup>

Thailand's mangrove forests and swamps are scattered throughout the southern coastal areas of the country, including the peninsular south. Mangroves grow profusely in both freshwater and saltwater areas and are able to withstand stressful environmental conditions such as exposure to mud containing high amounts of sulfur and no oxygen. They thrive on coastal dunes, seashores of rock and mud, and along the estuaries of rivers. They also grow densely in sheltered bays, where the water is rich in nutrients.



© Neil Banas  
Mangrove trees

Mangroves help to preserve the coastline, and they are integral to the local ecosystem. Their network of roots provide shrimp, fish, and crabs a place to feed and grow, and its forests serve as a resource or home to a variety of animals, including otters, civets, kingfishers, owls, and snakes. Much of the mangrove forest area in Thailand (and throughout Southeast Asia) has been cleared to make way for development and agriculture such as coastal fish and shrimp farms.

### **Rivers**<sup>26</sup>

The annual overflow of Thailand's rivers during the rainy season provides irrigation water for the many small farms that lie along the riverbanks. Most of the larger rivers drain into two major river systems, the Mekong and Chao Phraya. Together, they sustain the cultivation of wet rice and support the nation's agricultural economy. They are also essential means of transport for people and goods.

### *Mae Nam (River) Chao Phraya*<sup>27, 28</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Mongabay.com. Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. *Country Studies: Thailand*. "Geography: Regions." 1987. [http://www.mongabay.com/reference/country\\_studies/thailand/GEOGRAPHY.html](http://www.mongabay.com/reference/country_studies/thailand/GEOGRAPHY.html)

<sup>24</sup> UNEP Environment Assessment Programme – Asia-Pacific. "Thailand: Study Area." November 1997. <http://www.rrcap.unep.org/lc/cd/html/countryrep/thailand/studyarea.html>

<sup>25</sup> Network for Environmentally and Socially Sustainable Tourism (Thailand). "Mangroves & Mud Flats." 1997. <http://www.geocities.com/~nesst/mangrove.htm>

<sup>26</sup> Encyclopædia Britannica. "Thailand: Land: Drainage." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-52647/Thailand>

<sup>27</sup> MSN Encarta. "Chao Phraya." c.2007.

[http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia\\_761576921/chao\\_phraya.html](http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761576921/chao_phraya.html)

Running from north to south in the west-central part of the country, the Chao Phraya is the nation's main river. It begins in central Thailand at the intersection of three rivers: the Mae Nam Ping, Mae Nam Yom, and Mae Nam Nan. Only 365 km (227 mi) in length, the Chao Phraya irrigates the extensive rice fields spread throughout the surrounding valley, and, near the coast, it widens into a delta and empties into the Gulf of Thailand. Altogether, the Chao Phraya system drains approximately one third of Thailand's total land area. Kingdoms have arisen along its banks since the 12th century because of the substantial agricultural production harnessed from the rich floodplain.



© Vyacheslav Stepanyuchenko  
Chao Phraya

### *Mae Nam Ping*

The Mae Nam Ping is the westernmost of the main rivers that merge into the Chao Phraya. Beginning in the mountains of the north, the Mae Nam Ping receives water from its tributary, the Mae Nam Wang. It passes through the city of Chiang Mai and provides irrigation water to farms in the surrounding countryside. Flowing from north to south, it covers a total distance of 569 km (353 mi).<sup>29</sup> Much of the land that surrounds it is covered with hardwood forests, fertile rice fields, fruit orchards, and coffee and tea plantations.

### *Mae Nam Nan*

This river begins in the northern mountains near the Lao border. It flows southward from the Luang Phra Bang Range for a distance of 627 km (390 mi).<sup>30</sup> Just before it merges with the Chao Phraya River, it receives the waters of the Mae Nam Yom, which runs roughly parallel to it.

### *Mae Nam Yom*

The Mae Nam Yom also originates in the northern mountains, only a few miles west of the Mae Nam Nan. The Yom flows southward, tracing the same pattern as the Mae Nam Nan, and the two rivers eventually merge near the town of Chum Saeng. The combined rivers then meet the Mae Nam Ping, and at this point they all merge into the Chao Phraya, the large river that flows south into the Gulf of Thailand.

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<sup>28</sup> Mongabay.com. Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. Country Studies. "Thailand: Geography." 1987. [http://www.mongabay.com/reference/country\\_studies/thailand/GEOGRAPHY.html](http://www.mongabay.com/reference/country_studies/thailand/GEOGRAPHY.html)

<sup>29</sup> Welcome to Chiangmai and Chiangrai Magazine. "Mae Ping River: Lifeline of Chiangmai Province." c1995–2007. [http://www.chiangmai-chiangrai.com/mae\\_ping\\_river.html](http://www.chiangmai-chiangrai.com/mae_ping_river.html)

<sup>30</sup> Encyclopædia Britannica. "Nan River." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9054758/Nan-River>

### *Mae Nam Mun*

The Mae Nam Mun begins northeast of Bangkok in the Sam Kamphaeng Mountains. It drains the Khorat Plateau as it flows 673 km (418 mi) from west to east. Its principle tributary, the Chi River, joins the Mae Nam Mun west of the border with Laos. A short distance further to the east, the river becomes seasonally navigable. At the Laotian border, the combined waters of the Mae Nam Mun join with the Mekong River, which flows into Laos and Cambodia.<sup>31</sup>

### *Mekong River*<sup>32</sup>

Covering a distance of 4,350 km (2,700 mi), the Mekong River is the longest river in Southeast Asia and the 12th longest in the world. Originating in the Tibetan Plateau, the Mekong River flows through China and winds along the Burmese–Laotian border before crossing into Laos and forming much of the northeastern border of Thailand. The river is dotted with islands in many areas and contains numerous series of unnavigable rapids.



© Vyacheslav Stepanyuchenko  
Mekong River and Laos

Because the Mekong River constitutes much of the Thai–Laotian border, the two countries share the river’s resources in that area. Likewise, Thailand is a member of the Mekong River Commission, which grew out of the Mekong Committee established in 1957. In 1995, the MRC formed as a coalition dedicated to managing and developing the lower Mekong River. The MRC agreement was signed by four countries through which the Mekong River runs: Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia.<sup>33</sup> Together, these countries comprise roughly 75% of the Mekong’s drainage area (Thailand’s share is approximately 18%).<sup>34</sup>

### **Major Cities**

Thailand’s cities have grown rapidly in recent years. The largest by far is Bangkok, the country’s economic, administrative, and cultural center.

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<sup>31</sup> Encyclopædia Britannica. “Mun River.” 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9054261/Mun-River>

<sup>32</sup> Encyclopædia Britannica. “Mekong River.” 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9110537/Mekong-River>

<sup>33</sup> Mekong River Commission. “The Mekong River Commission.” 28 April 2008. <http://www.mrcmekong.org/>

<sup>34</sup> The Encyclopedia of Earth. Food and Agriculture Organization (Content source). Marty Matlock (Topic Editor). “Water Profile of Thailand.” 8 February 2007. [http://www.eoearth.org/article/Water\\_profile\\_of\\_Thailand](http://www.eoearth.org/article/Water_profile_of_Thailand)

*Bangkok*<sup>35, 36</sup>

Bangkok was founded in 1782 as the new capital city of Thailand (then known as Siam) after Burmese armies burned the old capital of Ayutthaya in 1767.<sup>37</sup> Prior to that time it had been a small village and a stopover port for ships heading up the Chao Phraya River to Ayutthaya. Today, Bangkok is still the country's capital and its largest city. Known as "Krung Thep" ("City of Angels") by the local population, Bangkok is one of Southeast Asia's largest commercial and transportation centers. The city was called the "Venice of the East" by Europeans, but its many canals have since been filled and turned into roadways.

In 1971, Bangkok's rapid growth led to its incorporation of Thon Buri, a town on the west bank of the river. The combined city assumed the name "Bangkok Metropolis," which refers to the city's greater metropolitan area that extends well over 32 km (20 mi) in all directions. The population of Bangkok and its suburbs is now around 10 million people.



© David Wilmot  
Bangkok, Thailand

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, thousands of Chinese migrated to Bangkok in search of jobs. As the immigrant population grew to outnumber the Thais, the city took on a Chinese character. Accordingly, ethnic Chinese dominated much of the city's commerce, and Teochiu, a Chinese dialect, was widely spoken and visible in street signs and advertisements. After World War II, the immigration ended abruptly and government policies ensured the rapid assimilation of the Chinese into the surrounding Thai culture. Today, the city's population is mainly Thai (including many Chinese who identify as Thais), with minority enclaves of Malays, Europeans, Indians, and Arabs. Both Thai and English are widely spoken in the city.

Largely due to overcrowding, the city suffers from chronic air pollution, traffic gridlock, and substandard public facilities. Housing infrastructure is limited, and thousands of people live in slums and informal housing units where city services are lacking entirely. An elevated monorail system (the "Skytrain") began operating in the downtown area in 1999, and a subway system opened in 2004 to offer service to the central part of the city.

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<sup>35</sup> Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, U.S. Department of State. "Background Note: Thailand." March 2008. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2814.htm>

<sup>36</sup> MSN Encarta Online Encyclopedia. "Bangkok." c.1993–2007. [http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia\\_761567953/Bangkok.html](http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761567953/Bangkok.html)

<sup>37</sup> Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, U.S. Department of State. "Background Note: Thailand." March 2008. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2814.htm>

### *Nakhon Ratchasima*<sup>38</sup>

The largest city in northeastern Thailand, Nakhon Ratchasima (or Khorat) is the regional center of government, transportation, and finance. It connects via railway to Bangkok and is a main hub in the area's roadway and airline network. Accordingly, the city functions as a distribution point for livestock, such as pigs and cattle, and agricultural products. Crops grown in the surrounding territory include corn, tobacco, rice, and silk.



In the 1960s and 1970s, Nakhon Ratchasima grew rapidly as the U.S. military used the city's newly expanded Royal Thai Air Force Base for its operations in the Vietnam War. The city is also home to the Northeastern Technical Institute and other schools of higher education. Nearby, a number of restored Khmer temples, originally built in the 11th century, are among northeastern Thailand's most popular tourist sites.

### *Chiang Mai*<sup>39</sup>

The city of Chiang Mai was the center of the early Thai kingdom of Lanna, located along the Ping River in the northern part of the country. In 1558, the Lanna kingdom fell to the Burmese. However, the identity of this kingdom and its civilization has endured through the centuries as it remained independent of Bangkok until the late 1800s. Today, the region around Chiang Mai is culturally distinct in many ways from the region to the south.<sup>40</sup>

Chiang Mai is northern Thailand's largest city and the nation's third largest metropolitan area after Bangkok and Nakhon Ratchasima. This city is the cultural, economic, and educational center not only of northern Thailand, but also of neighboring southeastern Burma. The city's educational institutions include Chiang Mai University and the Northern Technical Institute. The region also maintains cultural ties with Thailand's neighbor to the east, Laos.

The city contains many traditional structures, including ruins of temples and Buddha figures and relics that date to the 13th and 14th centuries. One of the most popular sites of pilgrimage in Thailand is the temple complex known as Wat Phra That Doi Suthep, located just outside Chiang Mai. Also, the Thai royal family keeps their summer home at nearby Phu Ping Palace.

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<sup>38</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica. "Nakhon Ratchasima." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9054720/Nakhon-Ratchasima>

<sup>39</sup> Britannica. "Chiang Mai." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9023959/Chiang-Mai>

<sup>40</sup> Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, U.S. Department of State. "Background Note: Thailand." March 2008. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2814.htm>

## *Ayutthaya*

The ancient city of Ayutthaya was the cultural, military, commercial, and political center of the Kingdom of Ayutthaya, one of the country's first empires. The kingdom emerged on the banks of the Chao Phraya River in 1350 C.E. and extended its control throughout the central river valley. Eventually, it ruled a large part of Southeast Asia. In 1767, Burmese armies invaded and razed the city. A new Thai dynasty founded Bangkok, the new capitol city, on the other side of the Chao Phraya River in 1782.<sup>41, 42</sup>

This once opulent and powerful royal city, which saw its libraries, museums, temples, and artistic treasures turned to ashes, now consists largely of historical ruins. A new, smaller town that caters to tourists has been built on the site, and many of the temples have been reconstructed. Three museums preserve much of the ancient city's remaining artifacts and art work. Ayutthaya lies 90 km (55 mi) north of Bangkok.<sup>43</sup>

## *Songkhla*

Located on the eastern shore of Thailand's southern peninsula, the port of Songkhla lies 720 km (447 mi) south of Bangkok. It was formerly known by its Malay name, Singora, and was an active trading center for Persians, Indians, and Arabs.<sup>44</sup> The resources of nearby Lake Songkhla, Thailand's largest inland lake, sustained a large population in earlier years. The lake's fish stocks, however, have been depleted from overfishing.<sup>45</sup>



© David Reid  
National Museum in Songkhla, Thailand

The port connects via highway to the city of Hat Yai, about 30 km (18 mi) to the southwest, and Nakhon Si Thammarat to the north.<sup>46</sup> Most of the port's commercial business is with Singapore and Malaysia, which are both located south of Thailand. The city's exports include tin, rubber, peanuts, coconuts, and seafood.

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<sup>41</sup> ThaiAir. Royal Orchid Holidays. Stephens, Harold. "Thailand's World Heritage Sites from Ancient City to Jungle Escapes (Part 2)."  
[http://www.thaiair.com/Royal\\_Orchid\\_Holidays/Roh\\_travel\\_feature/rohweekly-218tharticle-1.htm](http://www.thaiair.com/Royal_Orchid_Holidays/Roh_travel_feature/rohweekly-218tharticle-1.htm)

<sup>42</sup> Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, U.S. Department of State. "Background Note: Thailand." March 2008. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2814.htm>

<sup>43</sup> Encyclopædia Britannica. "Thailand: The Ayutthayan Period, 1351–1767." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-52675/Thailand>

<sup>44</sup> Tourism Mart. "Songkhla Information." c.2003–2008. [http://www.tourismmart.com/storefront/province\\_desc.asp?pvid=490&countryid=1](http://www.tourismmart.com/storefront/province_desc.asp?pvid=490&countryid=1)

<sup>45</sup> PlanetWare. "Songkhla, Thailand." c.1995–2008. <http://www.planetware.com/thailand/songkhla-tha-sos.htm>

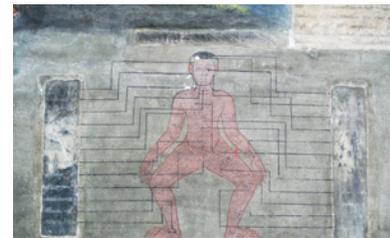
<sup>46</sup> Thai P&I Services International Ltd. "Songkhla Port." 2001. <http://www.tpni.co.th/content/songkla.htm>

## History<sup>47, 48, 49</sup>

### Early History

A few Paleolithic inhabitants may have lived in the area now known as Thailand as early as 20,000 years ago. It is known for certain that people have lived in the region for 10,000 years or more.<sup>50</sup> On the northeastern Khorat Plateau, evidence demonstrates that people were cultivating rice around the 4th millennium B.C.E. and forging bronze implements some centuries later. The Khmer and Mon people later entered the central plain and other areas of present-day Thailand. Their contact with the many peoples of South Asia contributed to the diverse ethnic and cultural history that helped shape Thailand's national identity.

In the first millennium C.E., the Tai people began migrating from their homeland in Nanchao, a state located in what is now China, into Southeast Asia. They eventually established a major independent kingdom, the Sukhothai, in central Thailand's Chao Phraya Valley in the 13th century. People living in the central plain adopted the Thai name to separate themselves from the Tai who were still living under foreign rule (at that time, the Cambodian Khmer Empire controlled much of the region). The new Kingdom of Sukhothai financed its operations by demanding tribute from the weaker states of Laos, Burma, and the Malay Peninsula. As they expanded the state, the Sukhothai rulers initiated diplomatic relations with China's Yuan Dynasty. In 1378, however, the kingdom's expansion had run its course; it was conquered and later absorbed by the rising Kingdom of Ayutthaya.



© Jordan Sitkin  
Ancient chart detailing pressure points

As the Sukhothai Kingdom grew, a northern kingdom established itself near the Burmese border. Known as Lanna (formally called Lan Na Thai), the kingdom built its capital at Chiang Mai. Although the Burmese controlled it intermittently, Chiang Mai (as the kingdom was often referred to) remained independent as late as the 19th century.

### *The Kingdom of Ayutthaya*

The city-state, Ayutthaya, emerged on the banks of the Chao Phraya River in the 14th century and soon extended its control throughout the central river valley. Ayutthaya was named after an Indian city that was home to the heroic character of Rama, as written in

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<sup>47</sup> Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. "Country Profile: Thailand." July 2007.

<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/profiles/Thailand.pdf>

<sup>48</sup> Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. *A Country Study: Thailand*. "Chapter 1: Historical Setting: The Bangkok Period, 1767–1932: The Chakri Dynasty." 1987.

<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/thtoc.html>

<sup>49</sup> The Thailand CIP (May 2008) is also a source for this chapter.

<sup>50</sup> *Thailand*, 10th Ed. "Facts about Thailand—History [p. 12]." 2003. Footscray, Victoria, Australia: Lonely Planet Publications.

the Hindu epic *Ramayana*. The rulers of Ayutthaya declared Theravada Buddhism as the kingdom's official religion in 1360, and they based their new legal code on a combination of Thai customs and Hindu law. One such Hindu tradition was the attribution of divine powers to the king, who allowed only members of royalty to look at his face. This tradition of "divine kingship" endured for centuries, and certain remnants of the custom still exist in the modern era.

After conquering the Khmer and incorporating the Sukhothai Kingdom, the Ayutthaya eventually controlled a large part of Southeast Asia. It established commercial relations or trade treaties with the Netherlands, Portugal, England, and Japan. Ayutthaya's downfall occurred in 1767, when Burmese armies invaded and burned the city to ruins.



© Vyacheslav Stepanyuchenko  
Wat Chaiwatthanaram, Ayyuthaya

### *Chakri Dynasty*

General Chakri (Rama I) was the first king of the Chakri Dynasty, which has endured to this day. After its establishment in 1782, the new kingdom claimed a Malay state and seized territory in Cambodia (it later joined the Vietnamese in establishing a protectorate over the Cambodian region). In 1826, the Chakri Kingdom signed a treaty with Britain that gave the Western nation limited trading concessions, and seven years later they signed a similar treaty with the United States. Expansion of the Chakri Dynasty ended by 1851.

King Mongkut (Rama IV) of the Chakri Dynasty oversaw the opening of the kingdom to the West, a process that was later continued by his son. During King Mongkut's reign (1851–1868), the government established treaties and cultural exchanges with Western nations and connected the Thai economy with that of the world. He also reformed religious practices and the kingdom's educational system. After Mongkut's death, his son Chulalongkorn (Rama V) became king and continued to modernize the country. He abolished slavery, established mandatory primary education, and centralized the state. Through political negotiations, Chulalongkorn also protected the kingdom's independence at a time when the surrounding nations were being colonized by Western powers.

### **Modern Era**

Thailand (then known as Siam) supported the Allied forces in World War I and, after the war, helped to establish the League of Nations. These actions increased its standing among the victorious Western powers. Thailand later became a member of SEATO (Southeast Asia Treaty Organization) and the United Nations.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> MSN Encarta. Wyatt, David K. "VII. History. D. Colonialism Averted." 2007.  
[http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia\\_761561385\\_10/thailand.html](http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761561385_10/thailand.html)

A group of officers and government officials influenced by Western ideas organized a coup in 1932 that brought constitutional rule to Siam. In 1933, parliamentary elections were held for the first time. The nationalist administration of Minister of Defense Phibun, who later became the prime minister, ensured that the military retained the upper hand over civilian rule. The Phibun administration also changed Siam's name to Thailand (Muang Thai, "Land of the Free") in 1939. It promoted nationalist, pro-Thai policies that heavily taxed Chinese businesses.<sup>52</sup>

When World War II broke out, the Phibun regime was somewhat pressured into allying itself with Japan, and it declared war on the U.S. and England in 1942. In a twist of circumstance, however, Thailand's ambassador opposed the Japanese and refused to deliver his own government's declaration of war. In response, the U.S. did not declare war against Thailand. Instead, it supported an anti-Japanese resistance movement that operated in Thailand throughout the war. Phibun was forced out of office in 1944. He became prime minister again in 1948; however, due to his militaristic, anti-communist stance during a time when China was coming under Communist rule and many feared its spread.

