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Thai Cultural Orientation

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*Bangkok traffic at night
Flickr/Heiko S*

Chapter 1 Profile

Introduction

Thailand occupies a central location within Southeast Asia and is the only country in the region that has never been colonized.¹ For much of its history the land was ruled by an absolute monarchy. Since 1932, however, the nation has experienced many changes, including a name change from Siam to Thailand.^{2,3} Modern Thailand has witnessed periods of remarkable economic development, deregulation, privatization, and a focus on an export-oriented economy.^{4,5,6} Today, about 96% of the nation's population are ethnic Thai, while the remaining population belongs to various ethnic groups. The military launched a coup in 2014, deposing the elected government; two years later, the military remained in control of the country.^{7,8,9}



*Thailand Map
Antoinette C. Smith*

Important Elements of Geography

Area

Thailand covers 513,120 sq km (198,456 sq mi), making it roughly the size of Texas or Spain, and is shaped like the head of an elephant. It is located at the center of peninsular Southeast Asia and is bordered by Myanmar (Burma) and the Andaman Sea to the west, Cambodia to the southeast, and the Gulf of Thailand and Malaysia to the south.

Climate

Thailand's tropical climate is characterized by its monsoon cycle. During the rainy season, 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. Rainfall varies throughout the region. The southern peninsula received over 2,500 mm (98 in) of rainfall yearly, compared to 1,500 mm (59 in) in the rest of the country. Some southern peninsular areas near the Andaman Sea receive up to 4,000 mm (157 in) of annual precipitation. Powerful thunderstorms occur throughout the transitional period between the rainy and dry seasons.^{10, 11, 12, 13, 14}

Geographical Divisions

Although Thailand is a relatively small nation, it is geographically diverse. Within its borders are rugged mountains, dense forest lands, arid plateaus, fertile river valleys, tropical rain forests, and coastal beaches.^{15, 16} These areas fall within roughly four geographical divisions located in the central, northern, northeastern, and southern regions of the country.^{17, 18}

Central Plain

Most of the nation's population is located in central Thailand where the fertile central plain acts as a large drainage basin for the Chao Phraya River. This drainage basin has been instrumental in the development of the country's fertile agricultural hub in the Chao Phraya Valley, the heart of the nation's "rice bowl."



*Rainy day in Thailand
Flickr/Joe Le Merou*



*Ayutthaya rice fields
Flickr/Ilhan Gendron*

Historically, the production of rice allowed peasants to feed themselves, pay taxes, and contribute to the maintenance of temples.^{19,20} Rice cultivation practices in the Chao Phraya Valley floodplain transformed between the 13th and 15th centuries due to the area's 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 due to floods and rain.²¹

Northern Mountains

In contrast, northern Thailand is the most mountainous part of the country. The northern mountains are tall and rugged with deep valleys. The tallest peak is Doi Inthanon (2,576 m /8,541 ft) near the city of Chiang Mai.^{22, 23, 24} This area is covered with thick forests. In the higher reaches, much of the terrain is formed from limestone. 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.^{25,}



*Chiang Mai mountains
Flickr/John Shedrick*

²⁶

Thailand's northeastern region, known as Isan, covers approximately one-third of Thailand's land area and is home to roughly one-third of the population. This mostly rural region is comprised mainly of a large plateau.^{27, 28}

Northeastern Upland Plateau

Thailand's northeastern region, known as Isan, covers approximately one-third of Thailand's land area and home to roughly one-third of the population. This mostly rural region is comprised mainly of a large plateau. It is bordered by the low-elevation Dangrek Mountains to the south along the Cambodian border, the Phetchabun Range to the west, the Dong Phrayayen Mountains to the southwest, and the Mekong River to the north and east. Here the



*Rice field in Isan
Flickr/Witcha Suyara*

elevations range from 200 m (650 ft) in the northwest to around 90 m (300 ft) in the southeast. The northern half of the upland plateau is filled with irregular ranges of low hills creating a drainage divide that separates rivers flowing to the northeastern section of the Mekong River border from those that flow to the southeastern section. The soils of the upland plateau are largely impermeable; they are frequently flooded during the rainy season and parched throughout the rest of the year.^{29, 30}

Farmers in the northern and northeastern regions regularly irrigate their crops to supplement rainfall, and the variety of rice they have grown there over the years has remained a staple; however, many northern farmers also grow cotton.³¹ Cloth from this region is famous for the unique colors and designs displaying tribal affiliations.³² The Thai silk industry, renowned for its quality, also thrives in the north, as well as in San Kamphaeng, located farther to the east.^{33, 34} Thailand's western edge is defined by a long, narrow stretch of land that forms the spine of the Malay Peninsula. The northern end of the region is marked by an extension of the northern mountains. The peaks of the Bilaukaung Mountains define the border between Thailand and Burma.^{35, 36, 37}

Peninsular South

Thailand's western edge is defined by a long, narrow stretch of land that forms the spine of the Malay Peninsula. The northern end of the region is marked by an extension of the northern mountains. The peaks of the Bilaukaung Mountains define the border between Thailand and Burma.³⁸ From the town of Prachuap Khiri Khan, the Thailand-Burma border follows a southwestern path to the Andaman Sea and the Isthmus of Kra, which at its minimum width of 40-48 km (25-30 mi) is the shortest distance between the Gulf of Thailand and the Andaman Sea.³⁹



*Peninsular South
Flickr/Mark Fischer*

Further south are the coastal regions, which occupy both the eastern and western side of the peninsula. This area once belonged to successive Malay Islamic sultanates, but the Anglo-Siamese Treaty of 1909 incorporated this southern region into the country of Thailand. Today, many Thai Malay Muslims call this area home, and some of Thailand's most popular beach resorts, including the island of Phuket, are located on the Andaman side of the peninsula. The largest southern Thai port, Songkhla, lies on the coast along the Gulf of Thailand.^{40, 41}

Mountains

The Dangrek Range is located in southeastern Thailand on the border with Cambodia. These forest-covered hills form the southern rim of the Khorat Plateau, and 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



*Phu Khiew Mountains
Flickr/Prachanart Viriyaraks*

slope gradually to the Mun River.⁴² The Tanen Range stretches along Thailand’s northern and western border with Burma and is marked by steep ridges and deep valleys. The mountains of this range reach as high as 2,134 m (7,000 ft).⁴³

The Dawna Range lies in western Thailand along the border with Burma. This chain of jagged mountains consists mostly of limestone, and in the upper elevations, it is covered with evergreen and deciduous forest. 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.^{44, 45, 46}

Further west and north, the Petchabun Range (Thiu Khao Petchabun) forms the westernmost rim of the Khorat Plateau. West and south of the Petchabun Range are the Dong Phaya Yen Mountains, which separate the northeast region and central plains.⁴⁷

Rivers

The Chao Phraya (Mae Nam) river flows north to south in west-central Thailand. It is the nation’s main river and drains approximately one-third of the nation. It begins 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 provides irrigation for the surrounding valley. Near the coast, it widens into a delta



*Chao Phraya River, Bangkok
Flickr/Juan Antonio Segal*

before emptying into the Gulf of Thailand.⁴⁸

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.⁴⁹ Originating in the Tibetan Plateau, the river flows through China winding along the Burmese–Laotian border before crossing into Laos and forming much of the northeastern border of Thailand. Near the tri-border region of Thailand, Laos, and Burma, the Mekong hosts two important Thai river ports, Chiang Saen and Chiang Khong.^{50, 51, 52, 53}



*Mekong River
Flickr/Michael Rush*

The Mae Nam Ping is the westernmost of the main tributaries of the Chao Phraya. Beginning in the northern mountains, the 590 km (370 mi) river flows southward through Chiang Mai providing irrigation for farms.^{54, 55} The Mae Nam Nan river begins in the northern mountains near the Lao border. It flows southward from the Luang Phra Bang Range for 627 km (390 mi).⁵⁶ The river becomes navigable below the town of Ubon Ratchathani.⁵⁷

Major Cities

Bangkok

Founded in 1782 as the new capital city of Thailand, Bangkok was established after Burmese armies burned the old capital of Ayutthaya in 1767.⁵⁸ Known as Krung Thep (“City of Angels”) by the local population, Bangkok is one of Southeast Asia’s largest commercial and transportation centers.^{59, 60} Until 1971, modern-day Bangkok was divided between two cities on opposite banks of the Chao Phraya River: Thon Buri on the western bank, and Krung Thep on the eastern



*Ratchaprarop Road, Bangkok
Flickr/David McKelvey*

bank. Thon Buri is the older part of the city and briefly preceded Krung Thep as the capital of the Kingdom of Siam during the late 18th century.⁶¹

Today, the main part of Bangkok lies on the eastern bank of the Chao Phraya, encompassing the historical and current Royal Palaces, the central business district, and most of the tourist districts. Factories and manufacturing plants are now mostly located near the warehouse regions in port areas, and in industrial parks on the outskirts of the central city. The metropolitan area now covers approximately 1,565 sq km (604 sq mi) and has a population of over 46.6 million. The city proper has a population of approximately 5.1 million.^{62, 63, 64}

Overcrowding has contributed to 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. An elevated monorail system (the “Skytrain”) began operating in the downtown area in 1999. A subway system opened in 2004, offering service to the central part of the city.^{65, 66, 67, 68, 69}



Nakhon Ratchasima (Khorat)
Flickr/Michael Coghlan

Nakhon Ratchasima (Khorat)

In the 1960s and 1970s, Nakhon Ratchasima (Khorat) 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.⁷⁰ Today, Nakhon Ratchasima is the largest city in northeastern Thailand and is the regional center for government, transportation, and finance.

Connected via railway to Bangkok, the city 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.^{71, 72, 73} 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.⁷⁴

Chiang Mai

The city of Chiang Mai was the center of the early Thai kingdom of Lanna, located along the Ping River in the north. The Lanna Kingdom fell in 1558, yet Chiang Mai’s unique identity and civilization have endured through the centuries. It remained independent of Bangkok until the late 1800s, and today the region around Chiang Mai is culturally distinct from the south.⁷⁵



*Wat Chiang Man in Chiang Mai
Flickr/Paul Arps*

Chiang Mai is northern Thailand's largest city.⁷⁶ It is the cultural, economic, and educational center of northern Thailand and of neighboring southeastern Burma. Traditionally, the city has been the religious center of northern Thailand. Its 300 *wats* (Buddhist temple complexes) are nearly equal in number to those found in Bangkok.^{77, 78, 79} 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.⁸⁰ Also, the Thai royal family keeps a residence in nearby Phu Ping Palace.^{81, 82} Chiang Mai University and the Northern Technical Institute are located in the city.^{83, 84}

Ayutthaya

The ancient city of Ayutthaya was the cultural, military, commercial, and political center of the Kingdom of Ayutthaya, which emerged on the banks of the Chao Phraya River in 1350 C.E. Eventually, ruling a large part of Southeast Asia. In 1767, Burmese armies invaded and razed the city.^{85, 86, 87, 88} This once opulent and powerful royal city, which saw its libraries, museums, temples, and artistic treasures turned to ashes, now largely consists of historical ruins. A new, smaller town that caters to tourists is built on the site, and many of its temples have been reconstructed. Three museums preserve much of the ancient city's remaining artifacts and artwork.

Ayutthaya lies 90 km (55 mi) north of Bangkok.^{89, 90, 91}

Songkhla

The port of Songkhla is located on the eastern shore of Thailand's southern peninsula, about 720 km (447 mi) south of Bangkok. Formerly known by its Malay name, Singora, it was an outpost of



*Temple in Ayutthaya, Thailand
Flickr/Juan Antonio Segal*

the Sumatran Srivijaya Empire during the 600s C.E.⁹² The contemporary city remains a mix of Thai, Chinese, and Malay culture.⁹³ Today, this fishing town and seaport city offers tourists a number of cultural attractions, including temples and sandy beaches.^{94, 95, 96} Over the last several years, the Songkhla region has been subject to sporadic terrorist bombings carried out by separatist groups operating out of the border region.^{97, 98, 99}



*Reclining Buddha statue in Songkhla
Flickr/Photo Dharma*

Important Elements of History



*Mon Buddhist wheel, Dvaravati
Public Domain*

The Mon of India first arrived in the area during the first century B.C.E., settling in northern Thailand where they established the Dvaravati Kingdom.¹⁰⁰ Around the same time, southern Thailand was influenced by the Srivijaya Kingdom, a Mahayana Buddhist empire centered in Palembang on the southern part of Indonesian Sumatra.^{101, 102, 103}

Between the 8th and 10th centuries C.E., the Tai-speaking people migrated from their homeland in present-day northern Vietnam.¹⁰⁴ They settled in a region extending from southeastern China to the northern parts of mainland Southeast Asia.¹⁰⁵

Between the 9th and 13th centuries C.E., the Khmer of Cambodia expanded northwestward into the Khorat Plateau and ultimately into the central plain of Thailand. At its height, the Khmer domain extended over about half of modern Thailand, reaching as far as Chiang Mai in the northern mountains.^{106, 107}

By the 11th century, the Tai had moved into areas that now make up the central part of Thailand.^{108, 109} By 1238, the Tai had defeated the Khmer and established the first of the Tai kingdoms—Sukhothai—in the upper Chao Phraya basin. The kingdom served as a base for Theravada Buddhism.^{110, 111, 112}



*Wat Taphan Hin, Sukhothai
Public Domain*

Relations with West

King Mongkut (Rama IV) of the Chakri Dynasty oversaw the opening of the kingdom to the West, a process later continued by his son. During King Mongkut's reign (1851–1868), the government established treaties and cultural exchanges with Western nations, connecting the Thai economy with that of the world. He also reformed religious practices and the kingdom's educational system.^{113, 114, 115, 116}



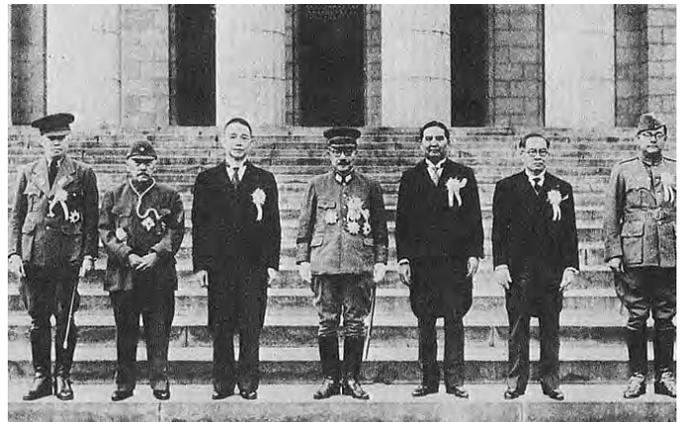
King Mongkut (Rama IV) of Siam
Public Domain

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.^{117, 118, 119} Chulalongkorn was succeeded by his son Vajiravudh (Rama VI) in 1910.^{120, 121} Vajiravudh was succeeded by his brother, Prajadhipok. In June 1932, a bloodless coup ended an unbroken absolute monarchy that had ruled Siam for 700 years. Prajadhipok remained on the throne under the new constitutional monarchy but abdicated in 1935.^{122, 123}

World War II - Present

When World War II broke out, the Phibun regime was pressured into allying itself with Japan and declared war on the U.S. and England in 1942.^{124, 125, 126} Thailand's ambassador refused to deliver his own government's declaration of war. In response, the U.S. did not declare war against Thailand.¹²⁷

In the last years of the war, public opinion turned against the regime forcing Phibun to resign. He was replaced by a civilian prime minister.^{128, 129}



Greater East Asia Conference, 1943
Public Domain



*Thai Soldiers in Vietnam
Public Domain*

Somchai Wongsawat as the new prime minister.^{135, 136} Somchai's election angered conservatives and sparked violent protests. The army dissolved the parliament and called for new elections.^{137, 138}

Supporters of the *United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship* (UDD) protested the removal of the prime minister. By early 2010, violence had escalated. Following a major assault by Thai troops in central Bangkok, protest leaders surrendered.^{139, 140, 141, 142, 143}



*General Prayut Chan-o-cha, Royal Thai Army Commander
Wikimedia/Government of Thailand*

The Thai government again established itself as an official ally of the U.S. in the fight against perceived Communist threats in the region. During the Vietnam War, Thailand allowed the U.S. military to use some of its air force bases for war operations. Thailand's military governed in intervals until 1992, and then again in 2006 after a period of parliamentary rule.^{130, 131, 132, 133, 134}

The nation returned once again to civilian rule, yet political tensions remained. By mid-2008, royalist protestors demonstrated against the government. The Constitutional Court removed the prime minister and the cabinet. The parliament elected

Political tensions continued. In July 2011, UDD candidate, Yingluck Shinawatra, won a parliamentary majority and became the nation's first female prime minister in August.¹⁴⁴ Simmering political tensions began to boil shortly after she took office. In 2013, tens of thousands took to the streets to protest the government. The prime minister responded by dissolving the legislature and scheduling new elections. Protestors disrupted voting, causing the Constitutional Court to rule the elections invalid. Yingluck and several of her ministers were ordered from office by the Constitutional Court.^{145, 146}

The army declared martial law on 20 May 2013 and suspended the constitution. A bloodless coup two days later left the nation under military rule and General Prayuth Chan-ocha was named prime minister.^{147, 148, 149} At the moment, new elections are unlikely before 2016.^{150, 151, 152}

Government

Thailand is a constitutional monarchy.^{153, 154} The chief-of-state is the King, but the head of the government is the prime minister who is elected by members of the House of Representatives. The prime minister is usually the leader of the party receiving a plurality of votes in national elections.^{155, 156}

The legislative branch consists of a bicameral legislature. The Senate (*Wuthisapha*) has 150 seats. Members serve six-year terms. Seventy-six members of this body are popularly elected, while 74 are appointed by the Senate Selection Committee. The lower House of Representatives (*Sapha Phuthaen Ratsadon*) has 500 members who are elected to four-year terms. Of these, 375 are elected by single-seat districts. The remaining 125 are elected on a proportional party-list basis.^{157,}

¹⁵⁸

The judicial branch consists of the Supreme Court of Justice and a series of subordinate courts. The Supreme Court has a president and six vice presidents. Supreme Court justices are selected by the Judicial Commission and approved by the king. The nation's Constitutional Court has nine justices. Judges are appointed by the king to a single nine-year term.¹⁵⁹



*King Bhumibol and President Obama
Pete Souza*



*Chamber of the National Assembly
Wikimedia/Prime Minister of Thailand*

Media

Most of the major print media outlets in Thailand are owned by large conglomerates and prominent families. The broadcast media, however, remains under the ownership of the government. The six free-to-air television stations are divided among four government bodies. The Public Relations Department and the Thai Public Broadcasting Service control one station each.

The state-controlled Mass Communication Organization of Thailand and the Thai Royal Army each oversees two channels. Satellite television is available. Seven hundred radio stations are also owned by the government and security forces, although thousands of community stations provide alternative broadcasts.^{160, 161}

Approximately 29% of the population regularly accesses the internet.¹⁶² The government and military have attempted to control information on the internet when it is considered divisive, subversive, or that might incite anti-government action among the population.¹⁶³ In 2015, the junta proposed a bill that would severely restrict internet freedom. It calls for the establishment of a government-run committee to search computers and other mobile devices. Violators would be subject to 3-15 years in jail.¹⁶⁴

^{165, 166}

Important Elements of Economy

Thailand's strong infrastructure, pro-investment policies, and strong export industries have created relatively sustained and strong economic growth. Its unemployment rate of 1% is among the lowest in the world. The nation's manufacturing sector was nearly halted following severe flooding in 2011. Investments in infrastructure, to repair the damage, have not result in the hoped-for recovery.



*Thai TV news
Flickr/Connie Ma*



*Rice field in Thailand
Flickr/Meghan Harvey*

Economic growth remains slow and lags behind other East Asian countries. The economy is expected to grow at a slow pace, partly due to political uncertainties which have weakened consumer confidence.^{167, 168, 169, 170}

Today, the agricultural sector accounts for between 9 and 12% of Thailand's GDP and employs roughly 38% of the labor force.^{171, 172, 173} Rice is the most important crop accounting for about 60% of all agricultural production. The largest rice-producing areas are in the Chao Phraya Basin and the Khorat Plateau. Rubber, coffee, and sugarcane are also important commodity crops.^{174,}

¹⁷⁵



*Garment worker in Thailand
Flickr/Labour Behind the Label, Clean Clothes Campaign*

Thailand's current economy is largely dependent on exports, which generate approximately 65% of its current Gross Domestic Product (GDP).¹⁷⁶ Thailand's top export partners are China, Japan, the United States, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, and Australia. Top import partners include Japan, China, the United Arab Emirates, Malaysia, and the United States.^{177, 178} The leading export products are electronics (including computers and peripherals and integrated circuits), automobiles and automotive parts, textiles and garments, and rubber and rubber products.^{179, 180} The nation is fast becoming a major center for automobiles. Leading manufacturers such as Toyota, Honda, Mazda, Nissan, and Ford all have factories in Thailand. In 2012, Thailand was the seventh-largest car exporter in the world.¹⁸¹



*Thai woman in Ayutthaya
Flickr/Mark Fischer*

Information on Ethnic Groups / Languages

Although there are a variety of different ethnic groups living in Thailand, according to the last official census, approximately 96% of the people are ethnic Thai. The remainder of the population consists mostly of smaller ethnic groups including the Burmese who constitute 2% of the population.^{182, 183} Ethnic Chinese in Thailand have been almost entirely assimilated into Thai society and today are virtually indistinct from ethnic Thai.¹⁸⁴

Several ethnic groups have yet to assimilate fully into mainstream Thailand live in the northern and western regions. They are collectively known as the “hill tribes,” or *chao khao* which is literally translated as “mountain people.”^{185, 186} The hill tribes are disparate, semi-nomadic groups who over time have migrated southward and westward into northern Thailand from Tibet, southern and central China, Burma, and Laos.^{187, 188, 189}

Thai

The Thai people comprise four groups: Central Thai, Northern Thai, Southern Thai, and Northeastern Thai (also known as the “Thai-Lao,” who are also predominant in Laos). All of these groups speak regional Thai dialects. From their origins in southern China, they migrated throughout a large swath of Southeast Asia, from Vietnam to Burma.¹⁹⁰

Malays

The Malays speak Jawi, a local variant of Malay and live predominantly in the southern Thai peninsula. Many Malays make their living working on rubber plantations, as subsistence farmers, or fishermen.¹⁹¹ They are mostly Sunni Muslims and constitute about 5% of the national population. Thai government efforts to assimilate the Malay population have been widely resisted. The Malays have rebelled against what they perceive as indifference to their regional economy and unique way of life. Resistance to Thai rule by a fraction of the Malays has led to a sustained insurgency against the Thai government.^{192, 193}



*Guide in Hat Yai near Malay border
Flickr/John Ragai*

The Hill Tribes

The polygynous Hmong came from Laos and are concentrated in Thailand's north and northeast. The two main subgroups are easily distinguished by their clothing. Blue Hmong women wear pleated indigo skirts with batik designs and tie their hair in huge buns. Women of the White Hmong wear white pleated skirts made of hemp and large black turbans. Men wear baggy black pants with embroidered jackets.^{194, 195, 196, 197}



*Hmong girls in Chiang Rai, Thailand
Wikimedia/Xavier Romero-Frias*

The Lahu refer to themselves as “the children of blessing.” They are concentrated in Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, and Mae Hong Sorn. They are subdivided into four groups: the Black Lahu, Yellow Lahu, Red Lahu, and Lahu Sheleh. Families often have ten children or more. Women are renowned for their weaving skills. Men are recognized for their hunting skills. Although some are now Christian, most Lahu follow their traditional animist religion.^{198, 199, 200, 201}



*Lahu men play flutes
Flickr/Steve Jurevson*



*Red Yao woman
Wikimedia/Huascar80*

The Mien, also referred to as Yao, originated in the Yunnan province region of China, but came to Thailand from Laos. They are concentrated in approximately 100 villages in Nan, Phayao, and Chiang Rai provinces. Their culture has strong Chinese influences, including a written language using Chinese characters, ancestor worship and Taoism. The Mien are largely polygynous, and practice their native animist religion. Most are subsistence farmers.^{202, 203, 204}



*Akha woman from Chiang Rai
Flickr/spotter_nl*

The Akha are concentrated in Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai provinces, and have been resistant to government assimilation efforts. They are animists who practice ancestor worship, with individuals memorizing the names of every male ancestor going back as far as 60 generations. At the entrance to each village, there is a wooden frame or “spirit gate” decorated with woodcarvings to keep away the evil spirits. Women wear ornate headdresses made of silver discs, bead, coins, and feathers.^{205, 206, 207}

Thailand’s Lisu are a particularly proud people with a strong sense of self-esteem. Their clothing is exceptionally bright. Women wear long green or blue dresses with striped yokes. Men wear blue or green baggy trousers. This group is largely animist and retains many rituals related to ancestor worship and managing the spirit world. Village shamans handle religious life, including healing the sick and dealing with evil spirits.^{208, 209, 210}



*Lisu women
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Overview: Chapter 1 Assessment

1. The Mekong River irrigates the extensive rice fields located in the central plain of Thailand.

False

The Chao Phraya is Thailand's central river. It irrigates rice fields throughout the surrounding valley. The Mekong River in the northeastern region of the country forms much of the Thai-Laotian border.

2. The Tai people, ancestors of the modern Thai, migrated into Southeast Asia and eventually founded the Sukhothai Kingdom in central Thailand.

True

Between the 8th and 10th centuries C.E., the Tai-speaking people migrated from their homeland in present-day northern Vietnam. By the 11th century, the Tai had moved into areas that now make up the central part of Thailand. By 1238, the Tai had established the first of the Tai kingdoms—Sukhothai—in the upper Chao Phraya basin.

3. Thailand's major revenues rely on exports.

True

Thailand's current economy is largely dependent on exports, which generate approximately 65% of its current Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

4. The king is the head of the government.

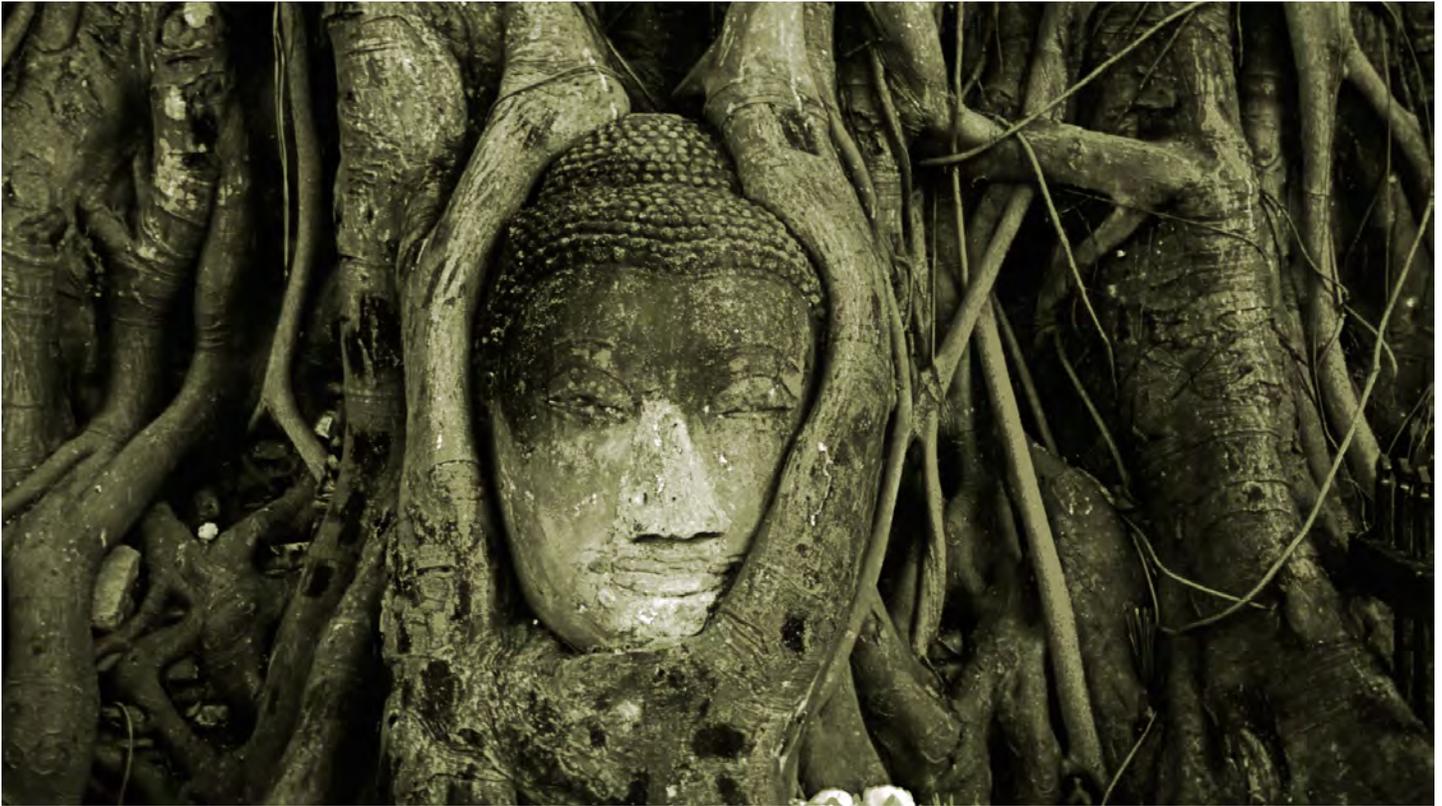
False

Thailand is a constitutional monarchy. The chief-of-state is the King, but the head of the government is the prime minister who is elected by members of the House of Representatives, the lower house of the national legislature.