The Thai government again established itself as an official ally of the U.S. in the fight against perceived Communist threats, whether in Thailand, Korea, or Vietnam. During the Vietnam War, Thailand allowed the U.S. military to use some of its air force bases for war operations. Military rule and harsh police tactics, which often met with popular resistance from workers and students, continued even after a new constitution took effect in 1974. The military governed in intervals until 1992, and then again in 2006 after a period of parliamentary rule.<sup>53</sup>



DoD Photo  
US aircraft in Thailand during the Vietnam war

In 2007, the Thai government adopted a new constitution, and Buddhist nationalists applied pressure to the Constitution Drafting Assembly to establish Buddhism as the state religion. Their efforts failed, although their cause remains an issue, fueled by the struggle against the Islamist insurgency in the southern provinces.<sup>54</sup> The country remains a civilian-ruled democracy at present, and Samak Sundaravej is the new prime minister.

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<sup>52</sup> In later administrations, the anti-Chinese policies were reversed. Policies were developed to incorporate the ethnic Chinese into Thai culture, an assimilation process that has been quite successful.

<sup>53</sup> BBC News. "Country Profile: Thailand." 28 February 2008. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/country\\_profiles/1237845.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/country_profiles/1237845.stm)

<sup>54</sup> International Herald Tribune. Mydans, Seth. "Thailand Set to Make Buddhism the State Religion." 24 May 2007. <http://www.iht.com/articles/2007/05/24/africa/thai.php>

## Recent Events: Southern Insurgency<sup>55, 56</sup>

The current Islamist insurgency in Thailand has its roots in events that took place at the turn of the 20th century. In 1902, the government of Siam annexed the semi-independent Malay Kingdom of Pattani, which included the southern provinces of Pattani, Songkhla, Narathiwat, and Yala. The residents in this area had practiced Islam since the mid 13th century. Because of religious and cultural differences, the 1902 annexation met with considerable resistance. One of the opposition leaders was Haji Sulong, head of the Pattani Provincial Islamic Council. In 1947, he organized a campaign that petitioned for independence, reinstatement of Islamic law, and language rights. In response, the Thai military government imprisoned him and other Pattani leaders for treason. After Haji Sulong's release from prison, both he and his son disappeared in 1954. Through his disappearance and assumed murder, he became a symbol of resistance for the Malay Muslim opposition movement, which remained active to various degrees in the decades that followed.



© Jordan Sitkin  
The coup of 2006

In the 1980s, the insurgency was largely quiet, but in recent years it has become more active. In 2003, the Thai government broke up a militant cell in the southern peninsular region after it discovered its plans to bomb foreign embassies in Thailand. Violence has escalated at the hands of separatist insurgents who resent the Thai Buddhist government's control over their territory. After the Thai government acknowledged in 2004 that an organized insurgency operated in the area, it declared martial law in the region. Since then, efforts to quell the insurgency have been ongoing, and over 2,800 people (approx.) have been killed.<sup>57</sup>

## Economy<sup>58, 59</sup>

Until the 1960s, the Thai economy was primarily agricultural. Farmers grew rice, maize, sugar cane, and other crops, and the country's access to marine resources allowed for a rich harvest of seafood. The substantial agricultural sector provided a foundation for the country's move toward industrialization. In the 1960s, the nation's initial manufacturing

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<sup>55</sup> BBC News. "Thailand's Restive South." 15 July 2005. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/3955543.stm>

<sup>56</sup> Human Rights Watch. "A Brief History of Insurgency in the Southern Border Provinces." August 2007. <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2007/thailand0807/3.htm>

<sup>57</sup> Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australian Government. Smartraveller.gov.au. "Travel Advice: Thailand." 6 May 2008. <http://www.smartraveller.gov.au/zw-cgi/view/Advice/Thailand>

<sup>58</sup> The World Bank. "Thailand: Country Brief." c.2008. [http://www.worldbank.or.th/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/EASTASIAPACIFICEXT/THAILAND\\_EXTN/0,,contentMDK:20205569~menuPK:333304~pagePK:1497618~piPK:217854~theSitePK:333296,0.html](http://www.worldbank.or.th/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/EASTASIAPACIFICEXT/THAILAND_EXTN/0,,contentMDK:20205569~menuPK:333304~pagePK:1497618~piPK:217854~theSitePK:333296,0.html)

<sup>59</sup> The Encyclopedia of Nations. National Economies Encyclopedia. "Thailand: Overview of Economy." c.2007. <http://www.nationsencyclopedia.com/economies/Asia-and-the-Pacific/Thailand-OVERVIEW-OF-ECONOMY.html>

efforts were successful, most notably in the food processing industry. The channeling of agricultural resources into the manufacturing sector led to increased development and the pronounced growth of the export sector.

Thailand further developed its industrial base by diversifying its economy and utilizing its large, cheap labor pool. The country received substantial foreign investment from China, Japan, and Korea. Another major contributor, the U.S., built the infrastructure, and helped fund the Thai police and military between 1951 and 1957. China's communist government had recently been established in 1949, and much of the U.S. funding was designed to stop communism from spreading beyond China's borders. The massive economic assistance that the U.S. provided to the Thai government fueled Thailand's booming industrial economy until the 1990s.<sup>60</sup>



© Adrian Whelan  
Rice paddies

Growing at a rate of 8–9% per year, Thailand's economy in the decade leading up to 1995 was one of the fastest-growing economies in the world.<sup>61</sup> However, in 1997, the Asian Financial Crisis (also called the East Asian Currency Crisis) broke out in Thailand. Sparked initially by Thailand's excessive foreign debt and the collapse of Thai currency (the *baht*), stock and currency devaluations quickly spread throughout Japan and Southeast Asia. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) intervened to stabilize the financial markets of Thailand, Korea, and Indonesia (the three countries that were most affected by the crisis), and by 1999, Thailand began to recover.<sup>62</sup>

As it restructured its agricultural and industrial sectors in an effort to boost productivity, the country saw its economy begin to turn around. The IMF funds were useful in reforming the financial sector to make its processes more transparent and accountable. Between 2002 and 2006, the country's economic growth averaged around 5.6%.<sup>63</sup> In 2007, it grew by 4.5%.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Encyclopædia Britannica. "Thailand: History: The Postwar Crisis and the Return of Phibun." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-52683/Thailand>

<sup>61</sup> The World Bank. "Thailand: Country Brief." c.2008. [http://www.worldbank.or.th/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/EASTASIAPACIFICEXT/THAILAND\\_EXTN/0,,contentMDK:20205569~menuPK:333304~pagePK:1497618~piPK:217854~theSitePK:333296,00.html](http://www.worldbank.or.th/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/EASTASIAPACIFICEXT/THAILAND_EXTN/0,,contentMDK:20205569~menuPK:333304~pagePK:1497618~piPK:217854~theSitePK:333296,00.html)

<sup>62</sup> International Monetary Fund. "The IMF's Response to the Asian Crisis." January 1999. <http://www.imf.org/external/np/exr/facts/asia.htm>

<sup>63</sup> The World Bank. "Thailand: Country Brief." c.2008. [http://www.worldbank.or.th/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/EASTASIAPACIFICEXT/THAILAND\\_EXTN/0,,contentMDK:20205569~menuPK:333304~pagePK:1497618~piPK:217854~theSitePK:333296,00.html](http://www.worldbank.or.th/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/EASTASIAPACIFICEXT/THAILAND_EXTN/0,,contentMDK:20205569~menuPK:333304~pagePK:1497618~piPK:217854~theSitePK:333296,00.html)

<sup>64</sup> CIA World Factbook. "Thailand." 15 April 2008. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/th.html>

## Exports and Imports<sup>65, 66</sup>

Thailand's total export revenues for 2006 reached USD 152.1 billion. Its leading export commodities include computers and integrated circuits, electrical appliances, automobiles, textiles and garments, rice, and fishery products, especially frozen shrimp. Its main export trading partners in 2005 were the U.S. (15.4%), Japan (13.6%), and China (8.3%), as well as Singapore, Hong Kong, and Malaysia.



© ibroodnow / Flickr.com  
Computers for sale in an outdoor market

Thailand imported goods worth USD 145.5 billion in 2006, only slightly less than its exports for that year. Major imports include raw materials, capital goods (which are used to assemble products such as machinery for manufacturing), consumer products, and petroleum imports. The country's main import partners for 2005 were Japan (22%), China (9.4%), U.S. (7.4%), and Malaysia (6.8%).

## Tourism<sup>67</sup>

Since the 1960s, Thailand has been one of Asia's premier tourist sites. It was not until the 1980s, however, that the Thai government began developing this sector. In subsequent years, tourism became Thailand's largest source of foreign income. The number of tourists dropped significantly following the devastating tsunami of 2004, but the industry had mostly recovered by 2007.<sup>68</sup>



© travellingzenwolf / Flickr.com  
Nightlife in Patong

Thailand's illegal sex trade developed peripherally to the tourist trade, and it played a significant role in the industry's growth from the 1960s to the late 20th century. By 2000, however, the sex trade began to decline as a result of the extremely high incidence rate of HIV in Thailand.

In the year 2007, the number of tourists from East Asia declined due to Thailand's most recent military coup, in 2006. The influx of large numbers of tourists from the Middle East, Europe, and South Asia, however, helped offset the decline in East Asian visitors.<sup>69</sup> In recent years, the country has actively promoted a campaign to attract more tourists by creating focused areas of interest such as eco-tourism.

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<sup>65</sup> Energy Information Administration. "Thailand: Profile." April 2007.

<http://www.eia.doe.gov/cabs/Thailand/Profile.html>

<sup>66</sup> The May 2008 Thailand CIP is a source for non-statistical information in this section of the document.

<sup>67</sup> Encyclopædia Britannica. "Thailand: Economy: Services." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-274217/Thailand>

<sup>68</sup> CIA World Factbook. "Thailand." 15 April 2008. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/th.html>

<sup>69</sup> The Bangkok Post. Bangkok Post Economic Review Year-End 2007. Theparat, Chatrudee. "Filling in for Absent Asians." 2008. <http://www.bangkokpost.com/economicyearend2007/tourism.html>

## Energy<sup>70, 71</sup>

Thailand's domestic production of oil is limited, as are its reserves. Accordingly, it imports a substantial percentage of the oil needed to meet the country's needs. The nation's natural gas reserves are far more substantial, but are still insufficient. Although domestic production has been rising, Thailand imports natural gas, mostly from Burma, to supplement its supply. Thailand's domestic natural gas fields are located almost exclusively in the Gulf of Thailand.



© Shane Bartley  
Gas station in Thailand

## Ethnic Groups

One way of defining the ethnicity of the Thai people is through their language. During King Narai's reign in the 17th century, the Central Thai dialect, also known as Ayutthaya Thai, was established as the standard language. The Kingdom maintained a separate court language, but Central Thai was used for business transactions as well as official and academic use. The Pali language was used for religious ceremonies, but eventually it also was replaced by Central Thai, which borrowed words from Pali, Sanskrit, and Khmer. The Central Thai dialect came to define Thai ethnicity and identity.



© Steve Evans  
Woman of the Lahu hill tribe

In Thailand's northern mountains, hill tribes of various ethnicities and linguistic backgrounds have established their own distinct cultures. Most of them migrated to the region in the 19th and 20th centuries from countries such as China and Tibet. More recently, groups such as the Hmong and the Mien fled to the area from Laos. Many of them left their countries of origin to escape political turmoil or poverty and to find available land. In past decades, the hill tribes were primarily associated with the illegal opium production in the area. However, the government has since organized crop substitution programs, and many of the economic activities in this region have entered the legal market.<sup>72</sup>

### *Thai*

Because of the country's history of ethnic diversity and the Thai government's active promotion of assimilation, it is difficult, if not impossible, to identify the Thai community as a distinct and homogenous ethnicity. It is known that the Central Thai population, who

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<sup>70</sup> Energy Information Administration. "Thailand: Background." April 2007. <http://www.eia.doe.gov/cabs/Thailand/Background.html>

<sup>71</sup> Energy Information Administration. "Thailand: Natural Gas." April 2007. <http://www.eia.doe.gov/cabs/Thailand/NaturalGas.html>

<sup>72</sup> Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. *Country Studies: Thailand*. "Society: The Highland, or Hill, Peoples." 1987. <http://countrystudies.us/thailand/44.htm>

descended from the earlier Chao Phraya floodplain kingdoms, dominated the country politically, socially, and linguistically. Thais were defined as people who were born in Thailand and who used the dialect of Standard Thai as their first language. The majority of Thais, however, either were not born in the central area or they lacked records detailing their ethnic background. As education, migration, and communication became more widespread, both language and origin became less defining factors.<sup>73</sup>

The Thai people today consist of the Central Thai, the Northern Thai, the Southern Thai, and the Northeastern Thai (also known as the “Thai-Lao,” who are also predominant in Laos). All of these groups speak regional dialects found in the Tai language family. From their origins in southern China, these people migrated throughout a large swath of Southeast Asia from Vietnam to Burma. Because of the mobility of the population in Thailand today, regional distinctions among the Thai are often difficult to determine.<sup>74</sup>

### *Khmer*

The Khmer live mostly in eastern Thailand. Many of them are refugees from Cambodia’s Pol Pot regime, which was overthrown by the Vietnamese in 1979. Others have lived in Thailand for centuries. By the mid 1400s, the Ayutthaya kingdom controlled the Khmer Empire’s western area, and many of the Khmer people stayed in the region after it fell under Thai rule. There were 600,000–800,000 Khmer in Thailand during the mid 1980s. Many have assimilated into Thai culture.<sup>75</sup>

### *Karen*<sup>76</sup>

Most members of this ethnic group live in Burma. However, in Thailand, they form the largest ethnic cluster among the northern hill tribes, and they can also be found in the plains and the western mountains that extend as far south as the Thai peninsula. In the mountains, they live in houses made of bamboo that are raised above the ground on stilts. They raise chickens, buffalo, and pigs, which they typically shelter under their houses.

The economic practices of the Karen are mixed, though they typically work in agriculture, and their culture is quite distinct from that of the Thais. The women are famous for the unique clothing that they weave from brightly colored cloth, most often of red and blue hues. The men construct and sell a variety of craft items. The Karen predominantly practice animism, the worship of nature



© Steve Evans  
Woman of the Karen hill tribe

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<sup>73</sup> Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. *Country Studies: Thailand*. “Society: Ethnicity, Regionalism and Language.” 1987. <http://countrystudies.us/thailand/41.htm>

<sup>74</sup> Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. *Country Studies: Thailand*. “Society: The Thai and Other Tai-Speaking People.” 1987. <http://countrystudies.us/thailand/42.htm>

<sup>75</sup> Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. *Country Studies Thailand*. “Society: The Khmer.” 1987. <http://countrystudies.us/thailand/45.htm>

<sup>76</sup> Thailand Online. Thailand Publications. “The Hill Tribes of Thailand: Karen.” c.1996–2004. <http://www.thailine.com/thailand/english/hill-e/karen-e.htm>

and associated spirits, although many of them have been converted to Christianity by missionaries.

### *Malays*

The Malays are Muslims who speak Jawi, a local variant of Malay, and they live predominantly in the southern Thai peninsula. Before Thailand annexed this region in 1902, Muslim sultanates operated independently in the area. Since then, the Thai government has centralized the administration and attempted to assimilate the Malay population, at times resorting to measures such as asserting control over their educational system. Their attempts to replace the Malay system of Islamic education with a compulsory Thai educational system have been strongly opposed. In general, the Malays have rebelled against what they perceive as indifference to their regional economy and unique way of life. They identify with their religion, Islam, and its corresponding legal code. Resistance to Thai rule by a fraction of the Malays has led to a sustained insurgency against the Thai government.<sup>77</sup>

### *Chinese*<sup>78</sup>

The Chinese, who have a history of forming business alliances and commercial networks in Southeast Asia, have largely assimilated into Thai culture. They form the largest non-indigenous ethnic group in Thailand, and their integration into Thai society has been an ongoing and successful process. In the 1970s, Thailand established diplomatic relations with China, and it offered its ethnic Chinese residents (including those who had not been born in Thailand) the choice of becoming Thai citizens. Thus, many ethnic Chinese identify as Thai, both culturally and for census purposes. Accordingly, they commonly speak both Thai and Chinese.



© Mathieu Fortin  
Chinese cemetery in Kanchanaburi

The Chinese have historically been employed as middlemen between large growers and business and finance suppliers. Often they have owned or managed small businesses or have worked as laborers. In the southern peninsular region, many Chinese have held jobs on rubber plantations or in tin mines.

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<sup>77</sup> Human Rights Watch. "A Brief History of Insurgency in the Southern Border Provinces." August 2007. <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2007/thailand0807/3.htm>

<sup>78</sup> Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. *Country Studies: Thailand*. "Society: The Chinese." 1987. <http://countrystudies.us/thailand/48.htm>

# Religion

## Overview

After its founding in the 6th century B.C.E., Buddhism remained undifferentiated for many years before eventually developing two main streams, Mahayana and Theravada. In the 3rd century B.C.E., Theravada Buddhism gained prominence in Sri Lanka and gradually spread throughout southern Asia. Mahayana emerged between the 1st century B.C.E. and the 1st century C.E. Its influence grew in central and northern Asia and spread to such countries as Japan, China, Tibet, and Korea. Although both branches of Buddhism are similar in basic beliefs, Theravada focuses more strictly on scripture, and, thus, it tends to be more monastic and less expansive than Mahayana. For those practicing Theravada Buddhism, the authoritative textual source is the *Pali Canon*, a collection of the early Indian records of the Buddha's teachings from his first monastic community.<sup>79, 80</sup>



© Carl Parkes  
Young Thai monks

In Thailand, Theravada Buddhism is the predominant religion; 95% of the population practices its teachings. Of the remaining populace, approximately 4–5% identify themselves as Muslim (mostly as Sunnis), and 1% or less belong to Christian, Hindu, Brahmin, Taoist, or other faiths. Among members of the hill tribes, animism, the belief that living spirits inhabit all of nature, and Christianity are both widespread. While Christian missionaries have actively promoted their religion in Thailand since the 16th century, they have, of late, achieved greater success among the hill tribes than among the larger population of Thais. Nonetheless, members of the hill tribes also practice Buddhism and Taoism, the latter originating in China.<sup>81, 82</sup>

## Religious Background<sup>83</sup>

Buddhism came to Thailand through Sri Lanka during the 6th century C.E. In the 13th century, the Thai kingdom of Sukhothai instituted Theravada Buddhism as the state religion. By this time, Islam was also an established religion, predominately in the southern Thai peninsula. Islamic influence extended north to Tambralinga, one of the

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<sup>79</sup> BuddhaSasana. Ven. Dr. W. Rahula. "Theravada – Mahayana Buddhism." 1996. <http://zencomp.com/greatwisdom/ebud/ebdha125.htm>

<sup>80</sup> Religion Facts. "Differences between Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism." c2004–2008. [http://www.religionfacts.com/buddhism/fastfacts/differences\\_theravada\\_mahayana.htm](http://www.religionfacts.com/buddhism/fastfacts/differences_theravada_mahayana.htm)

<sup>81</sup> Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, U.S. Department of State. "Background Note: Thailand." March 2008. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2814.htm>

<sup>82</sup> Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, U.S. Department of State. "Thailand. International Religious Freedom Report 2007." 14 September 2007. <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2007/90155.htm>

<sup>83</sup> Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. *A Country Study: Thailand*. "Chapter 2: The Society and Its Environment. Religion - Historical Background." September 1987. <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/thtoc.html>

strongest Malay city-states in the 10th century due to its control over the portage routes that crossed the Isthmus. Whereas the local region surrounding Tambralinga (located near the present-day city of Nakhon Si Thammarat) generally accepted Buddhism, the Malay city-states to its south adopted Islam.

By the 1400s, a religious boundary was in place, dividing Islamic Malaya<sup>84</sup> from the rest of Thailand, which, like most of mainland Southeast Asia, was predominately Buddhist. (Theravada Buddhism is practiced widely in Laos, Burma, Cambodia, and Sri Lanka). The separation between the two areas corresponded to their pre-existing cultural disparities; and the people of the peninsular Malay states, conquered by the Thai in the 13th century, shared a different ethnic origin, language, and religion. Thus, although their territory officially belonged to the kingdom of Thailand, the Malay people did not assimilate into mainstream Thai society.