5. Ethnic Thai constitute more than 90% of the population of Thailand.

True

Although a variety of ethnic groups live in Thailand, approximately 96% are ethnic Thai according to the last official census. The remainder consists mostly of smaller ethnic groups, including the Burmese at 2%.



*Buddha statue wrapped by tree
Flickr/Trevor Bauer - www.trafficmedia.com*

Chapter 2 Religion

Introduction

Theravada Buddhism is Thailand's predominant religion; 94% of the population practices its teachings. Of the remaining populace, approximately 5% identify as Muslim (mostly Sunni), and 1% or less practice Christianity, Hinduism, Brahmanism, Taoism, animist, and other religions. Christian missionaries have widely promoted their religion in Thailand since the 16th century, but they have achieved greater success among the hill tribes than among the larger population of Thais. Among members of the hill tribes, Christianity is widespread, as is animism—the belief that living spirits inhabit all of nature. Members of the hill tribes also practice Buddhism and Taoism, the latter originating in China.^{1, 2}



*Buddhas in Sukhothai
Wikimedia/Oliver Spalt*

Overview of Major Religions

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.^{3, 4, 5} By this time, Islam was also an established religion, predominately in the modern-day region of the southern Thai peninsula. Islamic influence extended north to Tambralinga, one of the 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.^{6, 7, 8}

During the 15th century, the king of Thailand tried to control the sea routes along the straits of Malacca in modern-day Malaysia. The king also tried to control the Patani Sultanate, at that time an independent Malay country on Thailand's southern border. By the 1900s, Thailand had defeated the Sultanate and divided its territories into the three Thai provinces of Narathiwat, Pattani, and Yala. Following its long-held policy of ethnic assimilation, the government did away with Shari'a courts and outlawed the Malay language. These actions incensed many Malays who viewed this as nothing short of colonization; many Malays have since resisted integration into Thai society.^{9, 10}



*Pattani Kingdom 1782
Wikipedia/Rigobert Bonne*

Throughout the region, calls grew for independence of Thailand's three provinces. Separatist movements developed, and by 2004 the violence had escalated. Numerous violent attacks marred the last decade. The government has tried, but failed, to suppress the revolt. Though the insurgency is as much about ethnicity as religion, both sides have used religion as justification for violence. Tensions between the majority Buddhists and the minority Muslims are ongoing.^{11, 12, 13, 14, 15}

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., he followed an ascetic path for many years eventually arriving at what he believed to be an awareness of the cause of suffering. Siddhartha subsequently developed a way to overcome suffering and dedicated the rest of his life to spreading this knowledge to others.¹⁶ The earliest teachings of Buddha are collected in the Tripitaka, or *Pali Canon*, which Theravada Buddhists recognize as the only authentic canonical texts.¹⁷ Another unique feature of Buddhism in Thailand is that women are prohibited from being ordained as monks, unlike other Buddhist nations.^{18, 19}



*Buddhist monks in Thailand
Flickr/Greg Walters*

According to Theravada Buddhists, there is nothing substantial in the world. Believers live according to the Noble Eightfold Path. These consist of Right View, Right Resolve, Right Speech, Right Actions, Right Occupation, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. When one has reached the perfect state, the person becomes an *arhat*, or worthy person. For the *arhat*, a holy life has been achieved and the cycle of reincarnation ends.^{20, 21}

Theravada Buddhism is the oldest form of Buddhism. It is a syncretic mixture of Buddhist, Hindu, and animistic beliefs.^{22, 23, 24} Its core teaching is based on the idea of the impermanence of people and of things. It stresses the possibility of escaping human suffering through the practice of meditation and certain moral precepts. This is accomplished through ethical conduct, meditation, and insight-wisdom.^{25, 26, 27} Buddhism teaches that worldly attachments and desires are a major source of suffering. Believers therefore strive to reach a state of nirvana, or ultimate peace, in which they no longer experience suffering.^{28, 29, 30} Much of life in Thailand surrounds earning merit so that in the next incarnation, a person will have a life that is closer to enlightenment.³¹

Islam

In Thailand, Islam is primarily in the provinces on the southern peninsula. Nearly all of the Thai Muslims (99%) are Sunni, but there are some adherents of Shi'a Islam.³² All Muslims worship a single deity, making Islam a monotheistic religion. Muslims worship *Allah*, the Arabic term for God and they “submit” or “surrender” (*islam*) to the will of *Allah* (God).³³ Muslims believe that God’s final message to humankind was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad through the angel Gabriel. This final message forms the sacred text of the holy Quran. Additional doctrinal guides are the *hadith*, a collection of the Prophet Muhammad’s sayings, and the *sunna*, which describes the practice of Islam by way of the Prophet Muhammad’s example.³⁴ Islam teaches that Muhammad is the last prophet in a long line of prophets, including Abraham, Moses, and Jesus.³⁵



Muslim woman in Yala, Thailand
Flickr/Tarik Abdel-Monem

The five Pillars of Islam form the core values and practices of the Islamic faith. The first of these is the *shahada*, which is the declaration of faith, “There is no god but God, and Muhammad is God’s messenger.” The second of these is the *salat*, which is the obligation to pray five times a day. *Sawm* is the third core practice and it obliges all physically healthy Muslims to fast during the holy month of Ramadan. *Zakat* is the next core value of faith; it guides Muslims to tithe a portion of their income to charity. The fifth and final practice is the *hajj*, which directs all physically and financially able Muslims to make pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in their lifetimes.³⁶

Care and Treatment of the Quran

The Quran, Islam’s sacred book, is treated with the *utmost* respect. Like the sacred texts of other religions, Islam’s sacred book it is never touched with dirty hands, it is kept off the floor, and it is never taken into toilet facilities, or washrooms.³⁷ Muslims always hold the Quran above the lap or waist, and they will often protect it with a dust cover. Because Muslims typically do not place anything



Quran
Flickr/Faris Algoaibi

on top of the Quran, they might keep such texts on the highest shelf of a bookcase, although not always. When a Quran becomes old or damaged, it may be disposed of in only one of two ways: burning or burial. Burning is conducted with deep respect, and is accompanied by prayers; the text is never burned with trash or other items. The second method is burial; the text is wrapped in a shroud-like piece of cloth, and then buried where people do not walk.^{38, 39}

The Role of Religion in the Thai Government

Thailand's 2007 constitution protects religious beliefs, although the country is currently drafting a new constitution. There is no state religion in Thailand, although Theravada Buddhism enjoys widespread support within the government.^{40, 41} According to Thai law, speech or actions deemed insulting to Buddhism is a criminal offense, and the monarch must be a Buddhist.^{42, 43} The government officially recognizes five religious groups: Buddhists, Muslims, Brahmin-Hindus, Sikhs, and Christians. To receive official recognition, a religious group must have at least 5,000 adherents, have a recognizable and distinct theology, and not be active in political affairs.⁴⁴



*Religion in schools
Flickr/Kathy*

The government requires religious education for all primary and secondary school children.⁴⁵ The curricula include lessons and information about all recognized religious groups in the nation.⁴⁶ ⁴⁷ The Supreme Sangha Council and the Central Islamic Committee of Thailand are responsible for creating special curricula for Buddhist and Islamic public schools.⁴⁸ In the southern region, the government subsidizes some schools where Islamic education is integrated into the national curriculum.⁴⁹ Muslim students may attend other private schools, but these generally do not have approved curricula.⁵⁰

The government provides funding for religious activities for recognized groups.⁵¹ Buddhist organizations get the lion's share of such funds, followed by Islamic and other groups. Some of the funds support religious education programs and institutions of higher education. Others funds are allocated to repair and construct religious buildings.⁵²

The government has made concessions to Islamic law (e.g. in the areas of inheritance and matrimony) in the southern provinces.⁵³ Muslim women serving in the Royal Thai

Police force are allowed to wear headscarves.⁵⁴ Although the government recognizes only religious holidays in the southern provinces, many offices and public institutions close during the *Eid al-Fitr* celebrations across the country. As a gesture of respect, the king or his representative presides over the yearly commemoration of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday.^{55, 56, 57}

Influence of Religion on Daily Life



*Family prayer
Flickr/Greg Walters*

Thais generally practice Buddhism in a highly syncretic way, fusing the religion with aspects of other belief systems and rituals.^{58, 59} For example, Buddhist ceremonies often include elements of ancestor worship or animist practices involving the worship of natural phenomena.^{60, 61, 62} It is not uncommon to find aspects of Hindu religious dogma in Thai Buddhist ceremonies. For instance, Brahmin (Hindu) priests oversee complex and sophisticated rites performed by the Thai monarchy. Additionally, shrines dedicated to Brahma and other Hindu deities are found throughout Thailand, and many Thais invoke the aid of these Hindu gods.⁶³ Christian and Taoist influences are also found in some Thai Buddhist practices.⁶⁴

Exchange 1: When do you pray?

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

Thai Buddhist rituals often include certain communal elements associated with agrarian society.⁶⁵ For example, in rural areas, it is common practice for laypeople to offer gifts of clothing, food, medicine, and shelter to Buddhist monks.⁶⁶ In doing so, they gain merit (*bun*) for their next incarnation, or rebirth. For this reason, people throughout the country donate gifts to religious temples.^{67, 68}

Thais also retain a strong belief in spirits and that they must make offerings to the spirits in order to appease them.^{69, 70} Spirit houses are built as places where local spirits can be comfortable so they are not likely to cause trouble.⁷¹ Virtually every building in the

country, including offices and homes, has at least one spirit house or small altar.^{72, 73, 74} People may also seek out monks who can offer spells or amulets to guard against evil spirits.^{75, 76, 77}

Religious Conventions and Gender Roles

Buddhism

Statues and images of the Buddha are sacred to Thais, who approach them with deep respect. Thais consider all Buddhist religious statues and images as sacred, and thus honor and care for them with great concern and respect.⁷⁸ Thais never point at a Buddha statue or image with fingers or feet, and never turn their backs on a Buddha statue when leaving a place; instead, they back out of the room facing the statue.^{79, 80} Showing disrespect for statues or other images of Buddha is a criminal offense in Thailand, with severe penalties.^{81, 82,}

^{83, 84}



*Buddha at Sukhotai Historical Park
Wikimedia/Kittipong Khunnen*

The Buddhist monk represents a person possessing great wisdom. Thai Buddhists thus consider it sacrilegious to physically place oneself at a higher elevation than a monk as he represents great wisdom.^{85, 86, 87, 88} When a monk is seated, those present do not stand above him.⁸⁹ Young Thai men over 21 are encouraged to serve as monks in the monastery during the 3-month long Buddhist Lent (*phansa*). Young urban men, however, often serve less than three months during *phansa*.^{90, 91} The Thai government encourages this practice by allowing civil servants to retain full pay for up to three months of service in a monastery.⁹²

Thai women are not permitted to serve as monks, however, but they can become nuns.⁹³ Thai Buddhist nuns shave their hair and wear white robes to take on a role that is less valued in Buddhism than the role of monk.⁹⁴ According to Buddhist tradition, women are not permitted to be alone with a monk.⁹⁵ Further, women may not touch a monk in his robes, whether intentionally or unintentionally. Even accidentally brushing against his robes is considered an offense.⁹⁶ Women are also not allowed to touch a monk's mother. If a woman accidentally does touch a monk, his robes, or his mother, the monk must undertake an elaborate ritual cleansing.⁹⁷ If a woman must give something to a monk, she must either place it on the floor or hand it to another male who will hand it to the monk.⁹⁸



*Buddhist nun
Flickr/Greg Walters*



*Islamic gender roles in Thailand
Flickr/Steve Jurvetson*

Islam

Until recently, the daily practices of Thailand's Muslims were largely a fusion of traditional Islamic customs and traditional Thai culture, which included indigenous Malay cultural rituals to ward off evil spirits.⁹⁹ Thai cultural practices also contained many traditional Islamic customs, while local Islamic ceremonies included aspects of indigenous rituals. The result was a largely syncretic religion, which blurred the cultural and Islamic elements in daily life.¹⁰⁰

In recent years, the country has witnessed a growth in a reformist movement that emphasizes Islamic identity and adherence to an orthodox lifestyle.¹⁰¹ This has translated into stricter gender roles for many Muslims in both public and private spaces, as well as an emphasis on wearing conservative clothing—especially the *hijab* (Islamic head covering for women).¹⁰²

Several different reformist movements currently operate in Thailand, and some have adopted quite rigid gender segregation and roles for women.¹⁰³ Other movements, although conservative, are empowering women by encouraging them to seek an education, while also gaining knowledge about their religious practices.¹⁰⁴ In response, Muslim women have established autonomous organizations on university campuses across the country, offering leadership training and “study circles” in which they promote the “ideal” Muslim woman based on the major female figures in Quranic sources.¹⁰⁵

Religious Events

Khao Pansa Day marks the beginning of the Buddhist Lenten period, as well as the annual three month long *Rains Retreat*. During this time, Buddhist monks practice intense study and meditation inside their temples. Their activity symbolizes a renewal of spiritual life.^{106, 107, 108}

Ok Phansa is celebrated in October and marks the end of the Buddhist Lenten period.¹⁰⁹ On this day, many monks return to their normal lives and those in temporary service return home. Buddhists celebrate this day with general cheerfulness.¹¹⁰

¹¹¹ *Tod Kratin* lasts for thirty days. It begins on *OK Phansa* and ends on the full moon of the next (12th) lunar month. During this time, Thai Buddhists engage in joyful activities, such as making robes for monks or donating money to temples.¹¹² On the last day of *Tod Kratin*, Buddhist Thais put on their best clothes and travel early in the day to the temple carrying food to offer to the monks. After the monks have eaten, they will bless the people before going back to the monastery. Later in the morning, many people return to take a vow with the monks. After taking a vow, they pray, listen to sermons, and meditate. After dark, the monks carry candles as they circle the temple three times, signifying the end of celebrations.^{113, 114}

Muslims celebrate the holy month of *Ramadan* on the Islamic lunar calendar, and is one of Islam's most extensive rituals (beginning 18 June in 2015). *Ramadan* is celebrated as the month the Prophet Muhammad received the initial revelations from the angel Gabriel. These revelations form part of the Quran, Islam's sacred text. Muslims celebrate this month through prayers and daily fasting, which lasts from sunrise to sunset. During this fast, Muslims abstain from eating, drinking, smoking, gossiping, cursing, fighting, sexual relations, and impure thoughts.¹¹⁵

Eid al-Fitr (around 17 July in 2015) marks the end of the holy month of Ramadan and the end of the fast. On this day, Thai Muslims rise early to pray together, after which the men attend special *Eid al-Fitr* services. Families then visit one another with gifts and celebrate together over large meals. On *Eid al-Fitr*, Muslims also give *zakat* (charity) to the poor, usually in the form of food or money to purchase food. *Zakat* is one of the five pillars of Islam.^{116, 117}



Monks collect offerings
Wikimedia/Tevaprapas



*Monks on Makha Bucha
Flickr/John Shedrick*

Religious Holidays

National Holidays

Thai society celebrates numerous Buddhist festivals and other elaborate rituals throughout the year.¹¹⁸ The government has designated many of these to be public holidays, requiring government offices, banks, post offices, and airlines to close in observance. Many dates are determined using the lunar calendar, so their specific dates are variable across the years.¹¹⁹

The first national religious holiday of the year is *Makha Bucha* (22 February 2016), which is held on the day of the full moon in the third lunar month.¹²⁰ This holiday commemorates the day that Buddha ordained 1,250 monks who had gathered to hear his teachings. On this same day, 45 years later, Buddha again delivered his teachings shortly before he died. Many Thais rise early and travel to the temple to give alms to the monks and listen to sermons. Some perform a special ritual that involves walking three times clockwise around a temple while carrying flowers, incense, and a candle. Alcohol cannot be sold on *Makha Bucha*, so bars are usually closed.^{121, 122, 123}

The next major holiday is *Visakha Bucha* (20 May 2016), the most sacred date on the Buddhist calendar.¹²⁴ *Visakha Bucha* commemorates the birth, enlightenment, and death of Buddha. Worshippers throughout the country attend sermons at their local temples, and, in the evening, hold candlelight services and processions. Shops are closed and no alcohol may be sold.¹²⁵

^{126, 127}



Visakha Bucha
Flickr/John Shedrick

Buildings of Worship

Buddhist Temples

A Buddhist temple (*wat*) in Thailand is not simply a place to worship, but is also a multipurpose facility for the community.¹²⁸ 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.^{129, 130}



Wat Arun - Temple of Dawn
Flickr/Claudio Ruiz

Although styles may vary, most Thai Buddhist temples have two parts: the *phutthawat* and the *sanghwat*. The *phutthawat* has several buildings. The *chedi* is a bell-shaped tower that usually contains some relic from the Buddha. The *phra prang* is an ornately carved spire. Many *wats* also contain a library (*ho trai*), an open pavilion (*sala kan parien*) that is used to meet people, a bell tower (*ho rakhang*), a cloister (*phra rabieng*) containing the statues of the Buddha, and an ordination hall (*bot*) where monks take their vows.^{131, 132}

The *Sanghwat* is a monk's living quarters. Within this section are the *kutis* (cells) in which the monks meditate and sleep. The largest building in a Buddhist temple complex is the *wiharn*, which includes a central, open space used for gatherings and worship. Statues of the Buddha stand or sit at the end of the gathering area; Buddha statues always face east.¹³³

One of the nation's most striking temples is Wat Arun, also referred to as the Temple of Dawn. The complex sits on the Thonburi side of the Chao Phraya near Bangkok. The building is a representation of Mount Meru, the Buddhist center of cosmology. The central tower is 104 m (345 ft) tall and the tallest religious structure in the nation. The exterior of the temple is covered with broken porcelain pieces retrieved from Chinese merchant ships.^{134, 135}



Chiang Rai Mosque
Wikimedia/Iceway12

Mosques

The Muslim building of worship is called a mosque. Although specific mosque designs vary, all mosques typically include several elements. Most have four walls, but some have more. In all cases, however, there is always a *qibla*, which is the wall facing Mecca. The *qibla* always contains a niche called a *mihrab*, which points worshipers in the direction of the *Kaaba* in Mecca.

The *Kaaba* is the square stone building covered with an embroidered black cloth located inside Mecca's holy sanctuary called *Al-Masjid al-Haram* (Sacred Mosque).¹³⁶ The Sacred Mosque and the *Kaaba* are the site of Islam's annual pilgrimage

(*hajj*); all Muslims face the *Kaaba* during daily prayers, no matter where they live. To the right of the *mihrab* stands a pulpit, or *minbar*, where the *imam* stands while giving sermons. Mosques often have a minaret from which calls to prayer are made five times a day. Many mosques also have an ablution fountain in their courtyards (*sahan*) where Muslims may ritually wash their hands, face, forearms, head, ears, and feet before prayers.^{137, 138}

One of Thailand's largest mosques is Pattani Central Mosque.¹³⁹ Construction began in 1954 and took nine years to complete. It is the center for Islam in the southern part of the nation. The architecture is reminiscent of the Taj Mahal in India with a large central dome surrounded by four smaller ones and two minarets.^{140, 141} The Krue Se mosque is located near Pattani town in southern Thailand. It was built between 1578 and 1593 in the style of Middle Eastern mosques, but the large domed roof was never completed.^{142,}

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*Appropriate dress at Wat Arun
Flickr/Maxim B.*

Behavior in Places of Worship

Buddhist Temples

Visitors are usually welcome in Thailand's Buddhist temples.¹⁴⁴ Everyone must remove their shoes before entering a temple, but socks must be worn because bare feet are inappropriate.^{145, 146} Always remove hats and sunglasses.¹⁴⁷ Visitors should dress modestly and respectfully, never in skimpy, revealing, or dirty clothing. Appropriate dress includes clean shirts and long pants for men. Long skirts or pants paired with blouses or sweaters that cover the shoulders are appropriate for women.¹⁴⁸ Avoid bothering worshippers.¹⁴⁹

Never photograph yourself with a statue of the Buddha.¹⁵⁰
¹⁵¹ Never take pictures of monks or worshippers.^{152, 153}

Exchange 2: May I enter the temple?

Visitor:	May I enter the temple?	pom ja kaa pai nai wad dai mai
Local:	Yes.	dai krab

Turn off all cell phones before entering a Buddhist temple, and do not eat or chew gum.¹⁵⁴ Since the foot is the lowest and least sacred part of the body, it must never be placed on, or pointed towards, an image or statue of the Buddha or worshippers. Take care to tuck your legs underneath to avoid offending others.¹⁵⁵

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

Visitor:	Must I take off my shoes inside the temple?	pom tawng tawd rong tao gawn khao wad rue plao krab
Local:	Yes.	tawng krab



Inside Chiang Rai Mosque
Wikimedia/Iceway12

Mosques

Non-Muslims are not always allowed to enter mosques, especially during prayer time. It is therefore best to ask permission before entering. It is important to dress conservatively when visiting a mosque, so visitors should avoid bright colors, and must not wear sheer or tight clothing. Remove shoes, hats, and sunglasses before entering.¹⁵⁶

Women should always wear tops with sleeves that come down to their wrists. Their clothing should be loose fitting, and skirts must be ankle length. If wearing pants, a woman's sweater or blouse must be long enough to cover the thighs, preferably to within one or two inches above the knee. Larger mosques in

tourist areas will often loan women the proper attire if they arrive in clothing that is not appropriate. Women are also advised to remove perfume and heavy makeup (although light makeup is fine), and they must cover their heads with scarves.¹⁵⁷

Men should wear loose fitting pants and shirts, and all clothing should be clean. Neither men nor women will be allowed to enter a mosque wearing shorts. Men should wear long pants and unadorned shirts. Short sleeved shirts are acceptable but long sleeves are preferable.^{158, 159}

Exchange 4: Do I need to cover my head?

Visitor:	Do I need to cover my head?	pom tawng klum huaa mai
Local:	Yes.	mai tawng krab

Once inside, visitors should turn off cell phones ringers, and avoid loud noises and unnecessary conversation. Visitors should also avoid walking in front of those who are praying as this might invalidate their prayers. Women and men generally pray in separate sections, and visitors should be sensitive to this tradition. Finally, do not bring food or drinks inside and do not point your feet towards the *qibla* (the wall that indicates the direction of Mecca).¹⁶⁰ Photographs are generally allowed inside mosques, but visitors should refrain from taking pictures during prayer times.¹⁶¹

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Religion: Chapter 2 Assessment

1. Buddhism arrived in Thailand around the 3rd century B.C.E.

False

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.

2. The predominant religion in Thailand is Mahayana Buddhism.

False

Approximately 95% of Thailand's population identify themselves as Theravada Buddhists.

3. Most of the country's Muslim population lives in the southern region.

True

In Thailand, Islam is primarily found in the provinces on the southern peninsula.

4. Thai Buddhism is a very pure form of the earliest teachings of Buddha.

False

Thais generally practice Buddhism in a highly syncretic way, fusing the religion with aspects of other belief systems and rituals, including animism and Hinduism.

5. Although Thailand is predominantly a Buddhist nation, the government provides substantial support to the Muslim community within its borders.

True

The Thai government has provided financial support for the renovation and construction of mosques, and it has made legal concessions to Muslim communities in consideration of their religious differences.



*A monk offering prayers
Flickr/Brian Jeffery Beggerly*

Chapter 3 Traditions

Introduction

Social inequality has a long tradition in Thailand. In the 15th century, the king implemented a formal system (*sakdi na*) to rank the worth and value of individuals; one's rank became central to all aspects of life. Although the system was abolished in the 19th century, remnants of it remain.^{1,2,3,4,5} At its core, Thai society continues to practice this hierarchal tradition. Social status frames relationships, interactions, conversations, and language use. Thus, Thais are adept at assessing appearance, age, education, occupation, and income to understand the relative position of another in relation to him or herself.^{6,7} Respect for superiors is anticipated. This core tradition is practiced in all sectors of Thai society, regardless of religion or ethnicity.⁸

Honors and Values

An integral part of Thai social hierarchy is *kraeng jai*, a social value that reflects Thais' reluctance to impose on others. On a practical level, this means that Thais will rarely display emotions such as public anger or public displeasure. The Thai notion of *jai yen* (cool heart) is another social value that means people believe in the imperative to be cool and calm in all situations. Losing one's temper can cause loss of face and one's honor.^{9, 10}



*Palace guard stoic but smiling
Flickr/Adam Baker*

Thais are typically generous and friendly, placing a high value on the social bonds of friends and family, as well as the concept of *sanuk* (“joy”). These core values mean that Thais are relatively easy-going and gregarious.^{11, 12, 13} Fun is thus fundamental to life, and so Thais typically do not devote all of their time and attention to work at the expense of social and family obligations.^{14, 15, 16}

Formulaic Codes of Politeness



*A "wai" gesture from Thai women
Flickr/shankar s.*

Greetings

Thais greet each other with a *wai*—a gesture in which the palms of the hands are placed together at chest level with fingers extended upward, accompanied by a slight bow. Those who are less senior greet first, which is followed by a response from the senior person. The positioning of the *wai* is critical in conveying respect. The higher the hands, the greater the respect conveyed.^{17, 18, 19, 20} Fingertips should extend above the eyebrows only when showing reverence to Buddha or when greeting royalty. For honored individuals, the fingertips should be between the eyebrows, with the thumb touching the nose.

It is a sign of great disrespect not to return a *wai*, except in certain circumstances. For example, if there is great social distance between two people, the senior person will not return the gesture (an adult rarely returns a *wai* from a child). A *wai* is not used to

greet servants, street vendors, or laborers nor returned to waiters and clerks. Monks never return the gesture.^{21, 22, 23, 24}

Exchange 5: Good morning.

Visitor:	Good morning.	sa wad dee krab
Local:	Good morning.	sa wad dee krab

Exchange 6: How are you?

Visitor:	How are you?	kun sa baai dee rue krab
Local:	Fine, very well.	pom sa baai dee krab

Foreigners might not be expected to initiate a *wai*, but it should always be returned (except as noted above). If a Thai does not offer a *wai*, then it is appropriate to shake hands with a man, and smile and nod to a woman.²⁵



*Greeting Thai officials
Flickr/House Committee on Foreign Affairs*

Names and Titles

Thais commonly call each other by their first names, preceded by *khun*. The use of surnames preceded by Mr., Mrs., or Miss, is reserved only for extremely formal occasions. If the person has a professional title (e.g. doctor), one can use the title before the surname.^{26, 27, 28, 29}

Exchange 7: Hello!

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

Exchange 8: How is your family?

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

Thais often use familial titles when addressing each other, even among unrelated people. Common titles include *pee* (older sister or older brother), *nong* (younger brother or younger sister), *pa* (aunt), and *lung* (uncle). Titles are placed before the first name.³⁰

Exchange 9: Good night!

Visitor:	Good night!	sa wad dee krab
Local:	Good night!	sa wad dee krab

Exchange 10: Good afternoon.