© ... Buddhamountain / Flickr.com  
Buddha at Wat Phra Doi Suthep

As Buddhism developed in Thailand (previously known to outsiders as Siam), it took on elements of indigenous beliefs, such as animism. Such fusion is common and can be seen in northern Thailand today, where locals construct small “spirit houses” in order to distract harmful spirits from causing injury to people who live in the area.<sup>85</sup> In addition to the animist influence prevalent in the north, other regional variations of Buddhist traditions and rites appeared as the religion grew. For example, it became common practice in northeastern Thailand for locals to choose priests that they revered and wished to honor. This practice contrasted with that of central Thailand, where the king made such decisions.<sup>86</sup>

## Buddhism

Siddhartha Gautama Sakyamuni, later called “the Buddha,” founded Buddhism in the 6th century B.C.E. Born in India in 560 B.C.E., Siddhartha was a prince who gave up his family and his life of luxury to pursue enlightenment. He followed an ascetic path for many years and eventually arrived at what he believed to be an awareness of the cause of suffering. Siddhartha subsequently developed a way to overcome suffering, and he dedicated the rest of his life to spreading this knowledge to others.<sup>87</sup>



© Swamibu / Flickr.com  
Monk taking tiger for a walk at Tiger Temple

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<sup>84</sup> Peninsular Malaysia was called “Malaya” prior to 1963. Source: JFQ. Jay Gordon Simpson. “Not By Bombs Alone: Lessons from Malaya [p. 92.]” 1999. [http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jel/jfq\\_pubs/1622.pdf](http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jel/jfq_pubs/1622.pdf)

<sup>85</sup> Asiatours.net. “Buddhist Religion in Thailand.” No date. <http://asiatours.net/thailand/info/buddhism.html>

<sup>86</sup> Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. *A Country Study: Thailand*. “Chapter 2: The Society and Its Environment. “Religion.” 1987. <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/thtoc.html>

<sup>87</sup> Amazing Thailand. “Thai Religions.” c1997-2008. <http://www.amazing-thailand.com/Relig.html>

Buddhist doctrine focuses upon humankind, rather than the worship of a god or gods. Its central premise is that humans can escape from the pain experienced in life by ending their worldly attachments. The ultimate goal is enlightenment, known as *nirvana* (or *nibbana* according to Theravada texts). Enlightenment, or bliss, is a state of mind that transcends all desire and, therefore, ends any sense of suffering.<sup>88</sup>

The Buddha taught that people should avoid extremes in their lives, including extremes in austerity as well as in pleasure. This adherence to moderation is, for the Buddhist, the Middle Way, a method of staying unattached from strong passions while keeping the mind and body healthy and attentive. To follow this path, one requires an understanding of the Four Noble Truths, which define desire as the cause of all suffering. Such knowledge, according to Buddhist doctrine, offers its practitioners the ability to bring about their own salvation.

The first of the Four Noble Truths is the awareness that suffering permeates existence. Suffering is present not only in feelings of despair and sorrow, but also in birth, death, old age, and illness. These forms of distress cannot be avoided, but the common source of suffering can be eliminated. The Second Noble Truth defines suffering's cause: attachment, greed, and desire. By desiring wealth, power, status, beauty, or even rebirth, people attach themselves to suffering, for these things can never be secured or permanently attained. The Third Noble Truth teaches that through our own rightful efforts, we can be free of cravings and, therefore, free of suffering. In Buddhist practice, one does not need gods or priestly intermediaries for direction or salvation.

The Fourth Noble Truth outlines the specific steps that people must take to end their suffering. Called the Eightfold Path, this route is accessible only through an individual's dedicated effort. The Eightfold Path consists of the following ethical-moral choices: Right View, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort (regarding the content of one's mind), Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. One accomplishes the final three steps through sustained meditation.<sup>89, 90</sup>

## Islam

In Thailand, Islam is primarily found in the provinces on the southern peninsula. In the surrounding region, it is the predominant religion in Malaysia (located just south of Thailand) and Indonesia. Islam is the world's second largest religion, with over one billion followers worldwide. Those who profess Islam are members of the *Umma*, the religion's community of believers throughout the world.



© Paulo Heleno  
Smiling Thai muslim women

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<sup>88</sup> Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. *A Country Study: Thailand*. "Chapter 2: The Society and Its Environment. Historical Background." September 1987. <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/thtoc.html>

<sup>89</sup> Shippensburg University. Dr. C. George Boeree. "The Basics of Buddhist Wisdom." No date. <http://webpace.ship.edu/cgboer/buddhawise.html>

<sup>90</sup> Asiatours.net. "Buddhist Religion in Thailand." No date. <http://asiatours.net/thailand/info/buddhism.html>

Islam was founded by the Arab Prophet Muhammad in the 7th century CE. Within a century, it spread throughout North Africa, the Iberian Peninsula, and parts of Asia. Today, approximately half of the world's Muslim population is found in southern and Southeast Asia.<sup>91</sup>

After the Prophet's death in 632 C.E., the Islamic religion split into two divisions based on differing ideas concerning the selection process for leaders of the Muslim community. Muhammad's followers looked outside Muhammad's family and chose his friend, Abu Bakr, to be the first *caliph*, or presider over the period of 'God on earth' (the first caliphate).<sup>92</sup> The question of rightful succession came up in 656 when Muslims chose Ali, the Prophet's cousin, as the fourth *caliph*. Disagreement over whether religious leaders should be of the Prophet's lineage or independent of it, followed and led to war. Shi'a Muslims, who follow a hierarchical order, believed that successors to Muhammad should be related to him through lineage. Sunnis, who now comprise more than 90% of the *Umma*, believed such leaders should be chosen through an election or selection process. Sunni religious practice typically has little or no hierarchical leadership.

Both Sunni and Shi'a Muslims believe that the Holy Quran (Koran) contains the words revealed by Allah (God) to the Prophet Muhammad.<sup>93</sup> They believe in living one's life in accordance with the laws of Allah, as set forth in the Quran. To accomplish this, practitioners must follow the Five Pillars of Faith. These include affirming one's faith, observing daily prayer, giving alms to charities, fasting during Ramadan, and going on pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca during one's lifetime. The Islamic religion encourages Muslims to lead lives that reflect the qualities of honesty, mercy, kindness, and courage.

### **The Role of Religion in the Thai Government**

Although the Thai government is known for its tolerance toward other religions, it is, in practice, a Buddhist nation, and has considered officially adopting Buddhism as the state religion. Thailand requires its king to be a Buddhist, and the country's religious identity and rituals have effectively been Buddhist for many years. Still, in the modern era, the nation and the constitution have always



© David Reid  
Mosque in southern Thailand

been secular. This issue recently came to the fore when the country adopted a new constitution in August 2007. During the buildup to the constitution's ratification, the leaders of the military coup in power came under great pressure from Buddhist nationalists to institute Buddhism as the state religion. Although the Constitution Drafting Assembly did not give in to such demands, the nationalists have continued to pressure the

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<sup>91</sup> Fluehr-Lobban, Carolyn. *Islamic Societies in Practice*. [p. 148.] 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. 2004. Gainesville: University Press of Florida.

<sup>92</sup> Fluehr-Lobban, Carolyn. *Islamic Societies in Practice*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. 2004. Gainesville: University Press of Florida.

<sup>93</sup> The Quran is distinct from the *hadith*, which are the sayings of Muhammad.

government. They are, in part, motivated by the Islamic insurgency in the southern peninsula, which has targeted Buddhist monks and burned their temples. However, many Thais remain opposed to instituting Buddhism as the state religion because they see it as a divisive act that could inflame the Muslim insurgency.<sup>94, 95</sup>

Historically, the Buddhist-leaning Thai government has acknowledged and supported the practice of other religions, most notably Islam. For example, the government provided the funds for a translation of the Quran into the Thai language, and, in the legal realm, it has made concessions to Islamic law (in the areas of inheritance and matrimony) in the southern provinces. Furthermore, the government often supplies funding for the construction or restoration of Islamic mosques, and in areas where the population is predominately Muslim, the government allows many Muslim civil servants to take time off for Friday prayers. Finally, as a gesture of respect, the king, or a representative that he appoints, presides over the yearly commemoration of the Prophet Muhammad’s birthday.<sup>96</sup>

### **Influence of Religion on Daily Life**

Thais are devout practitioners of their respective religions, whether they belong to the Buddhist majority or the much smaller, yet substantial, Muslim population. Among the country’s Buddhists, there are differences in practice due to regional traditions and influences. Many are evangelical, fundamentalist, and conservative, and others advocate addressing social ills such as environmental degradation and poverty.

#### **Exchange 1: When do you pray?**

<b>Soldier:</b>	When do you pray?	kun suad mon mua rai
<b>Local:</b>	We pray at noon.	rao suad mon tawn pai wad rue gawn nawn krab

Thais generally practice Buddhism in a highly syncretic way, meaning they fuse the religion with aspects of other belief systems and rituals. For example, Buddhist ceremonies often include elements of ancestor worship or animist practices involving the worship of natural phenomena. Although few Hindus live in Thailand, it is



© Steve Evans  
Man praying in Buddhist temple

<sup>94</sup> FrontPageMag.com. Bandow, Doug. “A Buddhist Threat to Religious Freedom.” 10 September 2007. <http://frontpagemagazine.com/Articles/Read.aspx?GUID=88ABCC69-30DE-4A01-AC51-2F862E56AD45>

<sup>95</sup> International Herald Tribune. Mydans, Seth. “Thailand Set to Make Buddhism the State Religion.” 24 May 2007. <http://www.iht.com/articles/2007/05/24/africa/thai.php>

<sup>96</sup> Religions in Thailand. “Muslims.” 23 July 1996. <http://www.mahidol.ac.th/thailand/religions/muslims.html>

not uncommon to find reflections of Hindu religious dogma present in Thai Buddhist ceremonies. For instance, Brahmin (Hindu) priests oversee the complex and sophisticated rites performed by the Thai monarchy. Also, shrines dedicated to Brahma and other Hindu deities can be found throughout Thailand, and many Thais invoke the aid of these Hindu gods. Finally, Christian and Taoist influences can also be found in certain Thai Buddhist practices.<sup>97</sup>

Thai Buddhist rituals often include certain communal elements associated with agrarian society. In rural areas, especially, it is common practice for laypeople to offer gifts of clothing, food, medicine, and shelter to Buddhist monks. In doing so, they gain merit (*bun*) for their next incarnation, or rebirth. People throughout the country donate gifts to religious temples for this purpose. Another tradition calls for young men over 21 to offer their service as monks during the 3-month period of Buddhist Lent (*phansa*). Again, this practice is more common in rural, agricultural areas. When performed in urban areas, the young man's period of service in the monastery may be much shorter than three months.<sup>98</sup> The Thai government encourages this practice by allowing civil servants to retain full pay for up to three months of service in a monastery.<sup>99</sup>



© Tager808 / Flickr.com  
Monks celebrating Vien Tien

Thais consider all Buddhist religious statues and images to be sacred, and, accordingly, they honor and care for such items with great concern and respect. In a case of disrespectful behavior by visitors, Thais will not hesitate to convey their protective attitude toward such images, regardless of their condition. Any acts interpreted as sacrilegious against religious statues or images of the Buddha are subject to severe punishment, including imprisonment. Disrespectful actions against monks are also considered highly offensive.<sup>100</sup>

### **Religious Events and Holidays** <sup>101</sup>

Thai society celebrates numerous Buddhist festivals and other elaborate rituals throughout the year. The government designates many of them as public holidays, requiring government offices, banks, post offices, and airlines to close in observance. A few of the more notable Buddhist festivals include:

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<sup>97</sup> Encyclopaedia Britannica. "Thailand Religion." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-52654/Thailand>

<sup>98</sup> Encyclopaedia Britannica. "Thailand Religion." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-52654/Thailand>

<sup>99</sup> Marimari.com. "Religion." c1999–2004. [http://www.marimari.com/content/thailand/general\\_info/religion/religion.html](http://www.marimari.com/content/thailand/general_info/religion/religion.html)

<sup>100</sup> Asiatours.net. "Buddhist Religion in Thailand." No date. <http://asiatours.net/thailand/info/buddhism.html>

<sup>101</sup> Marimari.com. "Events & Festivals 2001." c1999–2004. [http://www.marimari.com/content/thailand/events\\_festivals/january.html](http://www.marimari.com/content/thailand/events_festivals/january.html)

### *Phra That Phanom Homage-Paying Fair*

This event, held in January and lasting seven days, honors one of the Buddha's relics known as the *Phra That Phanom*. Accordingly, thousands of Buddhists attend the festival in order to express their devotion to Buddha.

### *Magha Puja*

This Buddhist holy day and public holiday celebrates a spontaneous gathering of 1,250 Buddhist disciples who joined each other to hear the Buddha preach. Held in March, the holiday offers Buddhists an opportunity to gain merit by attending a variety of ceremonies. Religious activities associated with the holiday take place in temples across the country.



© Dallas Ewing  
Visakha Puja celebrations

### *Visakha Puja*

*Visakha Puja* is the most sacred of all Buddhist events. Celebrated annually in May, the holiday commemorates Buddha's birth, enlightenment, life, and death. Worshippers throughout the country attend sermons at their local temples, and, in the evening, they hold candlelight services and processions.

### *Tak Bat Dok Mai Merit-Making Festival*

When Buddhist Lent begins, monks confine themselves to their temples for a long period of study and meditation. The *Tak Bat Dok Mai* festival marks the beginning of this cycle. Worshippers offer gifts of incense and flowers to processions of monks, who later take the offerings to Lord Buddha at the Shrine of the Holy Footprint located in Saraburi at the Wat Phra Buddha Bat.

### *Asalha Puja*

Held on the first full moon of the 8th lunar month, this holiday commemorates the Buddha's first sermon after his enlightenment over 2,500 years ago. *Asalha Puja* is a public holiday as well as a religious observance. Participants hold candlelight processions in temples throughout Thailand.



© Hartfried Schmid  
Candles lit in celebration

### *Khao Phansa – Buddhist Lent*

This public holiday closely follows *Tak Bat Dok Mai Merit-Making Festival* and *Asalha Puja*. It marks the first day of Buddhist Lent and the annual Rains Retreat lasting three months. During this time, Buddhist monks practice intense study and meditation inside their temples. Their activity symbolizes a renewal of spiritual life.

## *Chak Phra and Thot Phapa Festival*

Both of these holidays mark the end of Buddhist Lent. For *Thot Phapa*, locals donate money to temples and give new saffron robes to monks (in Thailand, the traditional dress for monks is saffron colored robes). In honor of *Chak Phra*, participants celebrate sacred images of the Buddha with processions of decorated crafts held on both land and water.

### **Other Religious Traditions**

Thailand's small Christian population celebrates traditional Christian holidays, and Muslims celebrate the major Islamic religious events. For Muslims, the holy month of Ramadan is one of the most extensive rituals. Throughout this month, Muslims undertake a long, cleansing fast as an act of spiritual discipline. During the daylight hours of the holy month, they abstain from food, drink, and worldly desires. They eat only a small meal in the early morning and another in the evening. Restaurants in Muslim areas close during Ramadan, and celebratory gatherings are kept to a minimum. Locals ask visitors to these areas to refrain from eating, drinking, or smoking in public, as well as in Muslim homes.



© Shane Bartley  
Children's Christmas show in Bangkok

### **Buildings of Worship**<sup>102</sup>

A Buddhist temple (*wat*) in Thailand is not simply a place to worship, but is also a multipurpose facility for the community. A typical temple complex includes several rooms or buildings and serves variously as a monastery, community meeting place, youth club, orphanage, school, theater, or as a site for other related functions. In effect, a Buddhist temple is designed to spiritually and physically shelter all aspects of community life in Thailand.



© ScubaBeer / Flickr.com  
Temple of the Emerald Buddha, Bangkok

Accordingly, community members actively involve themselves in temple life, and this includes donating money, trinkets, flowers, religious objects, or services to the monastery. The community's generosity rests in the abiding belief that by giving gifts for religious purposes, people will gain merit toward their next rebirth (reincarnation).

The largest building of a Buddhist temple complex, the *wiharn*, includes a central, open space used for gatherings and worship. Statues of the Buddha stand or sit at the end of the gathering area, and, importantly, they always face east. Furthermore, each specific position or posture of the Buddha has a unique meaning. A seated Buddha indicates meditation, and if he lifts his right hand with the palm facing outwards, the Buddha communicates peace. If the Buddha raises his left hand and the palm faces upwards, he is teaching, and if both hands rest downward, he has gained enlightenment.

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<sup>102</sup> Asiatours.net. "Buddhist Religion in Thailand." No date.  
<http://asiatours.net/thailand/info/buddhism.html>

Murals depicting scenes from the Buddha's life hang on the walls of this central building. A few conical structures of brick (*chedis*) covered with brass, gold, or white plaster lie along the wall of the *wiharn*. They represent piles of rice and encourage the viewer to remember the Buddha. Some of the *chedis* have additional religious significance because they contain relics or bones of saints or priests. At one temple, *Wat Prathat (Wat Mahathat)*, relics of the Buddha are said to be interred in such a structure. It is common for Thais to cremate the dead and place their ashes in a *chedi* with their name inscribed on a small plaque on the side.

Another building in a Buddhist complex is a *bot*, where the ordination of Buddhist monks takes place. When not in use for this specific ceremony, this building remains closed. The *bot* may house a particularly sacred Buddha statue or sculpture. Libraries and educational centers for children also have designated space within the temple complex. Also, a *bothi* tree, the kind under which Buddha found enlightenment, is traditionally grown on the grounds of the complex.

Monks live within the temple complex and administer its daily activities, which include educational presentations and religious sermons. Their living area can be identified by locating the brightly colored, distinctive saffron robes that they drape from the windows. The monks also practice meditation and carry out Buddhist rituals in the temple, and they keep the facilities and grounds clean.



© Mike Locke  
Monk at a Buddhist temple

Adorning the outside of the temple are small, colorful pieces of glass that reflect light. Their purpose is to ward away evil spirits who, according to lore, are frightened away by the sight of their own reflection in the glass. With similar intent, monks place figures of monsters near doorways to guard the complex from harmful spirits. A typical image used for this purpose is that of a *naga*, a snake that can change its form. In Northern Thailand, temples commonly exhibit *singhas*, or lion statues, which are of Burmese origin. They represent power, and frequently line temple doors for protective purposes. The self-devouring monster known as a *kala*, a Hindu deity, represents the inescapable passing of time, and is often found above doors or windows. Elaborate images of *kinnari*, female figures endowed with birds' legs and wings, are of animist and Himalayan origin. They frequently adorn temples in Chiang Mai.

### **Behavior in Places of Worship** <sup>103, 104</sup>

Statues and images of the Buddha are extremely sacred and should be approached with deep respect and a meditative attitude.

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<sup>103</sup> Track of the Tiger. Tourist Information Handbook, Section 11. "Buddha Images." No date. [http://www.track-of-the-tiger.com/html/buddha\\_images.html](http://www.track-of-the-tiger.com/html/buddha_images.html)

<sup>104</sup> Asiatours.net. Thailand. "Thai Etiquette." No date. <http://asiatours.net/thailand/info/customs.html>

**Exchange 2:** May I enter the temple?

<b>Soldier:</b>	May I enter the temple?	pom ja kaa pai nai wad dai mai
<b>Local:</b>	Yes.	dai krab

Thais consider the head to be the body's most sacred part, and, thus, it is inappropriate to touch someone's head, regardless of intent. Likewise, the foot, being the lowest and least sacred part of the body, must never be placed on, or even pointed toward, an image or statue of the Buddha. Thais consider such an act to be highly disrespectful and an infringement of law. Authorities have imprisoned



© Denis De Mesmaeker  
Woman praying

visitors from other countries for climbing on Buddha statues to take photos, including statues that reside outside temple walls. Thais do not consider ignorance as an adequate excuse for such cultural violations.

Buddhist temples also have strict rules about appearance, and visitors should prepare accordingly. Those who enter a temple should dress modestly and respectfully, never in skimpy, revealing, or dirty clothing. Appropriate dress includes clean shirts and long pants for men and long skirts or pants paired with blouses or sweaters that cover the shoulders for women. Everyone must remove their shoes before entering, remain quiet inside, and refrain from touching paintings or statues.

**Exchange 3:** Must I take off my shoes inside the temple?

<b>Soldier:</b>	Must I take off my shoes inside the temple?	pom tawng tawd rong taaao gawn khao wad rue plao krab
<b>Local:</b>	Yes.	tawng krab

Women are not allowed to touch monks or offer them objects from their hands, and visitors should not interrupt those who are praying or meditating. If a monk is seated, people should not stand above him, for it is sacrilegious to deliberately place oneself in a higher elevation than a person who represents greater wisdom. This is also true outside the temple. For example, if a monk is seated on a bus, it is offensive to hover above him or stand nearby.