Visitor:	Good afternoon.	sa wad dee krab
Local:	Good afternoon.	sa wad dee krab

If exchanging business cards, make sure to look at the card given to you. Never fold or write on it. If possible, after examining the card, place it in a cardholder. These courtesies show respect and it will be appreciated.^{31, 32}



*Receiving a business card
Flickr/House Committee on Foreign Affairs*

Male / Female Interaction

Thai men and women enjoy equal rights under the law, except in cases of land ownership.³³ Thai women cannot obtain land in their names through either inheritance or purchase, but they can obtain land ownership if they marry a foreign national. On the other hand, women enjoy freedom of movement in all areas of society, and there are no legal restrictions on their dress.³⁴

Nevertheless, traditional patriarchal attitudes continue to persist in many parts of the country and women generally are expected to obey their husbands and be submissive. Unfortunately, such attitudes can lead to male domination over a spouse and, as some reports have demonstrated, this frequently contributes to high rates of domestic violence against women.³⁵ In spite of this, domestic male / female interactions are slowly improving.³⁶

In recent years, more Thai women have been entering the labor force, yet most continue to face discrimination and harassment in the workplace.³⁷ The majority of women can only find work in very low paying service jobs such as domestic workers, restaurant employees, and cashiers. Additionally, about 38% of women are employed in agriculture, while a significant number continue to work as prostitutes.^{38, 39, 40} In 2014, Thailand ranked 61 out of 142 on the Gender Gap Index and it remains a country where women are underrepresented in political and economic life.^{41, 42, 43, 44}



*Woman at work
Flickr/Morten F*



*Thai family seated on the floor
Flickr/Axel Drainville*

Hospitality and Gift-Giving

Guests to a Thai house must remove their shoes before entering.⁴⁵ Guests should arrive promptly at the appointed time, although being a few minutes late is acceptable.⁴⁶ When entering a home, carefully step over the threshold because Thais believe spirits reside in the door sill.^{47, 48, 49} Many Thais sit on the floor rather than on chairs. Women guests should tuck their legs to the side and behind them. Men may sit cross-legged. As a special gesture of respect for the host, men may also tuck their legs to the side.⁵⁰

Exchange 11: I appreciate your hospitality.

Visitor:	I appreciate your hospitality.	pom khaw kawb kun sam rab gaan rab rong kawng kun
Local:	It is nothing.	mai pen rai krab

Exchange 12: This gift is for you.

Visitor:	This gift is for you.	nie kue khawng khwan sam rab khun
Local:	I cannot accept this.	pom rab mai dai krab

Guests should not to offer too many compliments or admire possessions. This could embarrass the host who might then feel obligated to offer the item as a gift to the guest. Complimenting children is always welcome.⁵¹

It is not necessary to bring a gift when invited to a Thai home, although it will be appreciated. Gifts should always be neatly wrapped. Gold and yellow are royal colors and are good choices for wrapping paper. Gifts should not be wrapped in green, black, or blue since these are colors associated with mourning and funerals. Chocolates or fruit make good gifts. Flowers are also appropriate, but never give marigolds or carnations since these are generally associated with funerals. Gifts should generally be given with the right hand followed by a *wai*. Thais usually set gifts aside and rarely open them in the presence of the giver.^{52, 53, 54}



*Thai food variety
Flickr/Earthworm*

Eating Habits and Types of Food

Eating Habits and Customs

Thais normally eat three meals a day, but they are well known for snacking between meals.^{55, 56, 57} Typically, breakfast is eaten early in the morning and often consists of noodle or rice soup. Lunch is taken around noon. Dinner is the main meal of the day and is usually eaten around six, although some families might eat later.⁵⁸ Most Thais eat with forks and spoons, and knives are rarely present.⁵⁹ Noodles are eaten with chopsticks. Always hold the spoon in the right hand and the fork in the left, even if left-handed. Use the bottom of the fork to push food onto the spoon.^{60, 61} In northern parts of the country, sticky rice is often eaten with the fingers.^{62, 63} When finished, utensils should be placed together on the plate.⁶⁴

Meals are commonly served buffet style, or on platters set in the center of the table.⁶⁵ Diners may begin eating as soon as they are served. It is polite to leave a little food on the plate when finished to indicate that one is full.⁶⁶ Cleaning your plate indicates you did not get enough food and you are still hungry. However, never leave rice on the plate at the end of a meal. Rice has a special significance in Thai culture.⁶⁷ Never take the last bite from the serving platter.⁶⁸ Wait to be asked before taking seconds. Never lick your fingers.^{69, 70}

Exchange 13: What is the name of this dish?

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

Types of Food

Thai cuisine is a balanced blend of salty, sweet, sour, and spicy.⁷¹ Each of Thailand's four main regions has its own distinct flavors and specialties.⁷² Northeastern cuisine is influenced by Laos.⁷³ Malaysian influences are evident in the south, where the food is spiciest. Chinese- and Burmese-inspired food in the north is the least spicy. Central Thai flavors reflect the food of the Royal Thai kitchen.^{74, 75, 76}

Exchange 14: This food is very good.

Visitor:	This food is very good.	aa haan jaan nie aroi maag
Local:	It's Som Taam.	nie kue som tam krab

Exchange 15: What ingredients are used?

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

Common ingredients include garlic, chilies, galangal root, black pepper, tamarind juice, turmeric, cilantro, ginger, cumin, shallots, and coconut milk.^{77, 78} Thai food's tanginess comes from lime juice, lemon grass, and fresh coriander, while *nam pla* (fish sauce) and *kapi* (shrimp paste) provide salty flavors.^{79, 80}

Pad Thai is stir-fried noodles with egg, peanuts, tofu, shrimp, tamarind sauce and bean sprouts.^{81, 82, 83} *Pad ka prao* is made with meat and basil, and topped with a fried egg.⁸⁴ *Pad sataw* is pork or shrimp served with stinky beans.^{85, 86, 87} *Kaeng khieo wan kai* is a popular chicken and eggplant dish in a blend of coconut cream and green chili paste.^{88, 89}

Tom yum goong is a favorite hot and sour soup containing shrimp, mushrooms, lemongrass, kaffir lime leaves, and galangal. *Tom kha kai* is a coconut-milk based soup with chicken and spiced with galangal.^{90, 91, 92}

Salad options, often spicy, include *som tam*, papaya salad with peanuts, dried shrimp, and tomatoes; and *yum talay*, seafood salad with chilies, cilantro, mint, and lime.^{93, 94, 95, 96}

Exchange 16: The food tastes so good.

Visitor:	The food tastes so good.	gab khao jaan nie aroi lua gern
Local:	Thank you.	kawb kun krab

Dress Codes

Appearance is very important in Thailand, and people are often judged by the clothing they wear. Local people go to great lengths to wear spotlessly clean clothing. Every day 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 (oftentimes short because of the climate, but not always—depending on what part of the country you are in).^{97, 98, 99}



*Conservative clothing at a ceremony
Flickr/Uwe Schwarzbach*

Exchange 17: How should I dress?

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

Revealing clothing is unacceptable and 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. Clothing that is skimpy or provocative should also be avoided.^{100, 101} Additionally, it is culturally inappropriate to for women over 40 to wear slacks; instead, they should wear knee-length dresses or ankle length skirts with a comfortable blouse or tee-shirt.¹⁰²

Exchange 18: Is this acceptable to wear?

Visitor:	Is this acceptable to wear?	yang nie chai dai mai
Local:	Yes.	dai krab

Traditional Dress

In rural Thailand, women traditionally 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.¹⁰³ The top section, or *hua sin*, consists of plain cotton cloth; the color and motif of the *hua sin* depends on the ethnicity of the person wearing it. The color and motif of the midsection (*tua sin*) also depends on ethnic affiliation. It may have complex tapestry patterns, tie-dyed thread, or unique patterns woven into the fabric. The skirt's third section is the *tin sin*, or border, which may be either plainly woven or woven in an elaborate pattern.^{104, 105}



Traditional Dress
Flickr/Qsimple

Women also wear sarongs that wrap around the body. Often, Thai sarongs are striped or distinctly patterned. In the southern Thailand / Malay border region, Thai women wear sarongs made of batik, similar to those worn in neighboring countries.¹⁰⁶

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 the clothing worn by Thai women. In the southern Thailand / Malay border region, men traditionally wore cotton sarongs designed in plaid or checked patterns. In this region, they typically did not wear a shirt or garment on the upper body, yet for special occasions they would drape a cloth over their shoulders. In colder areas, they wore cotton shirts.¹⁰⁷

Unique Styles of the Hill Tribes

Women of the hill tribes that populate the northern mountainous region of Thailand make their own clothing, often from cloth they weave themselves. Hill country tribes each have a unique style, but the clothing generally 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.^{108, 109, 110} During the creative process, the women and young girls who weave and embellish the fabric are not usually influenced by media or designs from the international community. They typically only have their surrounding culture as a reference. The designs within each tribe thus look similar, yet there is still a personal touch added to the quality and detail of each design.¹¹¹



*Hill Tribe Dress
Flickr/Kahunapule Michael Johnson*

Ornaments worn by 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.¹¹² They also decorate their clothing by sewing coins onto headpieces, belts, jackets, and blouses. Jewelry makers will also find and use pieces of shell, animal fur, seeds, and feathers to embellish their clothing.¹¹³

Non-Religious Celebrations

New Year's Day (1 January 2016) is the first non-religious holiday of the year.¹¹⁴ Chakri Day (6 April 2016) is the next celebration of the year and commemorates the coronation of King Rama I and the contributions of all Chakri monarchs.^{115, 116} Thai New Year, *Songkran* is three day holiday (13-15 April 2016), and on the evening before it begins, people clean their homes to bring good luck. The next day, people don new clothes and travel to monasteries to give food to the monks. In the afternoon, they perform the bathing ceremony of the Buddha images. Then begins the “feast of throwing water.”^{117, 118, 119}



*Songkran Water Festival
Flickr/Prentice Wongvibulsin*

May 1 is Labor Day, and although public offices are closed, there are no special events.¹²⁰ Coronation Day (5-6 May 2016) commemorates the coronation of the current king. It begins with a 21-gun salute, after which the king awards royal decorations to people who have made valuable contributions to Thailand.^{121, 122} Royal Ploughing Ceremony is the third holiday of the month (9 May 2016). This ceremony, dating back more than seven centuries, cements the bond between farmers and the king, and includes a ploughing ritual near the Grand Palace. Animals are given a choice of seven foods and their choice predicts which crops will be plentiful in the coming year.^{123, 124}

The Queen's birthday (12 August 2016) is also celebrated as National Mother's Day. The country adorns its homes, public buildings, and palace with flags and decorations. This holiday serves as a time for people to give gifts and flowers to their mothers, grandmothers, and wives, and to donate to charity.¹²⁵ Chulalongkorn Day (23 October 2016) commemorates the death of King Chulalongkorn in 1910.^{126, 127} Father's Day is celebrated on the King's birthday (5 December 2016). People decorate their homes, buildings, and the palace with colorful flags, and hang the king's portrait in offices, public buildings, and private residences. A concert and fireworks display take place in the evening, culminating with a speech by the King.^{128, 129, 130, 131}

The final holiday of the year is Constitution Day (10-12 December 2016) commemorating the adoption of the constitutional monarchy in 1932. Parades and fireworks are held throughout the nation and images of the king are prominently displayed.^{132, 133}

Do's and Don'ts

Do show respect to all images of Buddha and 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.

Do walk slightly behind monks and the elderly.

Do pass objects with the right hand.

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

Do not throw rice away. Rice has a special place in Thai culture and it is considered the nation's lifeblood.

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

Do not place your ankle over your knee while sitting.

Do not point your foot or the sole of your foot at anyone or at any religious or royal image.

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, touching, 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 wear black unless at a funeral.

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Traditions: Chapter 3 Assessment

1. Thai society is extremely hierarchical.

True

One core feature of life is the hierarchal structure of society. One must always know their relative status. When encountering another, it is crucial to assess their relative status, which structures relations and even conversation and language use.

2. Shaking hands is a common form of greeting in Thailand.

False

The Thai people greet each other with a wai—a gesture in which the palms of the hands are placed together at chest level, fingers are extended upward, and accompanied by a slight bow.

3. The Thai like to open their gifts in front of the giver.

False

Thais will rarely open gifts in the presence of the giver.

4. When communicating, Thais generally refrain from displaying their emotional responses to others.

True

It is customary in Thailand to reserve one's feelings.

5. The title khun is commonly used with a person's surname as a gesture of respect.

False

Thai commonly call each other by their first names preceded by khun. The use of surnames, preceded by titles, is reserved only for extremely formal occasions.



*Bangkok street
Flickr/Nick Moulds*

Chapter 4 Urban Life

Introduction

Today, just 50.4% of Thailand's population lives in urban areas, thus a large portion of the country remains rural.¹ The capital city of Bangkok is the nation's largest city, with over five million residents. The city's greater metropolitan area is home to approximately 80% of all urban residents.^{2, 3} Six other cities in Thailand have populations between roughly 200,000 and 400,000, constituting less than one-third of Bangkok's population.⁴ Thailand continues to be one of the least densely populated countries in the region, however, averaging around 4,300 people per sq km (11,137 people/sq mi).^{5, 6} The government has adopted a policy to help ease problems associated with rapid urban growth in Bangkok. This policy encourages the even distribution of growth in other cities across the nation—and it is having some positive effects. The northeastern city of Udon Thani, for example, is now one of the fastest growing cities and is experiencing rapid economic growth.^{7, 8, 9, 10, 11}



*Bangkok riverfront property
Flickr/Juska Wendland*

Urbanization Issues

Urban areas in Thailand are confronted with a number of major challenges. 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; air and water pollution is severe and unremitting. Bangkok was Asia's 13th most polluted city in 2013.^{12, 13}

Demand for water has depleted ground water resources, which has had a devastating effect on Bangkok. The city is sinking at a rate of approximately 28 mm (1 in) each year. Bangkok's northern areas are most affected, and by some estimates, parts of the city could

be submerged by 2030. Coastal erosion in Samut Prakan Province is also losing land, which is sinking at a rate of 56 mm (2 in) each year.^{14, 15}

The volume of waste produced is growing annually, and improper disposal creates unsafe conditions for residents. The most serious problems are in the eastern sections of the nation, and around Bangkok.¹⁶ The city generates nearly 9,800 tons of garbage each day, and plastic bags are a particular concern. Much of the city's garbage finds its way into the canal system, clogging it and damaging wildlife. Current projects are underway to encourage recycling, reduce the amount of solid waste, and create proper disposal sites.^{17, 18, 19}

Work Problems in Urban Areas

In Bangkok and Thailand's other large cities, the rural-to-urban migration has been motivated by the desire for employment. The large influx of people to urban areas, however, has been greater than the labor market could absorb.²⁰ 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 have 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 temporarily declining because of its dependence on imports.²¹

The number of urban dwellers living in poverty has increased substantially. While educated members of the Thailand's growing middle class typically hold jobs in finance, business, and technology, the urban poor have not found stable employment.²² Women