Islamic mosques dominate the landscape of southern peninsular Thailand, including the Malay provinces of Yala, Satun, Narathiwat, and Pattani. However, they are also found in other parts of Thailand, including Bangkok.<sup>105</sup>

Similar to visiting a Buddhist temple, it is important to dress conservatively when visiting an Islamic mosque. Visitors should avoid sheer or tight clothing and remember to remove their shoes before entering. Women should wear clothing with sleeves and avoid tank tops and sleeveless blouses. Their clothing should be loose fitting, and skirts should not be shorter than knee length. If wearing pants, a woman’s sweater or blouse should be long enough to cover the tops of the thighs. Men should wear loose fitting pants and a shirt. All clothing should be clean, and neither men nor women should wear shorts. Also, women are advised to remove makeup, perfume, and nail polish, and to cover their head using some type of scarf.



© Ronn Aldaman  
Thai muslim man

**Exchange 4:** Do I need to cover my head?

<b>Soldier:</b>	Do I need to cover my head?	pom tawng klum huaa mai
<b>Local:</b>	Yes.	mai tawng krab

Before going into a mosque in Thailand, visitors should ask permission to enter.

Once inside, they should observe silence; talking, even softly, can interrupt prayers. Visitors should also avoid walking in front of those who are praying as this may invalidate their prayers. Women and men generally pray in separate sections, and visitors should be sensitive to this tradition. Finally, photographs should not be taken inside the mosque.

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<sup>105</sup> Religions in Thailand. “Muslims.” 23 July 1996.  
<http://www.mahidol.ac.th/thailand/religions/muslims.html>

# Traditions

## Traditional Economy

With its rich floodplains and monsoon climate, Thailand has traditionally been a farming society. The country's agricultural hub has long been the fertile Chao Phraya Valley, the heart of the nation's "rice bowl." Historically, the production of rice allowed peasants to feed themselves, pay taxes, and contribute to the maintenance of temples.

Centuries ago, changes in traditional rice growing practices significantly transformed the country's economy. In the highlands of the north and northeast, farmers regularly irrigated their crops to supplement rainfall, and the variety of rice they grew remained a staple in those areas. In the Chao Phraya Valley floodplain, however, rice cultivation practices transformed between the 13th and 15th centuries because of the area's greater natural water resources. Farmers in the region switched to a Bengalese variety of rice called "floating rice." The new variety grew faster and was more efficient to cultivate in the lowland fields, where water rose rapidly as a result of floods and rain. Growers were thus able to produce a surplus to sell abroad for lower prices, and the number of growers increased as new areas in the delta came under cultivation. Agriculture increasingly sustained the entire country. Ayutthaya, located at the southern end of the river valley, became the country's economic center due to the area's large rice surpluses.<sup>106</sup>



© Denis De Mesmaeker  
Rice fields in northern Thailand

In the north, textiles and crafts have long been part of the traditional economy. Many farmers in the area grow cotton, and small producers engage in spinning and dyeing fabrics. The cloth from this region is famous for its unique colors and designs displaying tribal affiliations.<sup>107</sup> The Thai silk industry, renowned for its quality, also thrives in the north, and as well, in San Kamphaeng, located farther to the east.<sup>108</sup> Village artisans in the region around Chiang Mai specialize in crafts such as pottery, woodcarving, and silverwork. Thais have used glazed decorative stoneware for household purposes since it became an established artistic form in the 13th century.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> The Library of Congress. Country Studies. Thailand. Chapter 1 - Historical Setting. The Ayutthaya Era, 1350-1767. "Economic Development." September 1987. <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/thtoc.html>

<sup>107</sup> Welcome to Chiangmai and Chiangrai Magazine. "Thailand Textile Industry and Its Cultural Importance." c.1995–2007. <http://www.chiangmai-chiangrai.com/thailand-textile-industry.html>

<sup>108</sup> Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Chiang Mai." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9023959/Chiang-Mai>

<sup>109</sup> Welcome to Chiangmai and Chiangrai Magazine. "Thai Stoneware and Celadon." c.1995–2007. [http://www.chiangmai-chiangrai.com/stoneware\\_and\\_celadon.html](http://www.chiangmai-chiangrai.com/stoneware_and_celadon.html)

## Greetings and Communication<sup>110, 111, 112</sup>

The Thai people are typically polite and accommodating in welcoming visitors to experience their culture as honored guests. Visitors should reciprocate by being polite and friendly in their interactions. A mannerly approach is always likely to lead to the most cooperation.



© Nick Ribaldo  
Smiling Thai Women

### Exchange 5: Good morning.

<b>Soldier:</b>	Good morning.	sa wad dee krab
<b>Local:</b>	Good morning.	sa wad dee krab

The communication style of Thai people is not aggressive, assertive, or in any way confrontational. Thais interpret such an approach as rude and usually react with an attitude of withdrawal from the conversation. In all instances, it is an affront to publicly criticize someone or display impatience or anger.

### Exchange 6: How are you?

<b>Soldier:</b>	How are you?	kun sa baai dee rue krab
<b>Local:</b>	Fine, very well.	pom sa baai dee krab

It is often the case in Western culture for people to be very upfront with their emotional reactions, as characterized by the expression “He wears his heart on his sleeve.” Such is not the case in Thai culture, where it is customary to reserve one’s private feelings rather than display them to the world. For example, as opposed to communicating friendliness, a

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<sup>110</sup> Asia Pacific Management Forum. “Thai Culture and the Implications for Business.” 1997.

<http://www.apmforum.com/columns/thai1.htm>

<sup>111</sup> Track of the Tiger. Tourist Information Handbook, Section 11. [No date.] <http://www.track-of-the-tiger.com/html/etiquette.html>

<sup>112</sup> Horizonmuaythai.com. “Thailand Culture and the People of Thailand.” c.2006.

<http://www.horizonmuaythai.com/Thailand/culture.html>

smile may simply be a calm reaction to a variety of conflicting emotions that a Thai person may feel at that moment.<sup>113</sup>

In general, conversational exchanges should not be overly direct, but simply measured and polite. This is also true when asking questions of a Thai person. In such a case, the questioner should be subtle. Instead of directly asking “Do you understand?,” one should rephrase the question in a softer way that requires a less direct response, such as “What do you think?”



© Mark Grapengater  
Happy Thai Man

Simple, polite inquiries about health or well-being are always appreciated.

**Exchange 7: Hello!**

<b>Soldier:</b>	Hi, Mr. Somchai.	sa wad dee krab kun som chai
<b>Local:</b>	Hello!	sa wad dee krab
<b>Soldier:</b>	Are you doing well?	kun sa baai dee rue krab
<b>Local:</b>	Yes.	sa baai dee krab

Thais often will nod their head when speaking with others, but this does not mean they agree with what is being said or even that they understand it. It is primarily a neutral, accommodating gesture. It may be motivated by a desire to protect the speaker from losing face when saying something that the Thai listener does not understand.

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<sup>113</sup> Asia Pacific Management Forum. “Behind the Smiles.” July 2000.  
<http://www.apmforum.com/columns/thai37.htm>

During initial exchanges with a Thai person, it is important to ask about his or her family.

**Exchange 8:** How is your family?

<b>Soldier:</b>	How is your family?	krawb kruaa kun pen yang hai bang
<b>Local:</b>	They are doing fine, thank you.	puag khao sa baai dee krab kawb kun

When greeting new people or taking leave of them, Thais do not customarily shake hands, although they will often make exceptions for foreigners. Traditionally, they make a gesture called *wai*. This gesture involves putting the palms together, as in a prayer position, and raising them upward while simultaneously bowing the head. The person lowest in status typically initiates the greeting. Further, the person making this gesture only raises the hands as high as the greeted person's status dictates. If the greeted person is old or is a dignitary, monk, or person of authority, the greeter raises the hands to nose level, indicating great respect. If the person is an equal, the greeter raises his or her hands only to chest level. If the receiver of the greeting is very young or otherwise lower in status, the greeter does not use the *wai* gesture at all but simply nods instead.



© Steven Kohus  
Wai, Traditional Thai Greeting

**Exchange 9:** Good night!

<b>Soldier:</b>	Good night!	sa wad dee krab
<b>Local:</b>	Good night!	sa wad dee krab

In addition to its use for greeting or taking leave of people, the *wai* is also used to apologize or ask forgiveness for an affront or misunderstanding.

Shaking hands with one's right hand is preferred when meeting Muslim men. When greeting Muslim women, men should not offer to shake hands. Instead, they should simply nod and issue a spoken greeting, or follow the female's lead. If she offers to shake hands, a light handshake grasping only the fingertips is appropriate. Any other form of handshake with a Muslim woman is unacceptable.

**Exchange 10:** Good afternoon.

<b>Soldier:</b>	Good afternoon.	sa wad dee krab
<b>Local:</b>	Good afternoon.	sa wad dee krab

Muslim men who are relatives or close friends commonly hold hands or hug each other. This should not be interpreted in light of the cultural views of America, where such an act could be judged in a negative way. In Thai Islamic tradition, such close gestures between men imply kinship or friendship and nothing more. Thai women are also emotionally expressive with each other, and they often hold hands or kiss each other on the cheek. Again, such gestures are an indication of friendship or kinship. They are also reserved for close friends and relatives, and are not to be used as forms of greeting by visitors.

**Hospitality and Gift-Giving**<sup>114</sup>

When entering a Thai home, visitors should observe and follow the customs and behavior of the host and other indigenous Thai. Some customs should be known and prepared for in advance. For instance, guests should always dress in clean and modest clothing, and they must remove their shoes before entering a home. Also, it is necessary to be sensitive to the dietary customs and eating habits of the household, such as the restriction against eating pork in the case of visiting a Muslim family.



© Dav Yaginuma  
Monk Made Gift Boxes for Sale

Visitors can acknowledge the hospitality of their host by making a friendly and polite statement of appreciation. Such statements, however, should not be excessive.

**Exchange 11:** I appreciate your hospitality.

<b>Soldier:</b>	I really appreciate your hospitality.	pom khaw kawb kun sam rab gaan rab rong kawng kun
<b>Local:</b>	It is nothing.	mai pen rai krab

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<sup>114</sup> MSN Encarta. "Customs of Thailand." c.2007.  
[http://encarta.msn.com/sidebar\\_631522271/customs\\_of\\_thailand.html](http://encarta.msn.com/sidebar_631522271/customs_of_thailand.html)

It is not customary or necessary to bring a gift when invited into the home of a Thai person. If, however, a visitor has been in the country for an extended stay, he can bring a small gift.

**Exchange 12:** This gift is for you.

<b>Soldier:</b>	This gift is for you.	nie kue khawng khwan sam rab khun
<b>Local:</b>	I cannot accept this.	pom rab mai dai krab

When visiting a Muslim home, guests should be aware that Muslims do not drink alcohol. It follows that guests should not offer alcoholic beverages as gifts. Similarly, they should not take pork products to the homes of Thai Muslims.

When the host offers coffee or tea, it is customary to politely accept. This is true even if a guest does not normally drink the kind of tea or coffee being offered. Rejecting the host's hospitality indicates poor manners and could be interpreted as a personal rejection of the host.

If in doubt about something you are drinking or eating, simply ask what it is.

**Exchange 13:** What is the name of this dish?

<b>Soldier:</b>	What is the name of this dish?	gab khao jaan nie riag waa arai
<b>Local:</b>	This is Tom Yum Koong.	tom yam gung krab

When seated next to someone at the dinner table, you should avoid touching that person. Thais avoid casual touching; they consider it to be overly intimate and invasive of one's personal space. Under no circumstances should a visitor to the culture touch a Thai person's head, which is considered to be the most sacred part of the body. Further, if seated on the floor or at a low table, one's feet should be tucked underneath and pointing back. Just as the head is considered to be the body's most sacred part, so the feet, being the lowest part of the body, are seen as the least sacred. It is extremely rude to point them at anyone or at revered objects such as images of Thai nobility or religious figures. The feet should also not be used to open doors,



© pchweat / Flickr.com  
Feet point back if seated on the floor

and if people are eating on the floor, you should never step over a plate of food.

A guest dining in the household can show politeness by complimenting the host or hostess on the quality of the food.

**Exchange 14:** This food is very good.

<b>Soldier:</b>	This food is very good.	aa haan jaan nie aroi maag
<b>Local:</b>	It's Som Taam.	nie kue som tam krab

Excessive talking during a meal or staring too directly into a Thai person's eyes as you talk with him or her is also considered rude. Furthermore, when the food is steaming hot, wait until it cools a little before dishing it up. Dishing up food that is hot implies greediness to eat, and Thais consider such an attitude ill-mannered. Rather than showing excessive hunger, it would be better to comment on the food as it is cooling.

**Exchange 15:** What ingredients are used?

<b>Soldier:</b>	What ingredients are used to make Tom Yum Koong?	tom yam gung mee kruang prung a rai baang krab
<b>Local:</b>	Shrimp, lemongrass, kaffir lime leaf, chilies, lemon juice, and fish sauce.	mee gung lae kruang tom yam kue ta krai bai ma grood prig khee noo nem ma now lem ma plou krab

Guests should use only the right hand to hold utensils, pass food at the dinner table, or pick up food that is meant to be picked up with the hands. The same rule applies when presenting a gift: use only the right hand. It is considered rude to use the left hand for any of these purposes.



© Adam Robertson  
Pass Food During a Meal

Some Thai customs are very different from those found in Western culture, and it is extremely offensive for one to violate them. For instance, in Thailand it is considered exceedingly rude to lick one's fingers when eating. Simply wipe

them on a napkin instead. Also, if a guest seated at the table has to blow his nose, he should leave the table to do so and wash his hands before returning.

After a Thai meal ends, it is a good rule of thumb to follow the lead of others as they leave the dining table, and remember to thank the host or the person who cooked the food.

**Exchange 16:** The food tastes so good.

<b>Soldier:</b>	The food tastes so good.	gab khao jaan nie aroi lua gern
<b>Local:</b>	Thank you.	kawb kun krab

### Eating Habits<sup>115, 116</sup>

Except for the indigenous Chinese in Thailand, Thais use chopsticks only when eating noodle dishes. Thais eat most other kinds of food with forks and spoons. They hold the spoon with their right hand and the fork with their left, using it to move food onto the spoon. They then use only the spoon—never the fork—to put food in their mouths. Since Thais usually cut their food into small, bite-sized pieces before serving it, knives are not useful at the table.



The server places bowls of food in the center of the table. Diners leave their plate sitting in front of them and use a large serving spoon to dish up the food they want from each bowl. A typical meal includes items such as soup, salad, a stir-fry or vegetable dish, and perhaps a curry. Rice always accompanies the individual courses. The typical drink served with a meal is water, but it is traditionally offered only at the end of the meal.

There are four characteristic flavors of Thai cooking, and they lend themselves to hundreds of blended flavors and unique dishes. They include: “sweet (sugars, fruits,

<sup>115</sup> Horizonmuaythai.com. “Thai Food Nutrition and Culture.” c.2006.  
[http://www.horizonmuaythai.com/Thailand/thai\\_food.html](http://www.horizonmuaythai.com/Thailand/thai_food.html)

<sup>116</sup> MSN Encarta. “Customs of Thailand.” c.2007.  
[http://encarta.msn.com/sidebar\\_631522271/customs\\_of\\_thailand.html](http://encarta.msn.com/sidebar_631522271/customs_of_thailand.html)

sweet peppers,); spicy (chilies); sour (vinegar, lime juice, tamarind); and salty (fish sauce, soy sauce).”<sup>117</sup>

**Dress Code**<sup>118, 119</sup>

In Thailand, local people go to great lengths to wear clothing that is spotlessly clean. Everyday dress can be casual but should be conservative. Women often wear Western-style skirts or dresses with the hem reaching the knee or below the knee. Blouses have sleeves (usually short because of the climate).

**Exchange 17:** How should I dress?

<b>Soldier:</b>	How should I dress?	pom tawng taeng tuaa yang hai
<b>Local:</b>	Wear loose fitting clothes which cover your body.	sai sua paa taam jai tae tawng mai san gern pai krab

Revealing clothing is simply unacceptable and is never worn publicly. This type of dress includes shorts, swimsuits (unless specifically at the beach or a pool), low-cut blouses or dresses, and tight garments. If the clothing is at all skimpy or provocative, it should be avoided.



© Ted Ollikkala  
Thai Youths

In urban areas, Thais often wear clothing similar to that of Westerners, but adapted to Thailand’s hot and humid climate. The clothing is, of course, always on the modest and conservative side. On special occasions, such as for weddings, Thais may dress traditionally. Fewer Western styles of clothing are seen in rural areas, where local people wear traditional apparel.

<sup>117</sup> Horizonmuaythai.com. “Thai Food Nutrition and Culture.” c.2006.

[http://www.horizonmuaythai.com/Thailand/thai\\_food.html](http://www.horizonmuaythai.com/Thailand/thai_food.html)

<sup>118</sup> Sawasdee Magazine. “High Fashion, Hill Style.” November 1996.

<http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/Congress/7905/hillsty1.htm>

<sup>119</sup> Book Rags. Encyclopedia of Modern Asia. “Clothing, Traditional – Thailand.” c.2001–2006.

<http://www.bookrags.com/research/clothing-traditionalthailand-ema-02/>

If a visitor is uncertain as to what to wear, asking is a good policy!

**Exchange 18:** Is this acceptable to wear?

<b>Soldier:</b>	Is this acceptable to wear?	yang nie chai dai mai
<b>Local:</b>	Yes.	dai krab

In lowland Thailand, women usually wear a garment known as a *pha sin*, or narrow skirt. It has three sections, either woven into one length of cloth with three separate designs, or constructed of three different fabrics. The top section, or *hua sin*, consists of plain cotton cloth whose color and motif can depend on the ethnicity of the person wearing it. The midsection (*tua sin*), as with the top section, carries different designs depending on ethnic affiliation. It may have complex tapestry patterns, tie-dyed thread, or unique weaving patterns. The skirt's third section is the *tin sin*, or border. Its weaving may be either elaborate or plain.

Women also wear sarongs that wrap around the body. Often, the sarongs are striped or distinctly patterned. In the south, Malay Thai women wear sarongs made of batik, similar to those worn in neighboring countries.

For the most part, men no longer wear traditional Thai clothing, which generally was not as elaborate or as varied in design (according to ethnicity) as that of Thai women. In the southern Malay region, men traditionally wore cotton sarongs designed in plaid or checked patterns. In the south, they typically did not wear a shirt or garment on the upper body, but for special occasions, they would drape a cloth over their shoulders. In colder areas, they wore cotton shirts.

Women of the hill tribes that populate the northern, mountainous region of Thailand make their own clothing, often from cloth that they weave themselves. Each tribe has a unique style, but in general, the clothing is brightly colored and has bold, distinctive designs. The tribes' formal styles are more elaborate and more intricately designed than everyday dress. In either case, patterned stitch work, embroidery, and appliqué adorn the vivid fabrics to create recognizable styles. During the creative process, the women and young girls who weave and embellish the fabric are not influenced by media or designs from the international community. They have only their surrounding culture as a reference, and, as a result, the designs within each tribe often look similar. However, one can find a personal touch in the quality and detail of work put into the design.



© Harry Alverson  
Married Karen Women Wear Blue

Ornaments worn by the hill tribes are typically made of silver rupees or of natural materials. Tribal silversmiths melt British silver rupees and use the material to construct their own jewelry, making pieces such as necklaces, rings, bangles, large bracelets, and

other items. They also decorate their clothing by sewing coins onto headpieces, belts, jackets, and blouses. From the environment, they use pieces of shell, animal fur, seeds, and feathers to further embellish their clothing.

### **Non-Religious Holidays**<sup>120, 121</sup>

There are a number of non-religious public holidays in Thailand. They include New Year's Day on the first of January, which is a secular holiday even though Buddhist celebrations occur throughout the country. Held in January or February, Chinese New Year is also a countrywide celebration. During this event, artists perform dragon and lion dances in order to chase evil spirits away. The celebration also includes Chinese opera



© Weenakanya Plangkamol  
Throwing water during the Songkran festival

performances, family reunions, elaborate fireworks, and banquets held on city streets, the latter of which is designed to satisfy the spirits of the ancestors. In mid April, the traditional Thai New Year festival takes place with great fanfare throughout the country. Its activities include water-throwing, an event that has roots in the tradition of sprinkling a few drops of water on a person's hands as a sign of good tidings for the New Year. The tradition has evolved into a more exuberant form in which people throw large buckets of water on each other. On this day, Thais also visit their temples in order to donate food to the monks and perform other acts of charity.

Other important holidays include National Labor Day and Coronation Day, both in May, and in December, Constitution Day. Finally, the King and Queen's birthdays are also national holidays. On the King's birthday, people decorate their homes, buildings, and the palace with colorful flags, and they hang his portrait in their offices, public buildings, and private residences. A concert and fireworks display take place in the evening, and the event culminates with a speech given by the King to mark the occasion. On the Queen's birthday, which Thais also celebrate as National Mother's Day, the country similarly adorns its homes, public buildings, and palace with flags and decorations. The holiday serves as a time for people to give gifts and flowers to their mothers, grandmothers, and wives, and to donate food and items to charity.

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<sup>120</sup> AsiaRooms.com. "Thailand Festivals and Events." c.2008. <http://www.asiarooms.com/travel-guide/thailand/thailand-festivals-&-events/index.html>

<sup>121</sup> DiscoveryThailand.com. "Public Holidays." 2008. [http://www.discoverythailand.com/Public\\_Holidays.asp](http://www.discoverythailand.com/Public_Holidays.asp)

## Social Events

### *Weddings*<sup>122,123,124</sup>

According to Thai tradition, one of the potential groom’s relatives or close friends represents him in asking the bride’s father for her hand. After he submits his request, discussions take place to determine whether the match would be suitable. The two families negotiate to determine the proper and reasonable amount that the groom can afford to pay as a dowry, and they consider his ability to support a wife. Factors that determine the amount of the dowry include the groom’s family assets as well as the young woman’s family background, level of education, career, and physical appearance. After the families reach an agreement, the groom pays the dowry at the actual wedding ceremony. In modern Thailand, sometimes the family immediately returns the dowry to the married couple as a wedding present.

On the eve of the wedding day, village tradition requires that the bridal couple and their guests attend a Buddhist blessing ceremony. Its purpose is to gain merit for the couple by honoring the ancestors of the bride through prayers performed by Buddhist monks. Among many Thais, especially in rural villages, this evening ceremony is extremely important. Other couples, however, follow simpler, modern practices and do not adopt this particular ceremony. In such cases a simple blessing by a monk takes place on the morning of the wedding. In other cases, the bride and groom simply go to the county office to legally register for marriage in lieu of a religious service.



© Justin Yoshida  
Thai Wedding Ceremony

When attending any of the pre-wedding ceremonies, or simply upon learning that a couple is engaged, it is appropriate to offer them good wishes.

**Exchange 19:** I wish you both happiness.

<b>Soldier:</b>	I wish you both happiness.	khaw hai kun tang song kon mee kwaam sug
<b>Local:</b>	We are honored.	raao rue sueg pen giad krab

<sup>122</sup> Simply-thai.com. “Relationships and Marriage in Thailand.” c.1998–2007. [http://www.simply-thai.com/Thailand\\_page\\_People\\_and\\_Culture\\_marriage.htm#Wedding\\_Day](http://www.simply-thai.com/Thailand_page_People_and_Culture_marriage.htm#Wedding_Day)

<sup>123</sup> Asia Pacific Management Forum. “Thai Wedding Customs.” 1998. <http://www.apmforum.com/columns/thai15.htm>

<sup>124</sup> Thailand for You. “Marriage in Thailand: Traditional Wedding Ceremonies, Thai Customs and Rituals.” 23 March 2008. [http://www.th4u.com/thai\\_marriage.htm](http://www.th4u.com/thai_marriage.htm)

When the wedding ceremony (*rodnamsamg*) begins in the afternoon, the bride and groom sit closely together. They hold their hands in an elevated *wai* greeting position that symbolizes greeting the Lord Buddha. A chain of flowers winds between their hands, connecting them both literally and figuratively. The person who leads the ritual places their hands in a special container of water, and their parents follow this step as well. The leader of this event is usually the most senior family member present, rather than a monk, who has no formal role in the actual wedding ceremony.

**Exchange 20: Congratulations!**

<b>Soldier:</b>	Congratulations on your wedding!	khaw sa daeng kwaam yin dee tie kun taeng harn
<b>Local:</b>	We are honored you could attend.	raao rue sueg pen giad tie kun maa ruam harn dai krab

The couple usually invites many guests to the wedding reception, but the number of guests that arrive is often uncertain. In Thailand, RSVPs are not expected, and many invited guests do not come to the ceremony, whereas many uninvited persons do attend. Those who attend may or may not bring their family members and friends. The reception typically involves a large dinner party with a formal master of ceremonies. The wedding’s guest of honor gives a short speech and toasts the newly married couple.



© Dan Weber  
Wedding in Loei, Thailand

*Funerals*<sup>125, 126</sup>

Monks are an integral part of Buddhist funerals in Thailand. The belief that death is part of the chain of suffering gives the Buddhist tradition, and those who represent it, particular authority at this time. Monks are essential in conducting all memorial services and funeral rites. They also chant Buddhist sutras to help the deceased, who, according to their beliefs, will reincarnate into a new existence.

<sup>125</sup> Buddhist Dharma Education Association. “Buddhist Funeral Rites in Thailand & Other South East Asian Countries.” c.1996–2008. <http://www.buddhanet.net/bfuneral.htm>

<sup>126</sup> Golden Ripples. “Rituals of Death in Thailand & ‘Funeral Casinos.’” 7 August 2007. <http://eclectic24.wordpress.com/2007/08/07/rituals-of-death-in-thailand-funeral-casinos/>

**Exchange 21:** I would like to give my condolences.

<b>Soldier:</b>	I would like to give my condolences to you and your family.	khaw sa daeng kwaam sia jai gab kun lae krawb krua
<b>Local:</b>	Thank you.	kawb kun krab

Buddhist doctrine teaches that acts of merit will help the person in their next incarnation. Thus, when a person is in the process of dying, monks and relatives encourage him or her to focus on Buddhist scriptures or chant the Buddha's different names. Often they will whisper one of the names in the person's ear, or they will write a word with religious significance on a piece of paper and place it in the deceased's mouth. Buddhists believe that if someone dies in this manner, with their attention on Buddha or his teachings, it will bring merit to the deceased's next life.



© Geoff Burns  
Funeral Procession

After a person's death, relatives and friends perform a washing ceremony in which they pour water over one of the deceased's hands. They place the body in a coffin, and surround it with incense, candles, colored lights, and the person's photograph. The coffin may stay in the deceased's home for up to a week, allowing family and friends to visit. They believe that the newly departed soul may experience a kind of separation anxiety, and they remain in the body's presence in order to alleviate such distress. Monks visit daily to chant the scriptures, and the family offers them food to increase the merit of the deceased person. The body is then cremated.

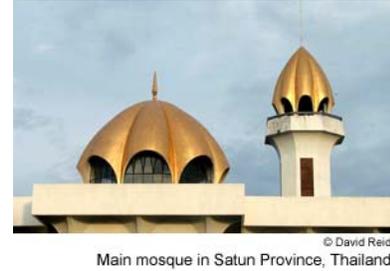
In northern Thailand, cremation of the body takes place sooner, typically within three days. Throughout the grieving process, the community strives to alleviate the suffering and loneliness felt by those left behind, as well as that of the soul of the newly deceased. During the evenings, neighbors and relatives gather in the family's home to feast and socialize, which includes playing games with dominoes and cards. Music fills the house on funeral day. The monks chant a funeral service and then walk ahead of the coffin as the mourners carry it. They often sprinkle green leaves on the stairs and across the doorway to make the deceased's final exit from his or her home different from their everyday departures during life. As the group walks to the crematorium, a man holding a pole with a white banner leads the procession. Men walk behind him carrying silver bowls of flowers. After the final service at the cemetery, the pall bearers place the coffin on a brick pyre and several people light the fire to cremate the body.

If the deceased is a wealthy or socially powerful person, family members may arrange to keep his body for up to a year in a specially constructed area within the temple. During this time, they frequently conduct religious services in order to impart additional merit to the person who died. Buddhists believe that as long as the body remains present, religious services, chants, and gifts will bring merit and status to the spirit of the deceased.

## Muslim Funerals<sup>127</sup>

In a traditional Muslim funeral, the family buries the deceased as soon as possible so as not to delay the decomposition of the body. Islamic law also requires the body to be bathed and covered before burial.

Male members of the family carry the wooden casket on their shoulders as they walk to the burial site. Sometimes they cover the body with a shroud, as opposed to placing it within a closed coffin. The men in attendance cover their heads as a sign of respect for the deceased. Islamic tradition prohibits women from attending the burial.



**Exchange 22:** Please be strong.

<b>Soldier:</b>	Please be strong.	kaw hai kem keng wai
<b>Local:</b>	We will try.	rao ja pa yaa yaam krab

Family members toss or shovel earth onto the coffin after lowering it into the ground. After the funeral ends, guests visit the home of the deceased's family to express condolences and share their grief. The period of bereavement continues for three days, and during this time family members pray for the deceased in their home.

During this period, visitors may express their concern and offer their best wishes to the survivors.

### **Do's and Don'ts**<sup>128, 129</sup>

**Do** show respect to all images of Buddha as well as symbols of Thai royalty.

**Do** remove your shoes before you enter a temple or mosque.

**Do** use your entire *right* hand only to summon a person. Keep your palm down and wave downward.

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<sup>127</sup> BMJ. Education and Debate. Gatrad, A.R. "Muslim Customs Surrounding Death, Bereavement, Postmortem Examinations, and Organ Transplants." 20 August 1994.  
<http://www.bmj.com/cgi/content/full/309/6953/521>

<sup>128</sup> Discovery Thailand. "Do's and Don'ts in Thailand." c.2008.  
[http://www.discoverythailand.com/Dos\\_and\\_Don\\_ts\\_in\\_Thailand.asp](http://www.discoverythailand.com/Dos_and_Don_ts_in_Thailand.asp)

<sup>129</sup> Asiatours.net. "Thai Etiquette." [No date.] <http://asiatours.net/thailand/info/customs.html>

**Do not** touch a Thai person on the head under any circumstances.

**Do not** touch a Thai person casually; it is a violation of personal space.

**Do not** point your foot or the sole of your foot at anyone.

**Do not** point your foot at a religious or royal image. Buddhist images are sacred.

**Do not** use your foot to touch a religious statue or any object connected with royalty.

**Do not** deface money, throw it down, or step on it. It bears the king's image.

**Do not** criticize or show any disrespect to the Thai monarchy.

**Do not** pick up any food with your left hand. The left hand is considered unclean.

**Do not** stand above someone who is older or considered wiser or more enlightened (e.g., a monk).

**Do not** attempt to make any physical contact with a Buddhist monk (e.g., shaking hands, passing him a gift, etc.).

**Do not** engage in overt expressions of affection with the opposite sex.

**Do not** point to anybody with a finger. Use the entire *right* hand instead.

**Do not** point upward with the middle finger. It is obscene in the U.S. and equally so in Thailand.

**Do not** use obscene or indecent language within earshot of Thai citizens. Many may be familiar with American slang.



## Urban Life

### Urbanization and Workforce<sup>130, 131, 132</sup>

Slightly under one-third of Thailand's population lives in urban areas, with the majority located around Bangkok, the country's wealthiest region.<sup>133</sup> In the 19th century, large numbers of Chinese immigrants arrived there looking for a better way of life, and thousands of other international immigrants seeking refuge followed. After World War II, the government encouraged economic development and, as a result, urban growth intensified throughout the country in the 1960s. In the late 20th century, cities such as Nakhon Ratchasima industrialized at an accelerated pace, and other cities in the northeast region grew rapidly as well. In southern Thailand, economic growth came about, in part, through the expansion of the fishing and shrimp farming industries. This boom brought many people to the metropolitan areas around the Chao Phraya River and delta, most notably Bangkok. Between 1980 and 2000, city censuses in Bangkok showed an increase of approximately 1.5 million people.<sup>134</sup>



© ScubaBeer / Flickr.com  
Khao San Road, Bangkok, Thailand

In Bangkok and the country's other large cities, the rural-to-urban migration has been motivated by the desire for employment. However, the large influx of people to these urban areas has been greater than the labor market could absorb. Moreover, in recent years, much of the workforce has been destabilized. In large urban areas in general, small markets and shops have gone out of business or been replaced by large multi-purpose chain stores and shopping malls. After the economic crash of 1997, several financial firms consolidated or closed. People also lost jobs in the construction and manufacturing sectors, the latter of which temporarily declined because of its dependence on imports.

The number of urban dwellers living in poverty has increased substantially alongside the growing middle class. Educated members of the latter group have risen to hold jobs in finance, business, and technical professions. The urban poor, however, have great difficulty in finding stable employment and sufficient pay. Women, who form a significant part of the workforce, often hold lower-paying jobs. They frequently suffer from a lack of equal pay, access to jobs, and job promotions, despite the existence of laws opposed to gender-based discrimination. As a means to survive, many women with low

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<sup>130</sup> MSN Encarta Online Encyclopedia. "Bangkok." c.1993–2007.

[http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia\\_761567953\\_1\\_\\_\\_\\_5/Bangkok.html#s5](http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761567953_1____5/Bangkok.html#s5)

<sup>131</sup> Everyculture.com. "Culture of Thailand." c.2007. <http://www.everyculture.com/Sa-Th/Thailand.html>

<sup>132</sup> Encyclopedia of the Nations. "Thailand." c.2007. <http://www.nationsencyclopedia.com/economies/Asia-and-the-Pacific/Thailand.html>

<sup>133</sup> Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, U.S. Department of State. "Background Note: Thailand." March 2008. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2814.htm>

<sup>134</sup> MSN Encarta Online Encyclopedia. "Bangkok." c.1993–2007.

[http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia\\_761567953\\_1\\_\\_\\_\\_5/Bangkok.html#s5](http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761567953_1____5/Bangkok.html#s5)

levels of education resort to prostitution, which is a widespread practice connected to the tourism industry. Child labor in brothels and factories is also a serious and ongoing problem, as noted by various international agencies.

Unionization is relatively weak in urban areas and throughout Thailand, where under 2% of the entire nation's work force claims union membership.<sup>135</sup> Common labor-related problems for Thais include long working hours, inadequate benefits (such as medical coverage), low pay, and unsafe conditions in factories. In particular, the textile industry has been cited repeatedly for failing to prevent occupational afflictions and injuries.



© Ben Harris-Roxas  
Industrial workers

Studies detailing typical industrial work environments frequently refer to their “dismal working conditions characterized by deafening noise, poor lighting, inadequate medical facilities, and improper ventilation.”<sup>136</sup> As a result of the latter occupational hazard, approximately 30% of the textile industry's female workforce exhibits symptoms of byssinosis, or “cotton sickness,” each year.<sup>137</sup>

### **Daily Urban Living Conditions**

As is common in rapidly expanding metropolitan areas, the rural-to-urban migration has contributed to a variety of public ills in Bangkok. The influx of people has strained access to the city's limited services and infrastructure, including public health facilities and housing units. Large, crowded slums are prevalent in the city, and the pollution of air and water is severe and unremitting.<sup>138</sup>

Since the 1960s, developers have constructed numerous high-rise buildings throughout Bangkok, signaling the continual (and upward) expansion of the city. Today, the main housing units in central Bangkok are commonly made up of several floors of apartments, often with a shop on the first floor and recreational areas confined to the rooftop. In the suburbs, oversized developments consisting of many small homes are often located in areas that have few links to public transportation.<sup>139</sup> Large shopping malls are now a commonplace feature throughout Bangkok.

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<sup>135</sup> Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, U.S. Department of State. “Background Note: Thailand.” March 2008. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2814.htm>

<sup>136</sup> Encyclopedia of the Nations. Thailand. “Labor Unions and Issues.” c.2007. <http://www.nationsencyclopedia.com/economies/Asia-and-the-Pacific/Thailand.html>

<sup>137</sup> Encyclopedia of the Nations. Thailand. “Labor Unions and Issues.” c.2007. <http://www.nationsencyclopedia.com/economies/Asia-and-the-Pacific/Thailand.html>

<sup>138</sup> MSN Encarta Online Encyclopedia. “Bangkok. The Urban Landscape.” c.1993–2007. [http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia\\_761567953\\_1\\_\\_\\_\\_5/Bangkok.html#s5](http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761567953_1____5/Bangkok.html#s5)

<sup>139</sup> MSN Encarta Online Encyclopedia. “Bangkok. The Urban Landscape.” c.1993–2007. [http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia\\_761567953\\_1\\_\\_\\_\\_5/Bangkok.html#s5](http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761567953_1____5/Bangkok.html#s5)

Urban planning has suffered as the cities have rapidly grown. Bangkok, for instance, has few public parks and few ways to escape the severe traffic congestion. Many of the city's old river canals have been filled in or have fallen into disrepair. Instead, the majority of urban planning focuses primarily on road and highway construction.<sup>140</sup> In general, growth in Bangkok has produced significant urban sprawl. Metropolitan Bangkok, including all of its suburbs and outlying populated areas, covers 1,569 sq km (612 sq mi).<sup>141</sup>



© P. J. Partridge  
Chao San Road, Bangkok

Communications systems in Thailand are predominantly owned and operated by the state, although some sections are under private commercial control. The majority of people living in cities have cell phones and the service is of high quality.<sup>142</sup>

**Exchange 23:** What is your telephone number?

<b>Soldier:</b>	What is your telephone number?	ber to ra sab khun ber a rai
<b>Local:</b>	My phone number is 2828989.	to ra sab khawng pom ber sawng paed sawng paed gao paed gao krap

There is also a fairly extensive landline network and computer internet service.

**Education**<sup>143</sup>

Although the Thai constitution mandates twelve years of state funded education for each of its citizens, such service is not readily available for the entire population.<sup>144</sup> Regardless, education is compulsory for nine years, beginning with primary school. The majority of children benefit from this service, especially in urban areas.<sup>145</sup> Approximately 97 % of all primary school-aged children now attend learning institutions, and the majority of them

<sup>140</sup> Everyculture.com. "Culture of Thailand." c.2007. <http://www.everyculture.com/Sa-Th/Thailand.html>

<sup>141</sup> Lonely Planet. Thailand. "Bangkok: Getting There & Around." c.2008. <http://www.lonelyplanet.com/worldguide/thailand/bangkok/getting-there-and-around>

<sup>142</sup> CIA World Factbook. "Thailand." 15 April 2008. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/th.html>

<sup>143</sup> MSN Encarta Online Encyclopedia. Thailand. "People and Society of Thailand: Education." [http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia\\_761561385\\_4/Thailand.html](http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761561385_4/Thailand.html)

<sup>144</sup> Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, U.S. Department of State. "Background Note: Thailand." March 2008. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2814.htm>

<sup>145</sup> Encyclopedia of the Nations. Thailand. "Labor Unions and Issues." c.2007. <http://www.nationsencyclopedia.com/economies/Asia-and-the-Pacific/Thailand.html>

proceed to secondary education, which typically continues until age 17.<sup>146</sup> Today, over 90% of the country's population is literate.<sup>147</sup>

The center of Thailand's higher education system is in Bangkok, where numerous major universities and private schools are located. These institutions offer concentrated studies in typical subjects such as medicine, technology, agriculture, teacher training, and fine arts. After the financial crisis of 1997, the government began to focus on improving the quality of higher education. One of its major goals was to better train students for employment in industries based in high technology, an area that had been previously underemphasized in studies. Traditionally, many university students who possess the financial means choose to study abroad, attending schools in Japan, Europe, North America, and Australia.



© Geoff Burns  
Children in the School Yard

### Health Care and Health Issues

In recent decades, the Thai government has channeled its economic growth into improving health services for the public. However, regional disparities exist. Since the 1960s, quality health care has been more readily available in Thailand's urban areas than in its rural regions. Today, hospitals and clinics are located throughout Bangkok and other large cities.

**Exchange 24:** Is there a hospital nearby?

<b>Soldier:</b>	Is there a hospital nearby?	mee rong pa yaa baan yoo glaay taew ni mai krab
<b>Local:</b>	Yes, in the center of town.	mee krab ti jai glaang muang

In Thailand, the middle and upper classes (primarily located in urban areas) have medical care that is ranked among the best in the world. It is also relatively inexpensive, and hospitals readily accept visitors at any time. Many foreign patients from Europe and the Middle East travel to Bangkok to be treated in private hospitals with reputations for high

<sup>146</sup> MSN Encarta Online Encyclopedia. Thailand. "People and Society of Thailand: Education." [http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia\\_761561385\\_4/Thailand.html](http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761561385_4/Thailand.html)

<sup>147</sup> CIA World Factbook. "Thailand." 15 April 2008. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/th.html>

medical standards. The country’s medical centers are also known for their expertise in cosmetic and plastic surgery.<sup>148, 149</sup>

**Exchange 25:** Is Dr. Somchai in, sir?

<b>Soldier:</b>	Is Dr. Somchai in, sir?	kun maw som chai yoo mai krab
<b>Local:</b>	No.	mai yoo krab

The HIV virus has grown to epidemic proportions in Thailand, in large part because of the country’s lucrative tourist trade. In the 1980s, the Thai government began to heavily promote the tourism industry, which subsequently became part of the bedrock of the country’s economy. One of the negative side effects of the boom in the service sector was the corresponding growth of the sex trade, which remains illegal but highly visible. Today, Thailand has one of the world’s highest rates of prostitution per capita.<sup>150, 151</sup> The sex trade has declined partly as the result of the high number of recorded HIV cases in the late 20th century. Tens of thousands of adults die from complications related to the disease each year, and the corresponding strain on medical resources has been considerable. As of 2003, HIV infected an estimated 1.5% of Thailand’s adult population.<sup>152</sup> In response to the epidemic, the Thai government has made low-cost drugs more widely available and has directed a greater share of the healthcare budget to treat those afflicted with HIV.