*Street vendor in shopping area
Flickr/Patrick Del Rosario*

form a significant part of this workforce. They suffer from a lack of equal pay, access to good paying jobs, and employment-related promotions—despite laws that prohibit gender discrimination. Consequently, many women with little education resort to prostitution to survive, which is a widespread problem connected to tourism. Child labor in brothels and factories is also a serious and ongoing problem.²³

Unionization is relatively weak in urban areas throughout Thailand, where less than 2% of the nation's work force claims union membership.²⁴ Common labor-related problems include long working hours, inadequate benefits (such as medical coverage), low pay, and unsafe working conditions. In particular, the textile industry is frequently cited for repeatedly failing to prevent occupational injuries and related illnesses. Studies that detail typical industrial work environments frequently refer to dismal working conditions, such as deafening noise, poor lighting, and improper ventilation.²⁵ As a result, approximately 30% of the textile industry's female workforce exhibits symptoms of byssinosis, or "cotton sickness," each year.²⁶

Healthcare and Health Issues

Thailand implemented comprehensive universal healthcare in 2002, which covers about 99% of the population. It includes basic healthcare, free prescription medication, outpatient care, hospitalization, surgery, and critical care.^{27, 28, 29} The lowest level of care is provided by health volunteers. Primary care is dispensed at Community Medical Units (CMU) staffed with nurses, midwives, and sanitarians. A few CMUs now have doctors. Communities with populations ranging between 20 and 100,000 have hospitals. Specialty hospitals operate in cities with a minimum population of 300,000 and there are excellent, often expensive, private hospitals in most urban areas.^{30, 31, 32} Doctors frequently work in several locations within a city and they might also own private clinics.³³

Access to healthcare is uneven across the nation, and there is significant competition for medical personnel. There are about 3 doctors, and 15 nurses and midwives per 10,000 residents.^{34, 35} The doctor-patient ratio is best in Bangkok and worst in the Northeastern region, the nation's poorest. Doctors in public hospitals have a higher workload than those in the private system.³⁶

Pharmaceuticals are generally available, but counterfeit drugs have entered the market. It is thus safest to buy medications through international chain pharmacies.^{37, 38} Mosquito-borne diseases are endemic including Dengue fever, Chikungunya, and Japanese encephalitis. HIV is prevalent and is mostly spread through sex workers and dirty hypodermic needles related to illegal drug use.^{39, 40} Air pollution, particularly in Chiang Mai, is severe in February and June.^{41, 42}



*Hospital in Phuket
Flickr/Wahyu Wijanarko*

Exchange 24: Is there a hospital nearby?

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

Exchange 25: Is Dr. Somchai in, sir?

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

Ambulances are available, but the service remains underdeveloped. Large hospitals in Bangkok have mobile intensive care units for emergency treatments. Other emergency situations, including car accidents, are usually attended by volunteer organizations. Traffic congestion in Bangkok and other cities is the main obstacle to emergency transportation.^{43, 44}



*Ambulance in Bangkok
Flickr/Ian Fuller*

Education and Schools in Cities

Nine years of education are mandatory and free in public schools. Students may also attend an additional three years of public secondary school free of charge.^{45, 46} Most students (84%) opt for private schools for the first nine years. In upper secondary school, 20% are enrolled in private schools, and 35% of vocational track students attend private schools.⁴⁷ Students attend 200 days of school each year, beginning in May and



*Elementary school kids in Bangkok
Flickr/grrrrl*

ending in March. The higher education calendar is slightly different. It begins between the middle of May and the middle of June.^{48, 49}

Although pre-primary education is not compulsory, it is free. Primary education extends from grades one through six. Secondary education is divided into two cycles, each lasting three years. In upper secondary school, which consists of grades 10-12, students may go into a general (academic) track or a vocational track. After successful completion of upper secondary school, students may elect to go on to higher education if they pass the university entrance examination.^{50, 51}



*High school students
Flickr/Ian Fuller*

Higher education is provided at universities, technical institutes, teacher's colleges, or professional and technical colleges. University degrees usually take four years to complete (120-150 credit hours). Upon completion of the undergraduate degree, students may go on to graduate study.^{52, 53}

Access to primary education is nearly universal, even in the most remote rural areas. Approximately 93% of students complete primary education. Access to secondary school is more limited, particularly in the most remote rural areas.⁵⁴ Approximately 76% of those who enter secondary school graduate from lower secondary school (grades 7-9) and enter upper secondary school. About 79% of upper secondary students graduate.^{55, 56}

Bangkok is the center of Thailand's higher education system, and is home to roughly 20% of the nation's tertiary institutions. These institutions offer concentrated studies in medicine, technology, agriculture, teacher training, and fine arts.^{57, 58}



*Dinner at street restaurant
Flickr/Siim Teller*

Restaurants and Marketplaces

Restaurants

Bangkok is a top destination for world foodies, according to a Lonely Planet survey.⁵⁹ In larger cities, restaurants appeal to a wide range of modern and traditional tastes. Bangkok in particular is known for its diversity of dining styles and its choices of cuisine, including both local and international.^{60, 61}

Exchange 31: What type of meat is this?

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

Diners might be asked to share a table in restaurants; when this happens, act as if you are eating alone and don't force conversation with the others at the table.⁶²

Exchange 32: I would like coffee or tea.

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



Thai sparkling water
Flickr/nachomaans

Diners should never pour their own drinks, whether it is alcohol or tea. If your glass needs to be refilled, filling it yourself could cause your Thai companions to lose face. Always be aware, however, of whether a companion's drink needs to be refilled. If it is half full or less, you should pour more drink into his or her glass.⁶³

Exchange 33: May I have a glass of water?

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

Exchange 34: Are you still serving breakfast?

Soldier:	Are you still serving breakfast?	yang mee aa haan chao yoo rue plao
Local:	Yes.	mee krab

Tipping is not generally expected. It is appropriate, however, to leave any coins left over after paying your restaurant bill. Many hotel restaurants and upscale establishments

add a service charge to the bill.^{64, 65} As a rule, the one who extended the dining invitation pays the entire bill.⁶⁶

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

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



Thai restaurant bill
Flickr/Alpha

Marketplace and Street Vendors

Stores and Markets

Shops in Thailand run the gamut from street vendors to modern glitzy malls. Night markets are also available in Bangkok and other cities.^{67, 68, 69} Souvenir markets and shops in Bangkok sell a variety of products, ranging from the commonplace to the unusual. Such items include fine jewelry, high technology goods, and amulets to ward off evil spells. The Chatuchak Weekend Market is one of the largest in the world; with 15,000 vendors, customers can buy virtually anything.^{70, 71}



*Fabrics at Chiang Mai night market
Flickr/Kahunapule Michael Johnson*

Exchange 36: Do you sell silk cotton?

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

Exchange 37: May I examine this close up?

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



*Chiang Mai night market
Flickr/Sam Efron*

For the most part, prices are fixed in department stores, minimarts, and similar venues. Prices might be negotiable at small mom-and-pop stores and other vendors. If a price is not marked, it is usually appropriate to bargain. The Thai respect good negotiators, but shoppers should try to make the vendor give the first offer. Shoppers should then politely reply, “Can you lower the price?” Always start low, but never haggle unless you intend to buy the product if you arrive at a mutually agreed upon price. Remember that Thai are very sensitive to losing face, so try to keep negotiations friendly and relaxed. Don’t raise your voice, don’t get angry, and always smile. Expect to pay between 50-60% of the original price.^{72, 73, 74, 75}

Exchange 38: How much longer will you be here?

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

Exchange 42: Please, buy something from me.

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



*Bangkok street vendor food stands
Flickr/Jack Hoge*

Street Vendors

City streets are filled with vendors ready to sell their food, and Bangkok has more than its share of good street eateries. Sidewalk vendors and food stalls are prevalent throughout the city; customers represent all levels of society, including the very rich. Patrons can buy snacks, tea, coffee, iced drinks, soups, curries, and 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. Monday is street cleaning day in the city, so many vendors take the day off.^{76, 77}



*Monk using an ATM
Flickr/Paolo Martini*

Money and ATMs

The official currency in Thailand is the Thai baht (THB). In March 2015, USD 1 traded for approximately THB 33.^{78, 79} Unlike most places in the world, traveler's checks sometimes get a better exchange rate than cash. Larger denominations usually get a better exchange rate than smaller bills. USD 50 and 100 bills should be in excellent condition. Older bills or those that are damaged may be rejected, or assumed to be counterfeit. Legal money changers and banks have the best rates for exchanging both traveler's checks and foreign currency into local money.^{80, 81}

Cash is the preferred method of doing business in Thailand, but credit cards can be used at some hotels, shops, and tourist venues. The most widely accepted are MasterCard and Visa. American Express is accepted only at higher end hotels and restaurants.^{82, 83} Credit cards and debit cards issued outside of Thailand can be used at many ATMs.⁸⁴

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

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

Exchange 40: Can you give me change for this?

Soldier:	Can you give me change for this?	khaw laeg hern pleg noi dai mai krab
Local:	No.	mai dai krab



*Bangkok traffic
Flickr/Neotyphodium*

Urban Traffic and Transportation

In 2013, Thailand had one of the world's highest rates of traffic fatalities. It is nearly three times than that of the United States.^{85, 86} Many drivers ignore traffic regulations, often exceeding the speed limits and passing recklessly. The use of stimulants, amphetamines, and alcohol is common among commercial drivers.⁸⁷ Roads in the capital are heavily congested and poorly marked.⁸⁸

Traffic in Bangkok is notoriously heavy, with more than five million cars in a city designed to handle about two million. Traveling even short distances can take a long time, sometimes taking two hours to drive a single kilometer (.6 mi).⁸⁹ Rush-hour traffic is particularly heavy. Peak traffic times are between 7:30 a.m. and 9:30 a.m. and again between 4:30 p.m. and 6:30 p.m. Heavy rains can create heavy flooding, which also makes roads slow and dangerous to navigate.⁹⁰

Exchange 26: Where can I rent a car?

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

Exchange 27: Which road leads to the airport?

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

Public Transportation

The public transportation system in Bangkok is expansive and well-developed. In other cities, the system is more rudimentary. Often the only available options will be motorcycle taxis, tut-tuks, bicycle-powered rickshaws, and pick-up trucks.^{91, 92, 93} Travelers are advised to use caution if using any of these vehicles since they can be dangerous in fast or heavy traffic. The majority of road accidents involve motorcycles, which account for approximately 70% of all road fatalities.^{94, 95}



*Bangkok minibus
Flickr/Ian Fuller*

Buses and Minivans

The bus system in Bangkok is extensive, but vehicles are often overcrowded and drivers rarely attend to passenger safety. Privately owned minivans typically shuttle between 8 and 15 passengers around Bangkok and between major cities. These minivans are unregulated, drivers are often untrained, and many drive recklessly. Serious bus accidents are frequent, particularly on longer overnight journeys.⁹⁶ The most reliable

buses are run by the government and operate out of BK stations. Buses operating directly out of tourist centers are not recommended due to high rates of theft.⁹⁷

Exchange 28: Will the bus be here soon?

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

Taxis, Mopeds, and Tuk-Tuks

Both automobile and motorcycle taxi service is readily available in Bangkok. Taxis outside the capital are generally not metered.⁹⁸ Water taxis offer an alternate way to avoid the heavy street traffic, and is both 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 express lines and standard travel that stops at all piers.⁹⁹



*Scooters, mopeds, and tuk-tuk
Flickr/eric socolofsky*

Travelers are advised to avoid using mopeds, tuk-tuks, and motorcycle taxis when possible, especially in Bangkok. These vehicles are dangerous and are frequently involved in accidents that result in death and severe injuries.^{100, 101}

Exchange 29: Where can I get a cab?

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

Subways, Monorail, and Trains

Another way to avoid much of the gridlock in Bangkok is by taking the monorail or subway. After years of planning, Bangkok’s new monorail system, Skytrain, began operating in 1999. Unofficially called “Betsy,” the Skytrain runs through the downtown area on elevated rail tracks. In 2004, a new subway also began operating, carrying passengers beneath the streets of central



*Bangkok metro
Flickr/shin--k*

Bangkok. The “Skytrain,” the “Airport Rail Link,” and the metro mass transit system in Bangkok is safe and efficient. They are air-conditioned and comfortable, and they are faster than other form of transportation since they avoid the heavy city traffic.^{102, 103}

Exchange 30: Is there a train station nearby?

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

The trains in Thailand often run on poorly maintained tracks. Equipment is outdated and many crossings are unmarked. Train travel is marked with delays and derailments. An accident on the Bangkok-Chiang Mai line in 2013 caused rail closures until repairs and maintenance were completed.^{104, 105, 106}

Street Crime and Solicitations Crime

Crime in Thailand's urban areas may be described as moderate. The cities are generally safe, but crimes of opportunity do occur. The most common crimes involve pick-pocketing, purse snatching, credit card theft, and tourist fraud.^{107, 108} Expatriates should remain vigilant in areas frequented by foreigners, which includes bars, religious buildings, hotels, beach resorts, and hotels. In the past, these venues have been the site of terrorist attacks aimed at foreigners.^{109, 110, 111}



*Pickpocket sign
Flickr/Roger Price*

Sexual assaults and robberies also occur regularly in the Koh Samui region and in Krabi province. Tourist districts in Chiang Mai and Pattaya also regularly occur. Such crimes often take place at night, near bars. Tourists also report being robbed in their hotel rooms after inviting guests in. Drinks are sometimes spiked; adulterated drinks are also problematic at bars and nightclubs.^{112, 113}

Beggars

Begging is not illegal in Thailand, but child begging is prohibited. Beggars frequently line the streets in Bangkok and other large cities.^{114, 115, 116} In a recent survey, Thailand's Human Security Ministry reported that it had 1,186 beggars.¹¹⁷ Many beggars on Bangkok's streets are immigrants from neighboring countries. Some work for criminal gangs and must give a portion of their



*Child begging for money
Flickr/P_Lahm kun*

“earnings” to these gangs. Many beggars are children who have been illegally trafficked from Cambodia. Most beggars, however, appear to be truly in need.^{118, 119, 120, 121}

When confronted by beggars, people should not give them money, especially if they are children. The money only encourages trafficking and the illegal sale of children to gangs.¹²² The Thai government is implementing a series of initiatives to deal with this issue, including deporting foreign beggars. Others are taken to the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security where they receive assistance designed to meet their immediate needs and get them off the street.^{123, 124}

Exchange 41: Give me money.

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

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Urban Life: Chapter 4 Assessment

1. Approximately half of Thailand's population lives in urban areas.

False

Today, Thailand remains an overwhelmingly rural nation. Only 34% of the population lives in urban areas.

2. The capital city, Thailand, is the fastest growing metropolitan area in Thailand.

False

The capital city of Thailand is Bangkok. The national urbanization rate is low (about 2%) and urban growth in Bangkok has stalled. Outside of the city proper, however, urban expansion is continuing.

3. Thailand mandates nine years of compulsory education for its children.

True

Nine years of education are mandatory and free in public schools. Students may also attend an additional three years of public secondary school free of charge.

4. Thailand has a universal healthcare coverage system.

True

Thailand implemented a comprehensive universal healthcare in 2002, which covers about 99% of the population. It includes basic health, free prescription medication, outpatient care, hospitalization, surgery, and critical care.

5. Public transportation in Thailand's major cities is generally well developed.

False

Although the public transportation system in Bangkok is expansive and well developed, the system is more rudimentary in other cities. Often, the only available options will be motorcycle taxis, tut-tuks, bicycle-powered rickshaws, and pick-up trucks.



*Hilltribe village, Northern Thailand
Flickr/Oliver Laumann*

Chapter 5 Rural Life

Introduction

In spite of Thailand's relatively high rate of urban growth from 1947 to 1980, the country remains largely rural. Today, approximately 66% of the population resides in rural towns and villages.^{1, 2} By some estimates, there are more than 77,000 rural villages in the nation, with the most remote and rural located in the north and northeast.^{3, 4} Living conditions and lifestyles in rural Thailand differ significantly from those in urban areas. Rural areas are generally the poorest, with residents earning only half of what their urban counterparts earn. In 2011, an additional 17% of the rural population fell below the national poverty line, and nearly 80% currently live in poverty.^{5, 6, 7}

For much of its recent past, rural areas were ignored in favor of advancing development in urban areas, especially Bangkok. The lack of infrastructure has led to lower quality schools, inadequate technology, and family farms that are vulnerable to the vagaries of the global marketplace. Rural households spend about 80% of their income on food, leaving little for anything else. Many households rely on remittances sent by family members who live in cities or abroad, where they work in higher-paying jobs. These and other factors have created political and social tension and division, which broadly falls along rural-urban lines.^{8, 9, 10}

Nonetheless, changes are taking place in rural Thailand. The economy, once mostly dependent on agriculture, is increasingly diverse. People who migrated away from their rural homes are returning, and perceptions about rural areas are changing.^{11, 12, 13, 14} As rural development projects help bring infrastructure and economic advances to the region, rural people will become more fully integrated into the national scene, bringing both benefits and challenges for Thai society.¹⁵

Land Distribution / Ownership

Thailand's rural land rights and ownership laws have changed over the years. 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.^{16, 17} The kingdom initiated the practice of individual land ownership in the early 20th century, and farmers obtained formal deeds after



*Rice field in a rural area
Flickr/Pierre Pouliquin*

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.¹⁸

Today, 36-41% of the land in Thailand is classified as agricultural, while 28-33% is classified as forestland. In the 1970s, the government initiated a series of land reforms designed to address problems of landlessness, tenancy, and tenure insecurity, but the results were largely unsuccessful. Between 1975 and 2003, only 74,000 hectares (182,860 acres) of private land had been redistributed. The redistribution of public lands, however, saw about 3.7 million hectares (9,142,900 acres) parceled out to nearly 1.5 million people.^{19, 20}

By law, there are several types of land tenure. For example, individuals can have ownership rights and are free to sell their land; approximately 71% of all agricultural lands fall under this type of tenure. Leasehold lands are those in which parties may enter into a formal lease, not to exceed 30 years. Leases lasting more than three years, however, must be formally registered. Approximately 11-30% of agricultural land is under some kind of leasehold



*Woman in rice field
Flickr/*

tenancy arrangement. Customary law governs land use rights in some areas of the nation, especially rural districts and among the indigenous hill tribes. Nevertheless, land is still subject to the formal legal regulations that govern land ownership and usage.²¹

Ownership of private land is obtained through legal purchase, lease, or inheritance. Individuals who have occupied and used land continuously for at least ten years have the right to petition for ownership rights. Land rights that are legally registered are secure. In other cases, tenancy might be considered temporary and therefore land rights are less secure. Approximately 63% of land and 90% of land transactions are registered, suggesting moderate to high levels of land security.²²

Currently, the average Thai farm is about 3.7 hectares (9 acres) in size. Farms in the North and Northeastern regions tend to be slightly smaller. The largest farms are found in the Central region. Approximately 10% of farm households own no land. Another 17% have less than .8 hectares (2 acres). Twenty percent have farms smaller than 1.6 hectares (4 acres).²³

Rural Economy / Typical Source of Income in Rural Areas

For centuries, the agricultural sector employed most of Thailand's workforce. Today, it continues to support a substantial number of workers whose agricultural practices vary according to region.²⁴ 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. In the northern mountain areas, farmers developed



*Farmer in irrigated rice field
Flickr/Brian Hoffman*

irrigation systems so they could sufficiently water their crops.²⁵

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.²⁶ They typically produce rice, though some Hmong farmers produce opium. Rural people in the northern areas have also traditionally relied on forest products, such as bamboo and teakwood, to supplement their incomes.²⁷ As a result, many areas have been deforested.²⁸ 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.²⁹

Farmers in southern and central Thailand are more prosperous than those who live in the north and the northeast, where farmers generally remain poor.³⁰ 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.³¹

Today, agriculture accounts for between 9 and 12% of national Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and employs between 33 and 38% of the labor force.^{32, 33} Crop production remains the most important sector accounting for about 60% of agricultural output. The main crops include rice, cassava, rubber, corn, sugarcane, coconuts, and soybeans.^{34, 35} Fisheries are an important subsector, which accounts for about 14% of production. This is followed by the livestock subsector, which contributes about 9%.³⁶

The rural economy is largely dependent on agriculture, although the RNFE (rural non-farm economy) is growing in rural areas. In 2010, RNFE accounted for roughly 30% of the rural economy and nearly 74% were employed in the private sector, mostly in manufacturing, commerce, and services.^{37, 38, 39} The shift to RNFE employment has been greater for women than for men. The size of the RNFE as a percentage of the rural economy varies by region. It commands the largest share in the Central Region and Southern Regions but is significantly smaller in the North and Northeastern Regions.⁴⁰



*Thai farmers
Flickr/Brian K*

Exchange 62: Where do you work, sir?

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

Exchange 43: Do you own this land?

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

Gender Roles/Division of Labor/Gender Issues

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 women occasionally perform these duties.⁴¹ 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.⁴²



*Thai man prepares rice field
Flickr/Sandor Weisz*

Men or other family members often leave for part of the year 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.⁴³

Rural Transportation Issues

Rural dwellers have access to motorbikes, cars, trucks, but locals rely most heavily on public buses because they are thrifty and relatively safe.⁴⁴ In some cases, people utilize tractor engines and used parts from trucks to make farm vehicles capable of carrying produce (and people) to market.⁴⁵



*Ox cart
Flickr/Andrejs Strazds*

Thailand's roads are the second most dangerous in the world.⁴⁶ Pedestrians leading animals, bicyclists, and erratically driven motorbikes are frequently on rural roads. 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, but some is very fast. At night, people often do not use their headlights when driving. Driving a private car in such areas is thus risky, especially at night.⁴⁷

Rural highways typically have two lanes as far north as Chiang Mai, but roads can be quite narrow. At night, people often do not use their headlights. In the mountainous north, locals tend to drive recklessly. They often do not follow basic driving rules and traffic laws are rarely enforced.^{48, 49, 50} Further, remote rural roads can be especially dangerous since they are typically graveled and marked by potholes, narrow lanes, and an absence of road signs.⁵¹



*Rural transport minibus
Flickr/Earthworm*

For long distance travel, cars and trucks are the most common forms of rural transport. For shorter trips, motorcycles and bikes are the most common ways of getting around. Small minibuses called songtaews are common in rural towns. Other choices include the three-wheeled pedicab known as the tuk-tuk. Fares must be negotiated in advance since drivers often overcharge foreign visitors.^{52, 53, 54, 55}



*Ferry across the Chao Praya
Flickr/Uwe Schwarzbach*

River travel is also an efficient option for transport.⁵⁶ 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 in 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 wet according to season.⁵⁷

Ferries operate between the mainland and many islands off the coast.⁵⁸ Commuters can travel the canals (khlongs) around Bangkok in ferryboats, and on waterways that connect the city to the outskirts. Poor maintenance, rough seas, and overcrowding make this a dangerous option for

travelers. Passengers should always check to make sure there are available lifejackets in case of an accident.⁵⁹

Travelers should also avoid taking a late-night speedboat from Ko Pha Ngan's Full Moon Party to Samui.⁶⁰ Other kinds of river transportation include express boats, small speedboats, and long-tail boats that operate on the coastlines.⁶¹ The latter of these boats is typically propelled by a type of car engine.

Exchange 46: Do you know this area very well?

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

Exchange 47: Is there lodging nearby?

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

Health Issues

Thailand's universal healthcare program covers approximately 99% of the population. Healthcare throughout rural Thailand is available, but is often basic and English-speaking doctors are a rarity. Many rural communities face a shortfall of clinical resources and doctors.⁶²,⁶³,⁶⁴ The lowest level of care is provided by health volunteers.



*Chiang Mai hospital
Flickr/bwaters23*

Primary care is dispensed at Community Medical Units (CMU) staffed by nurses, midwives, and sanitarians. A few CMUs now have doctors. Communities of fewer than 20,000 residents are unlikely to have a local hospital.⁶⁵

Access to medical care in rural areas is often a challenge, especially in northeastern Thailand where hospitals are often staffed by just a single physician.⁶⁶ Clinics and hospitals may be located far from villages, and poor local transportation and roads make it impossible for some to get to private offices or hospitals.⁶⁷ To address issues of unequal access, Thailand now provides monetary incentives for new medical school graduates to serve three years in a rural hospital. While the situation has improved, a significant number of doctors resign from their rural posts before completing their term.⁶⁸,⁶⁹,⁷⁰

Exchange 44: Is there a medical clinic nearby?

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



*Herbal medicine shop
Flickr/bwaters23*

In very small villages, local medical staff might consist solely of volunteers who lack adequate training. In other cases, they might be trained only to communicate with patients about health issues, rather than to treat them.⁷¹ Rural populations thus continue to rely on herbal folk medicine, which is primarily dispensed by healers.⁷²,⁷³ Folk medicine in Thailand maintains a certain level of government sponsorship within the country's codified medical system, which is based, in part, on traditional Indian and Chinese medical practices. A 2005 government survey revealed there are 3,075 traditional healers practicing in 39 provinces.⁷⁴,⁷⁵,⁷⁶,⁷⁷

Exchange 45: My arm is broken. Can you help me?

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

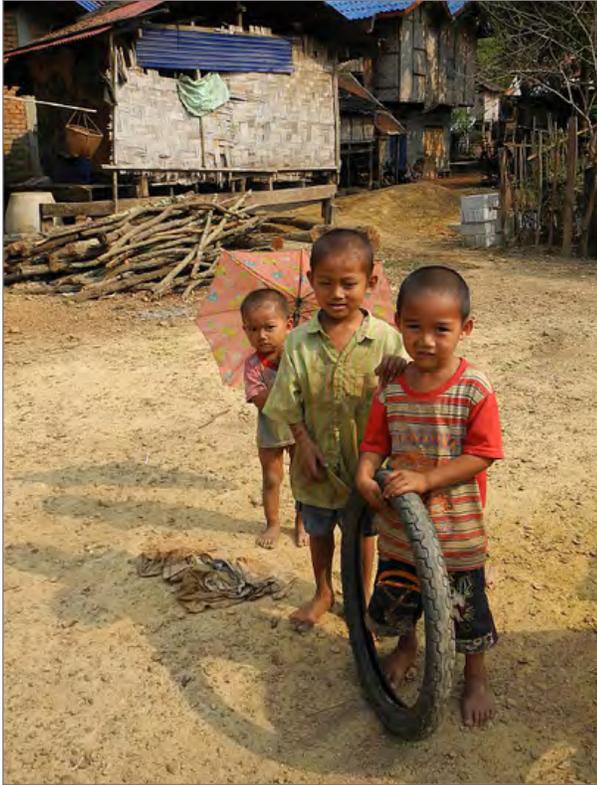
Rural Education

Public Schools

Students in Thailand are required to complete nine years of basic education (six years of primary school and three years of lower secondary school). Pre-primary school, although not mandatory, is also provided free of charge.⁷⁸ Education is free for those attending public schools. An additional three years of upper secondary school are not mandatory but are provided free of charge to public school



*Rural village school in Thailand
Flickr/cucosan*



*Village children
Flickr/Axel Drainville*

students. The school year begins in May and ends in March.^{79, 80, 81}

Access to basic education is generally good, even in the most remote areas. Access to secondary schools is more limited, especially in the most remote regions of Thailand.⁸² In the most remote areas, children may have to walk miles to get to school. Because of the distance and the poor quality of roads, some students have to live on the school grounds.⁸³

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. In many cases, a family removes their child from school in order to help with domestic duties and agricultural work.⁸⁴

Some rural schools lack electricity and sanitary facilities due to weak infrastructure. Many rural schools also are overcrowded and lack even basic supplies, including pencils and books.^{85, 86} These factors have contributed to lower outcomes on educational attainment tests for rural students.⁸⁷

Exchange 65: Is there a school nearby?

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

Exchange 60: Do your children go to school?