**Transportation and Traffic**

Traffic in Bangkok is notoriously heavy. When driving, it is necessary to plan one’s route in advance.



<sup>148</sup> Encyclopaedia Britannica. “Thailand: Health and Welfare.” 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-52667/Thailand>

<sup>149</sup> Track of the Tiger. Tourist Information Handbook, Section 11. “Medical.” No date. <http://www.track-of-the-tiger.com/html/medical.html>

<sup>150</sup> Encyclopaedia Britannica. “Thailand: Services.” 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-274217/Thailand>

<sup>151</sup> Encyclopaedia Britannica. “Thailand: Health and Welfare.” 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-52667/Thailand>

<sup>152</sup> CIA World Factbook. “Thailand.” 15 April 2008. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/th.html>

**Exchange 26:** Where can I rent a car?

<b>Soldier:</b>	Where can I rent a car?	pom cha chao rod dai ti nai krab
<b>Local:</b>	Downtown.	nai muang krab

The same need for planning ahead exists when choosing between the various forms of public transportation.

**Exchange 27:** Which road leads to the airport?

<b>Soldier:</b>	Which road leads to the airport?	ta non saay nai pai sa naam bin krab
<b>Local:</b>	The road heading east.	saay tie pai taang tid ta wan awg krab

Although bus service is readily available throughout the city, heavy traffic often causes travel to be slow. Busses can also be very crowded, as they are an inexpensive way to travel.

**Exchange 28:** Will the bus be here soon?

<b>Soldier:</b>	Will the bus be here soon?	rod mey juan ja maa tung laew chai mai
<b>Local:</b>	Yes.	chai krab

Taxi service is readily available in both automobile and motorcycle form. However, water taxis offer an alternate way to avoid the heavy street traffic, and the service is economical and easy to negotiate. The standard route for water taxi service is along the

Chao Phraya River between south central Bangkok and Nonthaburi Province to the north. Service includes both express lines and standard travel that stops at all piers.<sup>153</sup>

**Exchange 29:** Where can I get a cab?

<b>Soldier:</b>	Where can I get a cab?	pom ja haa rod taxi dai ti nai krab
<b>Local:</b>	Over there.	ti non krab

Another way to avoid much of the gridlock in Bangkok is by taking the monorail or subway. After years of planning, the Skytrain, Bangkok’s new monorail system, began operating in 1999. Unofficially called “Betsy,” the Skytrain runs through the downtown area on elevated rail tracks. This system has increased the speed and ease of traveling through busy urban streets. In 2004, a new subway also opened for operation and began carrying passengers beneath the streets of central Bangkok<sup>154, 155</sup>



© Ross Thomson  
Tuk-tuk taxi in Bangkok

**Exchange 30:** Is there a train station nearby?

<b>Soldier:</b>	Is there a train station nearby?	mee sa taa nee rod fai glaay glaay taew nie mai krab
<b>Local:</b>	No.	mai mee krab

The streets in Bangkok have uneven surfaces and high curbs, making them difficult for disabled persons to negotiate, especially given the heavy traffic. Pedestrians must use elevated walkways to cross many of the streets, and their stairways are usually quite steep.

<sup>153</sup> Lonely Planet. “Bangkok: Getting There and Around.” c.2008.

<http://www.lonelyplanet.com/worldguide/thailand/bangkok/getting-there-and-around>

<sup>154</sup> MSN Encarta Online Encyclopedia. “Bangkok.” c.1993–2007.

[http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia\\_761567953\\_1\\_\\_\\_\\_5/Bangkok.html#s5](http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761567953_1____5/Bangkok.html#s5)

<sup>155</sup> The New York Times. Olson, Martha Stevenson. “Travel Advisory; A Train Called Betsy Debuts in Bangkok.” 26 December 1999.

<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9804E2D81E30F935A15751C1A96F958260>

Busses, water taxis, and boats typically do not allow sufficient time for disabled passengers to board at their regularly scheduled stops.

### Restaurants and Marketplace <sup>156</sup>

In cities, restaurants appeal to a wide range of modern and traditional tastes. Bangkok in particular is known for its diversity in styles of dining and choices of cuisine, including both local and international flavors. If a diner is unfamiliar with the ingredients or preparation of a particular meal, he or she may simply question the waiter to gain more information.



© mako / Flickr.com  
Tom Yum soup

**Exchange 31:** What type of meat is this?

<b>Soldier:</b>	What type of meat is this?	nie nuua a rai krab
<b>Local:</b>	Beef.	nuua wuaa krab

Virtually all restaurants in urban Thailand offer a range of drinks, including traditional American and European beverages such as coffee or tea.

**Exchange 32:** I would like coffee or tea.

<b>Soldier:</b>	I would like coffee or tea.	pom yaag dai gaa fae rue chaa krab
<b>Local:</b>	Sure.	dai si krab

Other kinds of beverages include a variety of herbal teas, fruit juices, soda, plain water, and beer. Because of a special tax on beer, a single bottle of it may be more expensive than an entire meal.<sup>157</sup>

<sup>156</sup> Lonely Planet. Thailand. "Money and Costs." c.2008.  
<http://www.lonelyplanet.com/worldguide/thailand/bangkok/money-and-costs>

<sup>157</sup> Asiatour.com. "Thailand: Food and Drink." 4 February 2008. <http://www.asiatour.com/thailand/e-02trav/et-tra16.htm>

**Exchange 33:** May I have a glass of water?

<b>Soldier:</b>	May I have a glass of water?	khaw nam gaew nung dai mai krab
<b>Local:</b>	Yes, right away.	dai tan tee krab

Diners may want to know whether a particular kind of meal, such as breakfast, lunch, or dinner, is being served. Just ask.

**Exchange 34:** Are you still serving breakfast?

<b>Soldier:</b>	Are you still serving breakfast?	yang mee aa haan chao yoo rue plaao
<b>Local:</b>	Yes.	mee krab

Many restaurants, and most of the finer ones (particularly those at hotels), accept major credit cards. Otherwise, cash is expected. ATMs are found throughout the cities. In addition, exchange booths that advance cash on credit cards are widespread in urban areas.

Tipping is not common practice in Bangkok unless one is dining in an expensive restaurant or at a hotel. It is usually unexpected for service at cafes and inexpensive restaurants. There is one notable exception: if the bill is unusually high, it would be good practice to leave a tip, regardless of the type of restaurant.

**Exchange 35:** Can I have my total bill, please?

<b>Soldier:</b>	Can I have my total bill, please?	khaw bai sed tang mod khawng pom krab
<b>Local:</b>	Yes, of course.	dai krab

Sidewalk vendors and food stalls are prevalent throughout Bangkok, and their customers represent all levels of the income scale, including the very rich. Patrons can buy snacks, tea, coffee, iced drinks, soups, curries, and complete, quality meals from these outdoor eateries. At specialty food stalls, exotic items such as fried locusts are available. Street vendors typically maintain fixed prices and require local cash. Credit cards are accepted in more upscale restaurants.



© Natalia Menezes  
A Pad Thai stand in Bangkok

Souvenir markets and shops in Bangkok sell a variety of products ranging from the commonplace to the unusual, including fine jewelry, high technology goods, and amulets said to ward off evil spells. At the Chatuchak Weekend Market, customers can buy live animals such as snakes and chickens, as well as vintage clothing and modern furniture. Other specialty stores and shopping centers cater to unique market niches, attracting buyers from all over Asia and the world.

**Exchange 36:** Do you sell silk cotton?

<b>Soldier:</b>	Do you sell silk cotton?	kun mee paa mai Thai rue paa faay khay rue plao krab
<b>Local:</b>	Yes.	mee krab

When buying goods from vendors of crafts or souvenirs, bargaining is common practice and prices are customarily flexible. Advertised prices are usually higher than the amount the seller expects to receive for the product. The vendor begins negotiations with an initial offer and he expects the customer to subsequently bargain with him. He also expects the potential buyer to be serious about purchasing in order to ensure that the process results in an actual sale. When negotiations conclude and the buyer accepts the seller's offer, the customer is obligated to follow through with the purchase, without reconsideration. It is extremely rude and a demonstration of bad-faith behavior to back out of negotiations or a finalized sale.



© Pablo Pecora  
A street market in Chiang Mai

A buyer should examine an item carefully to be sure that, on close inspection, the quality matches the price he or she is willing to pay.

**Exchange 37:** May I examine this close up?

<b>Soldier:</b>	May I examine this close up?	khaw pom doo glaay glaay dai mai krab
<b>Local:</b>	Sure.	dai krab

If a buyer wants to shop elsewhere before negotiating over particular items, it is perfectly acceptable to look over other goods and return later to the shop. In keeping with custom, it is far better to have comparison shopping finished and a clear idea in mind of the particular product you want before you signal intent to buy.



© Pablo Pecora  
A produce market

**Exchange 38:** How much longer will you be here?

<b>Soldier:</b>	How much longer will you be here?	kun ja yoo ti nie naan tao rai krab
<b>Local:</b>	Three more hours.	eeg saam chua mong krab

It is always a good idea to establish in advance whether a seller will accept U.S. dollars, credit cards, or only local currency.

**Exchange 39:** Do you accept U.S. currency?

<b>Soldier:</b>	Do you accept U.S. currency?	kun rab hern American mai krab
<b>Local:</b>	No we only accept baht.	mai krab rao rab tae hern Baht tao nan

Also, a buyer may have a currency denomination that seems too large for the cost of the item being purchased. In that case, asking whether the seller can give change is advisable before committing to buy something.

**Exchange 40:** Can you give me change for this?

<b>Soldier:</b>	Can you give me change for this?	khaw laeg hern pleeg noi dai mai krab
<b>Local:</b>	No.	mai dai krab

The currency in Thailand is known as *baht*. It is broken down into coins (*satang*), with 100 *satang* in one *baht*. Legal money changers and banks have the best rates for exchanging traveler's checks and currency into local money.

**Dealing with Beggars and Street Vendors** <sup>158, 159</sup>

Beggars in Bangkok and other large cities can be quite aggressive. It is not uncommon for gangs to kidnap, buy, or rent young children from poor families in order to use them to beg for money. Many of the children, typically aged six months to ten years, are trafficked from Burma and Cambodia to Thailand, where there are no direct laws against begging. Children over the age of five typically have less success begging and are used instead to sell goods to tourists at roadside stands. In exchange for their work, the children receive minimal lodging and food.



© SiamEye / Flickr.com  
Disabled beggar in Bangkok

When confronted by beggars, it is best to ignore them if other beggars are in the immediate area. If they see someone handing out money, they are likely to pursue the source more aggressively.

**Exchange 41:** Give me money.

<b>Local:</b>	Give me money.	khaw hern pom bang
<b>Soldier:</b>	I don't have any.	pom mai mee loei

<sup>158</sup> Humantrafficking.org. "Gangs Control Beggars in Thailand." 31 March 2007.

<http://www.humantrafficking.org/updates/538>

<sup>159</sup> Humantrafficking.org. "Child Beggars in Thailand: A Lucrative Business." August 2005.

<http://www.humantrafficking.org/updates/91>

Some beggars run professional operations, but others are simply very poor, begging for themselves or their family. If a visitor chooses to give money, it should be done when other beggars are not around and should consist of only a small amount.

If a vendor on the street is insistent on making an unwanted sale, the target of the sale should politely and firmly decline the offer.

**Exchange 42:** Please, buy something from me.

<b>Local:</b>	Please, buy something from me.	chuay sue khawng pom bang krab
<b>Soldier:</b>	Sorry, I have no money left.	sia jai pom mai mee hern loei

## Rural Life

### Rural Economy and Land Distribution<sup>160, 161</sup>

The agricultural sector has employed most of Thailand's workforce for centuries, and today, it continues to support a substantial number of workers whose agricultural practices vary according to region. Thai rice farmers traditionally used water buffaloes to harvest wet rice, and this practice continues today. Near the oceans and rivers, workers continue to fish and collect shellfish as they have done for centuries. In northeastern Thailand, agriculture has always proven more difficult because the region's soil is thinner and less fertile and the area receives less rain. There, and in the northern mountain areas as well, farmers developed irrigation systems in order to sufficiently water their crops.



© autan / Flickr.com  
Logging in central Thailand

Agricultural practices differ among the hill tribes of the north, such as the Hmong (the Meo) and the Karen, who utilize slash and burn agriculture, a process that involves clearing forested areas. They typically produce rice and, among the Hmong, opium. Rural people in the northern areas have also traditionally relied on forest products, such as bamboo and teakwood, to supplement their incomes. As a result, many areas have been deforested. Finally, in the large river valleys of central Thailand, the land is fertile and water is plentiful. In this region, farmers have intensified their agricultural production by developing canals for irrigation, transportation, and flood control. Their work patterns depend on the cycles of the monsoon rains.

Farmers in southern and central Thailand are more prosperous than those in the north and especially the northeast, where they generally remain very poor. In 1994, the average income in the poorest area in the northeast was 11.9 times lower than the average income of workers in Bangkok. For this reason, many people moved to the cities in search of jobs and higher income. However, after the 1997 economic crisis caused widespread unemployment in urban industries, many of the recent migrants returned to the countryside to find work. The influx of jobseekers into the countryside was so large that the rural agricultural economy could not absorb them. Consequently, poverty rates increased, with the most significant spike occurring in the rural northeast. During the period between 1996 and 1999, poverty rates rose from 19.4% to 30.8% in northeastern Thailand.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Everyculture.com. "Culture of Thailand: Food and Economy." c.2007. <http://www.everyculture.com/Sa-Th/Thailand.html>

<sup>161</sup> MSN Encarta Online Encyclopedia. "Thailand." c.2007. [http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia\\_761561385\\_4/Thailand.html](http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761561385_4/Thailand.html)

<sup>162</sup> All statistics in this paragraph are from the following source: National Economies Encyclopedia. "Thailand: Poverty and Wealth." c.2007. <http://www.nationsencyclopedia.com/economies/Asia-and-the-Pacific/Thailand-POVERTY-AND-WEALTH.html>

Thai farmers have traditionally sold their agricultural produce to local middlemen, a role often taken on by ethnic Chinese. These middlemen function as merchants for growers and small farmers by providing transportation and making arrangements to deliver their goods to market. As small traders and shopkeepers, Chinese businessmen have also been a source of supplies and credit, and, overall, they have provided an important economic link for rural people. However, ethnic Chinese have not held an exclusive monopoly in this area of the economy.

Rural land rights and ownership laws have changed over the years in Thailand. In the past, farmers paid a tax to the king for the right to work the land that they occupied. Population density was low and competition for cultivable land was minimal. As a result, available acreage remained abundant and most of the farms were small. The kingdom initiated the practice of individual land ownership in the early 20th century, and farmers obtained formal deeds after meeting occupancy and usage guidelines. As the country's population grew, increasing numbers of farmers competed for land, with many moving into areas classified for reserve rather than cultivation. Illegal occupation, restrictions on foreign ownership, and unclear classification procedures led to widespread problems. Many farmers lacked legal documentation for the land that they utilized, and as a result, they were unable to establish credit or qualify for government support. In general, it became increasingly difficult for authorities to determine ownership for particular tracts of land, and many farmers resorted to renting property in order to work.<sup>163</sup>



© Pablo Pecora  
Sleeping near a small camp

**Exchange 43:** Do you own this land?

<b>Soldier:</b>	Do you own this land?	kun pen jao khawng tie din puen ni chai mai krab
<b>Local:</b>	Yes.	chai krab

After the economy collapsed in the late 1990s, the government instituted certain reforms regarding land ownership. In particular, the new laws made it easier for Thais married to non-Thais to acquire land, a right that was previously difficult to exercise, or denied to them altogether due to prohibitions on foreign ownership. However, problems persist as

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<sup>163</sup> Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. Country Study: Thailand. "Land Tenure." September 1987. [http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field\(DOCID+th0093\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field(DOCID+th0093))

ownership laws and classifications remain unclear and residents continue to lack formal titles for the land that they have occupied for years.<sup>164</sup>

Overall, the majority of people in Thailand live in rural areas, even if their livelihoods are not tied to the agricultural sector. While many rural residents earn a living from farming, much of the population commutes to jobs in the cities. Also, a large number of rural Thais do only seasonal agricultural work, such as rice harvesting. They live in the countryside when the agricultural demand for jobs is high and, thereafter, they return to the cities to work for the remainder of the year.

### Rural Health<sup>165</sup>

Whereas much of Thailand’s health care has been privatized in the nation’s cities, the government heavily subsidizes medical care for those who live in rural areas. In the early 21st century, the country adopted a national health plan offering low-cost medical care to rural residents. The plan has significantly reduced infant mortality and death from infectious diseases. Overall, however, rural areas lack the same level of medical services and investment that urban areas receive. Fewer physicians, nurses, and well-equipped facilities are available outside metropolitan areas. Consequently, mortality rates remain higher in the countryside despite government subsidies. Often, rural residents can only rely on limited services, such as maternal and baby visits, inoculations, and family planning. However, access to these services may be insufficient.



© Angelo Juan Ramos  
Health clinic in Pak Chong village

Rural Thailand’s main medical facilities are community clinics and district hospitals, but they are often located in remote areas..

#### Exchange 44: Is there a medical clinic nearby?

<b>Soldier:</b>	Is there a medical clinic nearby?	mee raan maw glaay taew ni mai krab
<b>Local:</b>	Yes, over there.	mee krab yoo taang nown

<sup>164</sup> The Christian Science Monitor Online. Montlake, Simon. “In Thailand, a ‘Land Grab.’” 8 April 2005. <http://www.csmonitor.com/2005/0408/p07s02-woap.html>

<sup>165</sup> Encyclopædia Britannica. “Thailand: Health and Welfare.” 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-52667/Thailand>

In very small villages, the local medical staff may consist solely of volunteers who lack extensive training. In other cases, they may be primarily trained in communicating about health issues rather than treating them. For these reasons, rural populations continue to rely on herbal folk medicine, which is primarily dispensed by healers who are untrained and unlicensed in Western medicine. However, folk medicine maintains a certain level of government sponsorship, and the nation’s codified medical care system also has a partial foundation in traditional Indian and Chinese medical practices.<sup>166</sup>



© Ted Olikkalla  
Injured Rural Man

**Exchange 45:** My arm is broken, can you help me?

<b>Soldier:</b>	My arm is broken, can you help me?	khaen pom hag kun chuai pom dai mai
<b>Local:</b>	Yes, I can help you.	dai krab

The Thai government has a successful family planning program that has led to a sharp reduction in population growth. From a high of 3.1% in 1960, the growth rate has now dropped to under 1%.<sup>167</sup> At the same time, government-sponsored health education has led to an increase in the country’s average life expectancy. The impact of these health improvements, however, has been greater in urban areas.

Because most of Thailand’s population lives in the countryside, the nation’s HIV epidemic has afflicted rural areas as well as urban regions. Today, more than 500,000 Thais live with HIV or AIDS, and 25–30,000 die yearly from complications associated with the disease. Of the afflicted population, 90% are between 20 and 49 years of age, an important demographic in terms of the country’s productive workforce. In the early 1990s, the government utilized an aggressive public education campaign to successfully reduce the rate of infection. As a result, new HIV infections dropped from more than 100,000 annually to a present figure of approximately 15,000 per year.<sup>168</sup>

<sup>166</sup> Everyculture.com. “Thailand: Medicine and Health Care.” c.2007. <http://www.everyculture.com/Sa-Th/Thailand.html>

<sup>167</sup> Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, U.S. Department of State. “Background Note: Thailand.” March 2008. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2814.htm>

<sup>168</sup> All statistics are from: Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, U.S. Department of State. “Background Note: Thailand.” March 2008. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2814.htm>

## Rural Education

Education in rural Thailand has fallen far behind its urban counterpart. A large number of children in rural families receive only the nine years of elementary education mandated by the government.<sup>169</sup> In many cases, a family will subsequently remove their child from school in order to help with domestic duties and agricultural work. Because of family need, many young students leave school before they have completed the nine-year requirement.



© Mark Grapengater  
Siblings

Although state and private colleges are located throughout the country, rural areas suffer from weak elementary and secondary educational infrastructure. As reported in 1999, many schools lack libraries, including those in the greater community.<sup>170</sup> Library loaning services offering connections to larger resources are minimal due to poor organization and a general lack of commitment. Rural schools also suffer from a scarce number of books and basic school supplies, such as paper and pencils. School buildings are often dilapidated, crowded, and equipped with poor lighting.<sup>171, 172</sup>

For many years, volunteer organizations and NGOs have worked to upgrade conditions in Thailand's rural schools, with some limited success. For their part, state-run organizations have utilized a range of methods to motivate reading practices among students in rural Thailand. In the past, a "bookmobile project" attached to a university extension program created a successful book delivery pattern in rural areas. To encourage reading, the government has also used unorthodox means in widening the distribution of books. Its mobile delivery methods have included book vans, boats, motorcycles, and horse-drawn carts. To encourage reading among commuters, Thailand's Railway State Authority has placed books on trains and at train stations, making it easy for students and others to read while traveling.<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> In 1999, the Thai government increased compulsory primary education from six to nine years. Source: Everyculture.com. "Culture of Thailand: Socialization." c.2007. <http://www.everyculture.com/Sa-Th/Thailand.html>

<sup>170</sup> General sources indicate that the inadequate library and school infrastructure system has not improved much, if at all, since 1999.

<sup>171</sup> International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions. IFLANet. 65th IFLA Council and General Conference. "Delivering and Promoting Library Services in Rural Thailand." 1999. <http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla65/papers/023-114e.htm>

<sup>172</sup> Give Something Back International. "Roscoe's Rural Thai School Projects." c.2003-07. <http://www.gsbi.org/building-schools.html>

<sup>173</sup> International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions. IFLANet. 66th IFLA Council and General Conference. "Reaching Out Through a Mobile Library." 8 June 2000. <http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla66/papers/099-175e.htm>

Buddhist institutions sponsor many Thai schools, and they work with the Ministry of Education to shape school curriculum. In the country's early years, Buddhist monks were the main providers of education to boys from wealthy or influential families. Their goal was to train the boys to promote religious standards as part of their mandate in governing the provinces. In the late 19th century, the state expanded and emphasized its own role in providing public education. It began offering courses that were secular, broader in scope, and more vocational. Buddhist schools, however, have remained an essential part of Thailand's educational structure. Almost all villages have a monastery, and many of these maintain a school for religious instruction. Also, two major universities specializing in Buddhist studies maintain campuses throughout the country. Directed by monks, these institutions offer comprehensive Buddhist scholarship and training, in addition to instruction in other core subjects. Their goal is to develop well-educated monks who, in turn, can represent Buddhism in their local communities. Monks associated with one of these universities have also produced a formal Buddhist curriculum that is presently used in all primary and secondary schools.<sup>174, 175</sup>



© Trey Ratcliff  
Buddhist School

Children with disabilities are unlikely to obtain special education when they live in rural Thailand. This is true especially in the poverty-stricken north and northeastern regions, where disabilities and the necessity to work often keep children from attending school. A large number of child refugees from Laos and Burma live in these areas, and formal schooling plays only a limited role in their lives. In the 1990s, Thailand adopted special education policies and attempted to integrate special courses into the curriculum. However, such services remain limited and are primarily found only in urban schools.<sup>176</sup>

### **Gender Roles and Village Lifestyle**

Labor in rural areas is divided loosely by gender, with roles varying by region. In the north, the men prepare the land for planting and scatter the seed, whereas in central Thailand these duties are occasionally performed by women. In all regions, both men and women share the essential job of harvesting, and they often both participate in transplanting the rice seedlings. Both genders also engage in trading and selling goods in the marketplace. Domestic work is primarily the duty of women. They assume the responsibility of weaving, washing clothes, raising children, preparing food, and cleaning the house.<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> International Journal of Special Education. Carter, Stacy L. "The Development of Special Education Services in Thailand." 2006. <http://www.internationalsped.com/documents/04Carter.doc>

<sup>175</sup> Dhammathai Buddhist Information Network. "Buddhism in Thailand." c.2005. <http://www.dhammathai.org/e/thailand/contemporary.php>

<sup>176</sup> International Journal of Special Education. Carter, Stacy L. "The Development of Special Education Services in Thailand." 2006. <http://www.internationalsped.com/documents/04Carter.doc>

<sup>177</sup> Everyculture.com. "Culture of Thailand: Gender Roles and Statuses." c.2007. <http://www.everyculture.com/Sa-Th/Thailand.html>

Although more than half of the students who graduate from universities are women, they often remain tied to jobs that are low in pay and status. This is particularly common in rural areas, although women there may have considerable authority in the household. In some cases, their education allows them more options, such as the opportunity to gain better jobs by moving to the cities. However, it is often the men or other family members in the household that leave for part of the year in order to find gainful employment in the cities or in other countries. Higher divorce rates have accompanied the increasing independence of women and the prolonged, work-related separations of family members. Despite the woman's prominent role in the home, men are the heads of the household in nuclear families. Men also typically assume the position of village leaders, although it is now an option available to women as well.<sup>178</sup>



© Jonathan Pio  
Padaung Village

In rural Thailand, many people live in traditional-style homes that are elevated above the ground by large, wooden posts. This common feature serves to protect the home from flooding, and it also creates a work space beneath the house where the family can keep domestic animals and store equipment. Women use the space for their domestic duties, and family members can sleep outdoors under the house when the weather gets hot. The main part of the house includes a shaded veranda with mats for sitting and a balcony for doing domestic work such as laundry and sewing. In the enclosed part of the house there are sleeping quarters and a living room that is sparsely furnished. The house does not need sofas and chairs because people sit on mats on the floor. Small houses typically have a separate cooking area, and larger houses have a granary as well.<sup>179</sup>

Most rural homes have running water, and in the late 1970s and 1980s, villages began to receive electricity. As a result of modernization, television became widespread, and village habits changed accordingly. For example, regional opera and other customary forms of entertainment have given way to TV programs connected with urban Thailand.<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> Encyclopædia Britannica. "Thailand: Changing Rural and Urban Lifestyles." 2008.  
<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-274223/Thailand>

<sup>179</sup> Everyculture.com. "Culture of Thailand: Urbanism, Architecture, and the Use of Space." c.2007.  
<http://www.everyculture.com/Sa-Th/Thailand.html>

<sup>180</sup> Encyclopædia Britannica. "Thailand: Changing Rural and Urban Lifestyles." 2008.  
<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-274223/Thailand>

## Transportation<sup>181, 182, 183, 184</sup>

Major transportation systems in Thailand include trains, airlines, and a roadway system designed to withstand all weather conditions. Railways travel out of Bangkok, the main hub, and carry passengers to many parts of the country. The rail system is owned and managed by the State Railway of Thailand. The country initially developed its road and highway system in the 1950s with U.S. assistance, and the network now extends into remote northern areas. Of the 35,000 km (21,750 mi) of rural roads in Thailand, approximately 82% of them are paved.<sup>185</sup> Roadway maintenance falls under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Transport's Department of Rural Roads.

River travel is also an efficient option for transport. The waterways of the Chao Phraya Delta and the canals and rivers of the north and central regions have been used for centuries to carry people and goods throughout rural areas. In the case of the latter, Thais use barges to carry large amounts of agricultural produce. River navigation conditions depend on the weather, which varies from dry to rainy according to season. On canals (*khlongs*) around Bangkok and waterways that connect the city to its outskirts, commuters can travel on ferryboats. Other kinds of river transportation include express boats, small speed boats, and long-tail boats that operate on the coastlines.<sup>186</sup> The latter of these boats is typically propelled by a type of car engine.



© Drew Hess  
Boats in the peninsular south of Thailand

Rural dwellers have access to motorbikes, cars, trucks, and public buses; the locals rely heavily on the latter because they are thrifty and relatively safe. Small minibuses called *songtaews* are common in rural towns.<sup>187</sup> In some cases, people utilize tractor engines and used parts from trucks to make farm vehicles capable of carrying people and produce to market. Highways typically have two lanes as far north as Chiang Mai, but roads can

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<sup>181</sup> The World Bank. "Transport in Thailand." c.2008.

<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/EASTASIAPACIFICEXT/EXTEAPREGTOPTRANSPORT/0,,contentMDK:20767673~menuPK:2069358~pagePK:34004173~piPK:34003707~theSitePK:574066,00.html>

<sup>182</sup> Encyclopædia Britannica. "Thailand: Transportation and Telecommunications." 2008.

<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-52661/Thailand>

<sup>183</sup> U.S. Library of Congress. A Country Study: Thailand. "Country Profile: Transportation and Communications." 1987. <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/thtoc.html>

<sup>184</sup> MSN Encarta. "Thailand: Transportation." c.1993–2007.

[http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia\\_761561385\\_7/Thailand.html](http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761561385_7/Thailand.html)

<sup>185</sup> The World Bank. "Transport in Thailand." c.2008.

<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/EASTASIAPACIFICEXT/EXTEAPREGTOPTRANSPORT/0,,contentMDK:20767673~menuPK:2069358~pagePK:34004173~piPK:34003707~theSitePK:574066,00.html>

<sup>186</sup> Thaiworldview.com. "Boat." No date. <http://www.thaiworldview.com/travel/travel7.htm>

<sup>187</sup> One Stop Thailand. "Taxis and Buses in Thailand." 11 March 2008.

<http://www.1stophailand.com/transportation/taxis-buses/>

be quite narrow, though, at times, they are not heavily traveled.<sup>188, 189</sup> Roads in remote rural areas are typically graveled and marked by potholes, narrow lanes, and an absence of road signs.

**Exchange 46:** Do you know this area very well?

<b>Soldier:</b>	Do you know this area very well?	kun roo jag taew nie dee rue krab
<b>Local:</b>	Yes.	dee krab

It can be dangerous to drive in rural areas, for the roads are frequently used by pedestrians, some of whom may be leading animals, and bicyclists and motorbike drivers who may drive erratically. It is also common for horse-drawn carts to use the roads, and animals frequently cross in front of traffic. Much of the traffic is slow-moving, and some is very fast. At night, people often do not use their headlights when driving. Locals tend to drive recklessly in the north, where the terrain is mountainous. They often do not follow basic driving rules, and the police do not regularly enforce traffic laws in rural areas. Driving a private car in such areas, especially at night, can be risky and requires full concentration to avoid accidents.<sup>190</sup>



© Steve Evans  
Thai woman driving a ox and cart

**Exchange 47:** Is there lodging nearby?

<b>Soldier:</b>	Is there lodging nearby?	mee tie pag raem taew nie mai
<b>Local:</b>	Yes.	mee krab

<sup>188</sup> National Agricultural and Environmental Forum. Justice, Scott E. "Mechanizing Rural Transport via Alternative IMTs." No date. [http://www.naef-nepal.org/RRF MECHANIZATION OF RURAL TRANSPORTATION.pdf](http://www.naef-nepal.org/RRF_MECHANIZATION_OF_RURAL_TRANSPORTATION.pdf)

<sup>189</sup> One Stop Thailand. "Transportation to Thailand." No date. <http://www.1stophailand.com/transportation/>

<sup>190</sup> Andys [sic] Real Guide to Thailand. "Driving." No date. <http://216.147.18.102/thailand/driving.html>

**Village Hierarchy**<sup>191, 192, 193</sup>

Traditionally, Thai villagers deferred to the authority of clan leaders, Buddhist monks, and animist religious figures in their decision-making processes. When settling disputes, villagers tried to reach a consensus by following their longstanding communal customs, which involved elected village authorities as mediators in the process. Today, government services play a stronger role in village life, and, accordingly, rural residents have increased contact and familiarity with state officials and law. Though it varies by region, much of the customary reliance on village elders and local authority figures has weakened. However, many rural Thais continue to follow traditional village customs, despite the fact that they contradict state laws, which some see as arbitrary or irrational. For example, such was the case in the 1980s when the country’s Ministry of Justice operated a mobile court system in rural Thailand. The operation encountered resistance from rural residents, and, after achieving little success, the government abandoned the system. In general, the enforcement of national laws and hierarchies is irregular in rural areas.



© Steve Evans  
Village Elder

In terms of hierarchy, villages maintain their self-governing tradition of electing a village head, or *phu-yai ban*. Traditionally, only men could occupy this position, but policy changes established in 1983 now allow women to be selected as leaders. To meet the basic requirements, the leader must be literate, 25 years of age or older, and a member of the village community for at least six months. He or she can run for election repeatedly and hold the position for a long period of time. However, the leader can also be replaced if the villagers end their support.

**Exchange 48:** Does your mayor live here?

<b>Soldier:</b>	Does your mayor live here?	baan khawng gam nan yoo tie ni rue krab
<b>Local:</b>	Yes.	chai krab

<sup>191</sup> Thailand Law Source. Klausner, William J. “Law and Society.” No date. <http://members.tripod.com/asialaw/articles/lawwilliam.html>

<sup>192</sup> Geocities.com. “Welcome to Thailand: Village Organization and Leadership.” Cited from: “Thailand into the 2000’s” by the National Identity Board Office of The Prime Minister. 2000. [http://www.geocities.com/leo\\_md310/th2000/villa.htm](http://www.geocities.com/leo_md310/th2000/villa.htm)

<sup>193</sup> Deliberative Democracy. Arensberg, Austin. “Crossing Barriers: Improving Deliberation in Northeastern Thailand.” 2007. [http://www.austinarensberg.com/?page\\_id=391](http://www.austinarensberg.com/?page_id=391)

One of the major functions of the *phu-yai ban* is to settle disagreements in order to maintain social cohesion. The reconciliation process is a democratic one that reaches out to all parties involved in order to prevent anyone from losing face and to ensure that the final resolution is fair. The outcome depends on the degree of participation by villagers and to what extent the atmosphere is free from coercion or political manipulation by affected parties.

**Exchange 49:** Can you take me to your mayor?

<b>Soldier:</b>	Can you take me to your mayor?	chuai paa pom pai haa gam nan noi dai mai krab
<b>Local:</b>	Yes.	dai krab

In many villages, participation in community meetings is low for a variety of reasons. On a practical level, village meetings take place at night, and people who have worked in the fields all day may be too tired to attend. Women with children may simply be unable to leave their homes due to maternal obligations. Also, social barriers often reduce participation. For example, young adults between 13 and 18 years of age are not typically allowed to speak at the meetings. Similarly, people whose education does not extend beyond high school (which is typical in northeastern Thailand) may not feel comfortable in articulating a reasoned position.



© Ted Ollikkala  
Village Elders

In addition to presiding over meetings, the *phu-yai ban* serves as the village record-keeper and maintains logs of the births and deaths in the community. He or she also functions as a village spokesperson when it is necessary to communicate with government officials. On a larger scale, villages group together in districts of up to 28 villages, and one of the *phu-yai ban* is elected as representative (*kamnan*) of the entire group.

Thus, the authoritative person who can help visitors in rural areas is either the village leader or the district leader of several villages.

**Exchange 50:** Respected mayor, we need your help.

<b>Soldier:</b>	Respected mayor, we need your help / advice / opinion.	sa wad dee krab tan gam nan pom khaw kam nae nam / khaw kwaam hen giaw gab ruang nie noi krab
<b>Local:</b>	Yes.	dai krab

Different ethnic groups in Thailand have variations in their village structures. Among the Khmer in southeastern Thailand, customs are often similar to those of the majority because the group has largely assimilated into Thai culture. In Khmer villages, the village leader or chief retains authority in areas that are secular. In religious matters, however, Buddhist monks have the authority to intervene and restore social harmony.<sup>194</sup>



© Adrian Whelan  
Thailand and Burma border

**Checkpoints**<sup>195, 196</sup>

Numerous military checkpoints exist in the Malay provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat along Thailand’s southern peninsular border. In mid 2006, approximately 20,000 Thai soldiers were stationed in the region to ensure the public’s safety and staff the roadside checkpoints.<sup>197</sup>

**Exchange 51:** Did these people threaten you?

<b>Soldier:</b>	Did these people threaten you?	kon puag nie kug kaam kun rue plao
<b>Local:</b>	No.	plaaao krab

<sup>194</sup> Sawadee.com. “Hilltribes: Khmer.” c.1996–2007.

<http://www.sawadee.com/thailand/hilltribes/khmer/index.htm>

<sup>195</sup> Global Security.org. “Thailand Islamic Insurgency.” 27 April 2005.

<http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/thailand2.htm>

<sup>196</sup> Reuters. “Thailand Violence.” 7 January 2008.

[http://www.alertnet.org/db/crisisprofiles/TH\\_INS.htm?v=timeline](http://www.alertnet.org/db/crisisprofiles/TH_INS.htm?v=timeline)

<sup>197</sup> BBC News. “Fighting Thailand’s Insurgents.” 9 August 2006. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/4775623.stm>

In 2003, the Thai government broke up an Islamic militant cell in the southern peninsular area after it discovered plans to bomb foreign embassies in Thailand. Since then, violence has escalated by insurgents who resent the Thai Buddhist government's control over the territory. After the Thai government acknowledged in 2004 that an organized separatist insurgency held operations in the area, it declared martial law in those provinces. The southern area has long been a site of disruptive and illegal activity, ranging from Malaysian communists attacking the Thai government after World War II, to decades of drug trafficking by criminals and radical operatives. The recent insurgency follows a pattern of resistance after years of dormancy.<sup>198</sup>

**Exchange 52:** Where is the nearest checkpoint?

<b>Soldier:</b>	Where is the nearest checkpoint?	jud truad sawb tie glaay tie sud yoo ti nai
<b>Local:</b>	It's two kilometers.	yoo hang pai eeg sawng kilomed krab

Gated military checkpoints manned by armed guards are also present on roads near the border between Thailand and Burma. The soldiers' objective is to stop Burmese from crossing the border illegally or from escaping from closely guarded refugee camps. Although there are various methods of entry, smugglers with drugs and other goods often enter into Thailand by swimming across the Moei River, which forms the Thai border with Burma.



© g-na / Flickr.com  
Immigration Checkpoint on Burma border

However, many illegal immigrants from Burma are merely trying to escape the extreme poverty, malnutrition, joblessness, and inadequate medical care that mark Burmese society. They also hope to avoid forced conscription and labor, common practices in Burma due to the general political repression maintained by the country's military rulers. Thailand's relative prosperity offers the prospect of a richer life to those who succeed in crossing the border. Regardless of the Burmese refugees' reasons for crossing, however, the Thais do not allow them entry into the country.

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<sup>198</sup> Rebellions in this area date to 1902, when the government of Thailand (then named Siam) annexed the semi-independent Islamic Malay Kingdom of Patani.

**Exchange 53:** Is this all the ID you have?

<b>Soldier:</b>	Is this all the ID you have?	ni kue lag taan pra jam tuaa tie kun mee tang mod rue krab
<b>Local:</b>	Yes.	krab

In the city of Myawadi, located partly in Burma and partly in Thailand, military checkpoints are found along the Thai side of the city's outskirts. Their objective is to prevent Burmese visitors from traveling farther into Thailand.<sup>199, 200, 201</sup>

**Exchange 54:** Show us the car registration.

<b>Soldier:</b>	Show us the car registration.	khaw doo ta bian rod noi
<b>Local:</b>	OK.	dai krab

Customs checkpoints are placed between Thailand's borders with Laos and Cambodia. They are not open 24 hours a day but, instead, have scheduled hours of operation. Officials require visitors to present appropriate documentation in order to pass through the checkpoint, and they charge a fee, which varies according to the country of entry. In addition, military checkpoints are common near the Thai-Cambodian border, where drug smuggling is common and illegal immigrants frequently cross.<sup>202, 203</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> International Herald Tribune. Fuller, Thomas. "Part 3: Between Myanmar and Thailand, a Modest Waterway and a Gaping Divide." 24 October 2007. <http://www.iht.com/articles/2007/10/24/asia/border.1-155693.php?page=1>

<sup>200</sup> Real Travel. "Waterfalls, Bridges, Checkpoints, and a Motorbike." 28 October 2007. [http://realtravel.com/sangkhla\\_buri-journals-j5954636.html](http://realtravel.com/sangkhla_buri-journals-j5954636.html)

<sup>201</sup> GORP. Kaplan, Daniel. "Thai Refugee Camps: Beyond the Beaten Path." c.1999–2008. <http://gorp.away.com/gorp/location/asia/kaplan/refugee.htm>

<sup>202</sup> Andys [sic] Real Guide to Thailand. "Borders and Some History." No date. <http://216.147.18.102/thailand/borders.html>

<sup>203</sup> Andys [sic] Real Guide to Thailand. "Driving." No date. <http://216.147.18.102/thailand/driving.html>

**Landmines**<sup>204, 205, 206</sup>

Landmines and unexploded ordnance (UXO) are found along Thailand’s borders with Malaysia, Cambodia, Laos, and Burma. Most of the contaminated area lies along the Cambodian border, where the Khmer Rouge laid many mines in the 1970s. Throughout Thailand, many of these areas remain unmarked. Charity organizations in Thailand report that each year around 70 people are injured or disabled from stepping on mines, and other sources put the number much higher.



**Exchange 55:** Is this area mined?

<b>Soldier:</b>	Is this area mined?	taew nie mee ra berd mai
<b>Local:</b>	Yes.	mee krab

Mines are located in approximately 2,257 sq km (871 sq mi) of the country. For this reason, and in accordance with a treaty that bans landmines globally, the government of Thailand has made a commitment to clear all mines from its territory.<sup>207</sup> The Thai Army and Navy have been removing the devices in border areas since 1987, and the government promised to complete the project by 2009. However, the head of TMAC (Thailand Mine Action Center), the military agency ultimately responsible for mine clearing and disposal, has indicated that the agency needs more time and funding.

<sup>204</sup> International News Safety Institute. “Thailand: Landmines.” 11 April 2008.

<http://www.newssafety.com/hotspots/countries/thailandx.htm>

<sup>205</sup> Thailand Mine Action Center (TMAC). “Profiles: Thailand.” No date.

<http://maic.jmu.edu/journal/5.1/Profiles/Thailand/thailand.htm>

<sup>206</sup> Landmine Survivors Network. Agence France Presse. “Thailand Struggles to Clear Its Landmines.” 13 September 2004. [http://www.landminesurvivors.org/news\\_article.php?id=378](http://www.landminesurvivors.org/news_article.php?id=378)

<sup>207</sup> The “Royal Thai government signed the Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production, and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines in Ottawa on 3 December 1997. Thailand deposited its ratification instrument at the United Nations on 27 November 1998, the first nation in Southeast Asia to do so.” Source: Thailand Mine Action Center (TMAC). “About Us.” No date.

<http://www.tmac.go.th/aboutus/aboutus.htm>

## Family Life

### Family Structure<sup>208, 209</sup>

Life in Thai villages revolves around the extended family. Parents, grandparents, children, and other family members may all live in the same house, provided it is large enough to meet their needs. Because of the close quarters in such households, people generally lack privacy. Rather than causing tension, however, the crowded living arrangements tend to promote qualities such as tolerance and tactfulness. In turn, the family unit develops and maintains the social harmony that is so highly valued in Thailand.



© gadgetdan / Flickr.com  
Elderly Woman with Grandchildren

**Exchange 56:** How many people live in this house?

<b>Soldier:</b>	How many people live in this house?	mee kon yoo nai baan nie gie kon
<b>Local:</b>	Ten.	sib kon

Family members may also live in separate houses that are grouped together in one compound. Within these close family environments children interact daily with a number of different relatives. From this exposure to family members of all ages, children learn their social and familial roles as they grow into adulthood.

**Exchange 57:** Does your family live here?

<b>Soldier:</b>	Does your family live here?	krawb kruaa kun yoo tie nie rue plaao
<b>Local:</b>	Yes.	yoo krab

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<sup>208</sup> Geocities.com. The National Identity Board Office of the Prime Minister. "Thailand into the 2000s: The Family." 2000. [http://www.geocities.com/leo\\_md310/th2000/family.htm](http://www.geocities.com/leo_md310/th2000/family.htm)

<sup>209</sup> Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Thailand: Cultural Life: Daily Life and Social Customs: Changing Rural and Urban Lifestyles." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/589625/Thailand>

In urban Thailand, family ties are often less strong. The rapid growth of cities has led many Thais to relocate, and in doing so, they increasingly identify with modern urban culture. For example, young urban couples often set up their own separate household, and live a more modern, independent lifestyle than their counterparts in villages. As a result, it is less common to find extended families living together in Thailand's urban areas. However, most Thais have rural backgrounds, and they maintain connections to their relatives in villages.

**Exchange 58:** Did you grow up here?

<b>Soldier:</b>	Did you grow up here?	kun terb to tie nie rue krab
<b>Local:</b>	Yes.	chai krab

In general, the family unit is of utmost importance for the Thai people, and their bonds of kinship remain in place throughout their lives.

**Exchange 59:** Is this your entire family?

<b>Soldier:</b>	Is this your entire family?	ne kue krawb kruaa khong kun rue
<b>Local:</b>	Yes.	krab

Within the family, areas of responsibility are clearly delineated. First, Thai families are patriarchal, with the male leader having authority over all other members of the family. Mothers have authority in teaching children and overseeing family budgets. Children have shifting roles within the group; they assist the family whenever they can be of service. The largest social unit after the family is the village. Its members tend to rely on each other in the same way that family members provide a network of support for each other. However, because so many villagers now have long commutes to jobs in metropolitan areas, participation in village events has decreased.



© honey-bee / Flickr.com  
Urban Thai Family

## Status of Women, Elderly, and Children<sup>210, 211, 212, 213</sup>

### Women

The division of labor in Thai households falls primarily along gender lines. Women are responsible for running the household, teaching and disciplining their children, and helping with agricultural work.

**Exchange 60:** Do your children go to school?

<b>Soldier:</b>	Do your children go to school?	loog loog khawng kun pai rong rian rue plao
<b>Local:</b>	Yes.	pai krab

Outside the domestic sphere, women also work in such fields as agriculture, manufacturing, banking, tourism, and export industries. Female employment in the latter two sectors is particularly high. Women are also highly visible in the fields of health and education. In any case, even if a woman holds a job outside the household, she maintains her fundamental role as family caregiver.



**Exchange 61:** Are these your children?

<b>Soldier:</b>	Are these your children?	ni loog loog kun chai mai
<b>Local:</b>	Yes.	chai krab

<sup>210</sup> Geocities.com. The National Identity Board Office of the Prime Minister. "Thailand into the 2000s: The Family." 2000. [http://www.geocities.com/leo\\_md310/th2000/family.htm](http://www.geocities.com/leo_md310/th2000/family.htm)

<sup>211</sup> Geocities.com. The National Identity Board Office of the Prime Minister. "Thailand into the 2000s: The Role of Women in Thai Society." 2000. [http://www.geocities.com/leo\\_md310/th2000/women20.htm](http://www.geocities.com/leo_md310/th2000/women20.htm)

<sup>212</sup> Geocities.com. The National Identity Board Office of the Prime Minister. "Thailand into the 2000s: Social Welfare." 2000. [http://www.geocities.com/leo\\_md310/th2000/sowelf.htm](http://www.geocities.com/leo_md310/th2000/sowelf.htm)

<sup>213</sup> Geocities.com. The National Identity Board Office of the Prime Minister. "Thailand into the 2000s: Individual Life Cycles." 2000. [http://www.geocities.com/leo\\_md310/th2000/inlife.htm](http://www.geocities.com/leo_md310/th2000/inlife.htm)

Among their other professional endeavors, Thai women are prominent in government work. They serve in administrative positions at most levels, including cabinet posts and state ministries. A woman became a provincial governor for the first time in 1993. Overall, Thai women hold equal constitutional rights and they are among the first women in Asia to have achieved this status.

**Exchange 62:** Where do you work, sir?

<b>Soldier:</b>	Where do you work, sir?	kun tam haan tie nai krab
<b>Local:</b>	I am a farmer, sir.	pom pen chao naa krab

Women play a strong role in making decisions regarding purchases for the home or for family-related services or goods, whereas men are generally in charge of public transactions. In the past, men were the traditional breadwinners who worked outside the home and provided the family with its main income. Now, although women generally lack equal pay, their income makes a significant contribution to the household earnings.

*Elderly*

In Thailand, the elderly traditionally live with their extended families, who support and care for them. The responsibility for caring for the aging parents often falls to the youngest daughter. Depending on the extent to which she takes on this role, she may inherit the family home in return for her efforts.<sup>214</sup>



© Steve Evans  
Elderly hill tribe woman

**Exchange 63:** Do you have any brothers?

<b>Soldier:</b>	Do you have any brothers?	kun mee pie chay nawng chaay mai
<b>Local:</b>	Yes.	mee krab

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<sup>214</sup> Everyculture.com. "Culture of Thailand: Marriage, Family, and Kinship." c.2007. <http://www.everyculture.com/Sa-Th/Thailand.html>

The expectation and desire to take care of one's elderly family members is deeply ingrained into Thais at a young age. In general, Thais maintain a strong tradition of social welfare. Their efforts extend first, of course, to their own families and to those who are most vulnerable, typically the elderly and the very young. In the larger community, Buddhist monasteries have played a strong role in the Thai social support system, functioning as sources of social welfare, rehabilitation, education, and other community services. Thus, through both familial and communal networks, the elderly receive sufficient social and physical care.

In turn, the elderly typically care for the children in their extended families, and they participate in the family's social life. Furthermore, families rely on their elderly members for their knowledge and wisdom.

### *Children*

Thai children enjoy the love and indulgence of their families, which leads them to form lasting social bonds with their relatives. As they grow up within the family structure, they learn their roles and obligations. Older family members tend to treat young children permissively, but at the same time they are very active in teaching them about respect and responsibility. As they benefit from the care and instruction of their grandparents, children learn to show respect to older family members, and they subsequently apply this practice in other social situations throughout their lives. In other words, from an early age, Thais learn that in business, or any other social circumstances, they must respect and defer to their elders.



© Hans Evers  
Child's face

### **Exchange 64:** Are these people part of your family?

<b>Soldier:</b>	Are these people part of your family?	kon puag nie pen kon nai krawb kruaa khawng kun rue plao
<b>Local:</b>	No.	plao krab

As is common, children's roles change according to their age and gender. At a young age, they spend considerable time playing with other boys and girls in the community. Around the age of eight, children help care for livestock and watch over younger siblings when the parents are working. Boys tend to do more outdoor work, while girls participate in domestic chores. The responsibilities for both genders increase as the years pass. At the appropriate time, elder family members formally recognize teenagers for their insight and opinions by inviting them to take part in family discussions. During these sessions, their thoughts regarding important family issues receive consideration. At around the age of

20, boys usually spend a season in the village monastery, where they learn the ways of Buddhist monkhood firsthand.

In the past, Thais segregated their children for schooling according to gender. Boys learned to read and write in the village’s Buddhist monastery, which they attended regularly. The education of girls, on the other hand, was confined mostly to the home, where they learned to do domestic chores. This practice began to change in 1932, when the government created a secular system of public schools.

**Exchange 65:** Is there a school nearby?

<b>Soldier:</b>	Is there a school nearby?	mee rong rian glay glay taew nie mai
<b>Local:</b>	Yes.	mee krab

Thailand’s children benefited much from the more equitable educational system. By the late 1990s, the country’s educational efforts led to a significant increase in primary school enrollment and, ultimately, the achievement of literacy for roughly 93% of Thailand’s adults.<sup>215</sup>

**Marriage, Divorce, and Birth**<sup>216, 217</sup>

*Marriage*

In Thai culture, young people make their own decisions as to whom they will marry. They often wed someone from the same village after a lengthy period of courtship and chaperoned meetings. The parents have relatively little say in their child’s choice of marriage partner, and they are further removed from the process when their children live independently in urban areas.



© Enda Nasution  
Thai muslim wedding party

<sup>215</sup> Everyculture.com. “Culture of Thailand: Socialization.” c.2007. <http://www.everyculture.com/Sa-Th/Thailand.html>

<sup>216</sup> Geocities.com. The National Identity Board Office of the Prime Minister. “Thailand into the 2000s: Individual Life Cycles.” 2000. [http://www.geocities.com/leo\\_md310/th2000/inlife.htm](http://www.geocities.com/leo_md310/th2000/inlife.htm)

<sup>217</sup> Everyculture.com. “Culture of Thailand: Marriage, Family, and Kinship” and “Culture of Thailand: Etiquette.” c.2007. <http://www.everyculture.com/Sa-Th/Thailand.html>

**Exchange 66:** Are you married?

<b>Soldier:</b>	Are you married?	kun taeng haan laew rue yang
<b>Local:</b>	No.	yang krab

In villages, the new husband and wife will sometimes live in the wife's parents' home. It is more common in cities, however, for a newly married couple to set up their own nuclear family. In both cases, the wife becomes the central figure of the home and embodies its domestic values. She is responsible for raising the children. The husband becomes the head of the household and acts as a mediator between the family and the public world, even though the wife may hold a job outside the home as well. Husbands may help with some of the household work, such as cooking. This is often the case at village festivals, where men assist the women with food preparation.

Husbands and wives do not demonstrate their affections publicly. Such modesty is in accordance with the Thai principle of maintaining social harmony by controlling one's natural impulses. It is acceptable to show emotions inside the family unit, but public conduct is expected to be subdued, indirect, and respectfully polite. If there is a conflict between a husband and wife, they treat the situation as a private matter that is not to be discussed outside the immediate family.

**Exchange 67:** Is this your wife?

<b>Soldier:</b>	Is this your wife?	ni pan ra yaa kun chai mai
<b>Local:</b>	Yes.	chai krab

As it concerns the country's Muslim population, Islamic marriage follows a different set of rules. According to the laws of Islam, marriage is based on a contract initiated by a man and the father or legal guardian of the potential bride. The two parties negotiate a contract that specifies the qualities that a good Islamic husband should possess, such as sanity, economic solvency, and physical presence ( he is physically present with his family on a regular basis ).

*Divorce*

Obtaining a divorce in Thailand is a relatively straightforward and simple process. If neither party contests the separation and both are willing to cooperate, the couple

registers for an administrative divorce and it is typically granted. If, however, either party opposes the divorce or disagrees over property division or child custody, then the couple must proceed through a court system and state their grounds for separation. In Thailand, legal reasons for divorce include: separation for three years, desertion, polygamy, adultery, insanity, and physical or mental harm. When division of assets is an issue, community property laws apply and debts are divided between both parties as well.<sup>218</sup>



In Buddhist culture, a woman's social status is not diminished through divorce, and she is free to remarry without going through a waiting period. Marriage itself is not a religious sacrament in the Buddhist religion; the involvement of monks in the wedding ceremony represents a sharing of alms or blessings rather than a religious requirement. Just as marriage is free of religious judgment or strictures within Thailand's Buddhist culture, so too is divorce. Dissolving the marriage contract is the purview of the parties involved.<sup>219</sup> If there is a disagreement and the state becomes involved, neither party is favored or discriminated against by virtue of sex, according to Thai law.

For Muslim Thais, Islamic law allows a couple to divorce for several reasons, and the separation may be initiated by either party. Still, Islamic law requires that every attempt should be made to save the marriage. Before divorcing, a husband and wife must try to resolve their differences by seeking mediation from relatives on both sides of the family. If mediation fails to solve their problems, then the divorce may proceed. Once the divorce is filed, there is a three month period allowing time for the couple to attempt reconciliation. If after three months there has been no reconciliation, the divorce goes into effect and the marriage is officially over.<sup>220</sup>

In recent years, Thailand's divorce rate has increased for various reasons. A major factor has been the increased independence of women, who have entered the workforce in large numbers and are better able to support themselves. The expanding economy has led to more financial independence and a wider scope of professional choices for women. Also, many people who live in villages but commute to urban areas or other countries for work are absent from their families for long periods of time. The prolonged separation of family members has had a detrimental effect on some marriages.<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>218</sup> Chaninat & Leeds. "Thailand Divorce." c.2001-2007. <http://www.thailand-lawyer.com/divorce.html>

<sup>219</sup> Buddhist Publication Society. Dewaraja, Dr. (Mrs.) L.S. "The Position of Women in Buddhism." 1981. <http://www.accesstoinight.org/lib/authors/dewaraja/wheel280.html>

<sup>220</sup> Islam for Today. "Divorce: Some Misconceptions." 2007. <http://www.islamfortoday.com/divorce.htm>

<sup>221</sup> Encyclopædia Britannica. "Thailand: Cultural Life: Daily Life and Social Customs: Changing Urban and Rural Lifestyles." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/589625/Thailand>

## *Birth and Birth Ceremonies*<sup>222, 223</sup>

It is common for newlyweds living in villages to anticipate the birth of their first child within the first year of marriage. Large families with many children are typical in Thai culture, although the country's successful family planning programs have slowed this trend. In poor villages and households, children represent a source of assistance. They can help the family with farm work, housework, and caring for younger brothers and sisters.



Children are also seen as part of a social security network that ensures that the parents will be cared for in their old age.

The birth of a child is an occasion for great celebration. Although Thai Buddhism does not mandate religious ceremonies for a child's birth, Thais have adopted and localized certain Hindu rites for this event. Regardless, Buddhist priests also participate in these ceremonies by chanting, offering holy water, or reading scriptures. At birth, the family performs a ceremony in the home to promote and strengthen the child's *khwan*, the life force, soul, or spirit that any living being has, according to common Thai belief. For Thais, it is one's *khwan* that shields a person from illness or danger.<sup>224</sup> From its inception, the ceremony's purpose has been to protect both mother and child. It developed in a time when infant mortality rates were high and medical knowledge was minimal. As a result, people relied on folk practices for guidance.<sup>225</sup>

According to a study of pregnancy and childbirth in a village in northeastern Thailand, the notion of *khwan* also encompasses a person's will to live and state of mind. For this reason, residents in the northeast have traditionally held a special *khwan* ritual for each pregnant woman as she nears childbirth. The ritual's purpose is to help the woman mentally prepare for a successful delivery. According to custom, the rite takes place in the woman's natural surroundings, and her family members attend the ceremony to ensure a strong sense of community and wellbeing. The person directing the ceremony uses ritual objects and utters sacred words to the child after it is born, when it is most vulnerable to malevolent spirits known as *phi*. To block the influence of *phi*, participants toss rice grains throughout the house and scatter thorny branches on the ground below the delivery room.<sup>226</sup>

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<sup>222</sup> ThailandLife.com. "Fire Hair Shaving." c.1997–2008. <http://www.thailandlife.com/firehair.html>

<sup>223</sup> Thailand Illustrated. "Welcoming a New Member of the Royal Family." 2006. [http://thailand.prd.go.th/ebook\\_bak/story.php?idmag=29&idstory=225](http://thailand.prd.go.th/ebook_bak/story.php?idmag=29&idstory=225)

<sup>224</sup> Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. Country Study: Thailand. "Buddhist Doctrine and Popular Religion." 1987. <http://countrystudies.us/thailand/55.htm>

<sup>225</sup> Oriental Information Home Page, George Washington University (GWU). "Thai Culture: Festivals and Ceremonies." c.1996. <http://www.gwu.edu/~acg/tcfest.htm>

<sup>226</sup> Nanzan University. *Asian Folklore Studies*, Vol. 43. Poulsen, Anders. "Customs and Rites Connected with Pregnancy and Childbirth in a Northeastern Thai Village." 1984. <http://www.nanzan-u.ac.jp/SHUBUNKEN/publications/afs/pdf/a473.pdf>

For Thais, when a child reaches the age of one month and one day, it has survived the most dangerous period after birth. At this time a *khwan* ceremony takes place and a monk shaves the child's head. The shaved hair is placed in a banana-leaf bowl containing a lotus leaf (and possibly other flowers). The assemblage serves as an offering to the spirits of the area. In the ritual that follows, family members tie white cotton string around the baby's wrists and offer a customary blessing.

If the family is wealthy, they may consult an astrologer to choose the most propitious date for the *khwan* ritual. In such cases, ceremonial objects from a Brahmin and the astrologer become part of the offering, and the ritual may involve added steps.

In Thai families, male children may be slightly preferred. However, both girls and boys are cherished and loved.

### **Naming Conventions**<sup>227</sup>

Shortly after birth, a Thai baby receives a nickname, usually consisting of one syllable. Relatives and close friends will use this name throughout the child's entire life. A baby also receives a proper name, which the local priest chooses and officially registers in the village records. The designation of the formal name may take place at the *khwan* ceremony when the child's head is shaved at the age of one month and one day.



© Mark Grapengater  
Handsome Young Boy

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<sup>227</sup> Geocities.com. The National Identity Board Office of the Prime Minister. "Thailand into the 2000s: Individual Life Cycles." 2000. [http://www.geocities.com/leo\\_md310/th2000/inlife.htm](http://www.geocities.com/leo_md310/th2000/inlife.htm)