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

Children with disabilities are unlikely to obtain special education when they live in rural Thailand.⁸⁸ 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. In the 1990s, Thailand adopted special education policies and attempted to integrate special courses into the curriculum. However, such services remain limited and they are primarily found only in urban schools.⁸⁹



*Young monks studying
Flickr/denis*

Buddhist Schools

Buddhist institutions sponsor many Thai schools, and they work with the Ministry of Education to shape school curriculum.⁹⁰ In the country's early years, Buddhist monks were primarily responsible for educating boys from wealthy or influential families. Their goal was to train 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 vocational.⁹¹ Buddhist schools have remained an essential part of Thailand's educational structure.⁹²

⁹³

Almost all villages have a monastery, and many of these continue to maintain a school for religious instruction.⁹⁴ In addition, two major universities specializing in Buddhist studies maintain campuses in the country. Directed by monks, these institutions offer comprehensive Buddhist scholarship and training, in addition to instruction in core subjects. Their goal is to develop well-educated monks who, in turn, can represent Buddhism in their local communities.⁹⁵ Monks associated with one of these universities have produced a formal Buddhist curriculum that is used in all primary and secondary schools.^{96, 97}

Village Life

Thailand's state administrative structure is divided into three levels: central, local, and local autonomy administrations. While the central administration is the federal government, the local administration system is at the provincial and district level. The local autonomy system is comprised of approximately 7,800 local units, which are further subdivided. Thesaban represent the local administrative authority in urban areas. In semi-urban areas, the sanitary district (sukhaphiban) is the corresponding authority. In rural areas, the Provincial Administrative Organization (PAO) handles local affairs. The local officials are under the direct control and supervision of the provincial governors and district officers who have the power to dissolve local councils and dismiss council members.^{98, 99, 100}



*Mayor of Chiang Mai talks with a monk
Flickr/10 10*

Exchange 48: Does your mayor live here?

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

Exchange 49: Can you take me to your mayor?

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

Districts within each local administrative unit are subdivided into tambon, which are further subdivided into villages. Usually, a tambon consists of about 10 villages. Each tambon and village is headed by two officials: a kamnan and a village headman (phu-yai ban). The headman is directly elected by local residents to a five-year term. The kamnan is elected by village headmen in the tambon to serve a five-year term.^{101, 102, 103} Each local authority unit is made up of a local council whose members are elected by popular vote, and a head who is also directly elected by constituents.¹⁰⁴

Exchange 23: What is your telephone number?

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

Villages are administratively determined and might not correspond to the cultural norms of social interaction or ethnicity. This means that village heads sometimes find that government employees pass along instructions to district officials, bypassing cultural norms of interaction.¹⁰⁵

Exchange 50: Respected mayor, we need your help.

Soldier:	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
Local:	Yes.	dai krab

Border Crossings and Checkpoints



*Thailand-Laos Border crossing
Flickr/Axel Drainville*

Border Crossings

Thailand shares land borders with four countries: Burma, Cambodia, Laos, and Malaysia.¹⁰⁶ The nation's international border crossings may be used by anyone, but local border crossings are open only to locals on either side of the border who hold special border passes.¹⁰⁷ International visitors may cross the border into Burma at four official crossing points: Mae Sai, Mae Sot, Phunaron, and Ranong. These borders are often in a state of flux, so it is best to check ahead to make sure there are no closures or armed conflicts in the region.^{108, 109, 110}

There are six international crossings between Thailand and Cambodia. They are located in Aranyaprathet, Hat Lek, Chong Jom, Chong Sa Ngam, Ban Pakard, and Ban Laem. The most frequently used is Aranyaprathet, where eVisas are

accepted. Border disputes between the two countries make these areas volatile; military activity has occurred with little advance warning.^{111, 112}

There are eight international crossings between Laos and Thailand. They are at Chong Mek, Mukdahan, Nakhon Phanom, Bueng Kan, Nong Khai, Ban Mo, and Thai Li. Visitors planning to cross at Mukdahan must use the Friendship Bridge II to cross into Laos.¹¹³

There are seven official points from Thailand into Malaysia. These are Ban Ta Ba, Sungai Kolok, Betang, Pedang Besar, Wang Prajan, and Kuala Perlis. Visitors should exercise caution in the region because insurgent activity can flare at any time. U.S. embassy personnel are prohibited from traveling to the southernmost reaches of the country

without prior approval, and only on official business. The State Department advises all travelers to take the same precautions.^{114, 115}



*Thailand-Myanmar (Burma) Border
Flickr/Frédéric Gloor*

Checkpoints

Along the Thai-Burmese border, there are numerous military and police checkpoints. Travelers may be asked to produce ID.¹¹⁶ In Bangkok, police routinely set up checkpoints, especially in the entertainment districts. In late 2014, there were reports of police trying to extort money from foreign visitors at these checkpoints. Police or the military may erect checkpoints in the capital at a moment's notice to stem protests or civil disorder.^{117, 118}

Exchange 51: Did these people threaten you?

Soldier:	Did these people threaten you?	kon puag nie kug kaam kun rue plao
Local:	No.	plaaο krab

Exchange 52: Where is the nearest checkpoint?

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

Numerous military checkpoints exist in the southern provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat, along Thailand's southern peninsular border with Malaysia. Nearly 60,000 security forces were deployed in the region in 2013.¹¹⁹

Exchange 53: Is this all the ID you have?

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

Exchange 54: Show us the car registration.

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



*Demining symposium in Bangkok
Flicker/Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention*

Landmines

Thailand signed the Mine Ban Treaty in December 1997 and ratified it in 1998. Domestic legislation to enact the provisions in the treaty has not concluded. Executive measures to implement the convention have been attempted, but never issued.¹²⁰

The Kingdom claims it has never produced or exported antipersonnel mines; yet in the past, they have imported such devices from several nations, including China and the United States. Thailand recently declared it possesses 3,227 mines, which will be used only for training purposes.¹²¹

Thailand has provided no precise information regarding the extent of landmine contamination in the country, yet it is estimated that mines are located in approximately 1,202 sq km (464 sq mi) of the country.¹²² Landmines and unexploded ordnance (UXO) are found along Thailand's borders with Malaysia, Cambodia, Laos, and Burma. Most of the contaminated area (75%) lies along the Cambodian border, where the Khmer Rouge laid many mines in the 1970s.¹²³ In addition to mines, there has been extensive use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in the southern regions. Insurgents are known to have used such devices between 2009 and 2012, but since 2013, there have been no further reports of use.¹²⁴

Exchange 55: Is this area mined?

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

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Rural Life: Chapter 5 Assessment

1. Thailand's most rural areas are in the southern region.

False

The most remote and rural sections of the nation are the north and the northeast.

2. Nearly two out of every three people in Thailand live in a rural area.

True

Approximately 66% of the Thai population lives in rural towns and villages.

3. Approximately 37% of farmers own plots of land less than 1.6 hectares (4 acres) in size.

True

Approximately 10% of farm households own no land and another 17% have less than .8 hectares (2 acres). Another 20% have farms smaller than 1.6 hectares (4 acres).

4. Virtually all of the rural economy is related to agriculture.

False

The rural economy, though still largely dependent on agriculture, is changing. The RNFE (rural non-farm economy) is also growing and in 2010, RNFE accounted for roughly 30% of the rural economy.

5. Motorcycles are a common form of transportation in rural Thailand.

True

Major transportation systems outside of the capital are rudimentary. For long distance travel, cars and trucks are the most common forms of transport. For shorter trips, motorcycles and bikes are the most common ways of getting around.



*Thai family at home
Flickr/Adam Stanhope*

Chapter 6 Family Life

Introduction

Thailand is well known for its deeply rooted family values. Family plays a central role in Thai society and Thailand was among the first countries to celebrate Family Day.¹ Family bonds are strong and persist throughout life, regardless of geographical distance. Thai families are a source of care and support for one another, including elderly family members.^{2,3,4} Yet, contemporary social pressures continue to influence Thai family life in important ways. Busy schedules mean that many people only see their family for brief periods before and after work or school. Further, many people from rural families migrate to cities in search of better opportunities, thus leaving their family behind for sustained periods. In some villages, as many as 80% of children live with their grandparents, who are often the caretakers when parents leave to work elsewhere.^{5,6} ⁷ Even though rural migrants to urban areas continue to maintain family ties, they see their relatives far less frequently than in the past. Households with immigrant parents are generally better off financially, but their children often suffer from psychological health problems, do worse in school, and are more likely to experience other social problems.⁸

Typical Household and Family Structure

In the last 30 years, the size of the average Thai household has decreased, and most contemporary households consist of an average of 4 members.^{9, 10, 11} Extended families continue to be an important part of Thai life, however, and it is not uncommon to find several generations living under one roof.^{12, 13, 14}

Exchange 56: How many people live in this house?

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



*Thai family outside
Flickr/lisa angulo red*

Extended family might 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 how to interact appropriately within their families and society.¹⁵

Exchange 57: Does your family live here?

Soldier:	Does your family live here?	krawb kruaa kun yoo tie nie rue plaa
Local:	Yes.	yoo krab

Exchange 61: Are these your children?

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

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.¹⁶ For example, young urban couples often set up their own separate households, and live more independent lifestyles than their counterparts live in villages. As a result, it is less common to find extended families living together in Thailand's urban areas.¹⁷

However, since most Thais have rural backgrounds, they maintain connections to their relatives in villages.¹⁸

Exchange 58: Did you grow up here?

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

Exchange 59: Is this your entire family?

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



*Thai village couple
Flickr/digitalfishpc*

Male / Female Interactions in the Family

Thai families are traditionally matrilineal, although males retain authority over their families.¹⁹ Women have an advantage with respect to inheritance and property rights, and family lineage and customary lines of female authority are passed from the mother to her daughter(s). As a result, female children are preferred somewhat more than males.^{20, 21}

Within the family, areas of responsibility are clearly delineated. First, Thai males have general authority over their families, while mothers have authority over their children and their family’s budget. Children have shifting roles within the group; they assist the family whenever they can be of service.^{22, 23, 24}

Status of Women, Elderly, and Children

Women

Women have decision-making authority regarding purchases for the home or for family-related services or goods, whereas men are generally in charge of public transactions.²⁵ Although Thai women generally lack equal pay, their incomes make significant contributions to household earnings. Outside the domestic sphere, women work in agricultural, manufacturing, banking, tourism, and export industries. Female employment in the tourism and export sectors is particularly high.²⁶ Women are also highly visible in the fields of health and education. Among their other professional endeavors, Thai women are prominent in government and serve in administrative positions at most levels, including cabinet posts and state ministries. Thai women hold equal constitutional rights and they are among the first women in Asia to achieve this status.^{27, 28}



*Thai woman with sewing business
Flickr/Earthworm*

Elderly

In Thailand, approximately 10% of the population is over the age of 64.²⁹ The elderly population is growing at about 3% a year and is expected to double in the next 20 years, when they are expected to make up about 20% of the population.^{30, 31} Many remain economically active, especially those in rural Thailand. Many are self-employed and most work in agriculture.^{32, 33, 34}



*Village women
Flickr/Saengroaj Srisawaskraisorn, USAID*

Elderly people are highly regarded in Thailand, and they continue to play an important role in their families and in the broader community. Many elderly Thais care for their grandchildren and perform household tasks, such as cooking and cleaning; in some cases, they provide financial support. They also play an important role in preserving Thai culture by passing down traditions and intergenerational history.^{35, 36}

Exchange 64: Are these people part of your family?

Soldier:	Are these people part of your family?	kon puag nie pen kon nai krawb kruaa khawng kun rue plao
Local:	No.	plaa0 krab



In Thailand, the elderly traditionally live with their extended families, who support and care for them. About half live in three-generation households, while fewer than 5% live alone.^{37, 38} The expectation and desire to take care of one’s elderly family members is deeply ingrained into Thais at a young age. Yet, the responsibility for caring for aging parents typically 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.³⁹

*Elderly living with family
Flickr/Earthworm*

Exchange 63: Do you have any brothers?

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

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 be permissive with young children, yet they also actively teach them about respect and responsibility. Children learn at an early age to show respect to older family members, which teaches them that in business or any other social situation, they must respect and defer to their elders.^{40, 41}



*Children perform 'wai' gesture
Flickr/Jonah Sng*

Children born in Thailand are required to have their births registered, which provides legal status, certain rights and protections. However, as many as one million births have not been registered.⁴² Children born out of wedlock are considered the legitimate child of the mother.⁴³ If the parents subsequently marry, the child is considered the legitimate of both the father and the mother.⁴⁴

Thailand has made progress on combatting child labor. Nevertheless, approximately 13% of children aged 5-14 work. Many are employed in the agricultural sector, particularly in the fishing subsector. Others work in Thailand's garment industry, as domestic servants, as paid Muay Thai (boxing) fighters, or in bars and restaurants. Thailand has a significant problem with illegal trafficking of children, who are sexually exploited and forced to work in the illegal sex trade.⁴⁵

Married Life, Divorce, and Birth

Marriage

Marriage in Thailand is generally regarded as desirable but it is no longer universal, and the number of women in Thailand who have never married is increasing.^{46, 47, 48} People in Thailand are delaying marriage longer; while the average age at first marriage in 2013 for men was approximately 26 and for women 24.⁴⁹

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, however, and they are further removed from the process when their children live independently in urban areas.^{50, 51}



*Thai couple with child
Flickr/Jim Durbin*

Exchange 66: Are you married?

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

In villages, new husbands and wives will sometimes live with the wives' parents. It is more common in cities, however, for a newly married couple to set up their own home.⁵² Traditional family gender roles show a clear division of labor, where the wife is responsible for domestic duties, including child care and home management, and the husband is responsible for providing financial stability.^{53, 54} Modern Thai women are more likely to work outside the home than past generations, but still maintain traditional roles and are generally subordinate to men.⁵⁵

Whether a wife works or not, she is the central figure of the home and embodies its domestic values.⁵⁶ She is responsible for raising the children, while the husband becomes the head of the household and acts as a mediator between the family and the public, even though the wife may hold a job outside the home.⁵⁷ Husbands might help with some of the household work, such as cooking, which is often the case at village festivals, where men assist women in food preparation.⁵⁸



*Thai married couple
Flickr/NoRMaN TsAi*

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.⁵⁹ 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.⁶⁰

Exchange 67: Is this your wife?

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



*Thai woman with child, "peace"
Flickr/Frédéric Gloor*

Divorce

Divorce in Thailand carries relatively little stigma.⁶¹ According to a 2008 poll, 55% of Thais considered married women to have about the same status as all other women in general.⁶² According to Buddhist tradition, divorce does not diminish a woman's social status and she is free to remarry. 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, and is not a religious requirement. Marriage is free of religious judgment or strictures within Thailand's Buddhist culture, and so too is divorce. Dissolving a marriage contract is the right of every husband and wife, if they so choose.⁶³

Obtaining a divorce in Thailand is relatively simple and straightforward. If both husband and wife agree to a separation, and if both are willing to cooperate, they register for an administrative divorce—which is usually granted.⁶⁴ If either the husband or wife opposes the divorce, or disagrees over how property will be divided, or disagrees who will have custody of their children, the couple must proceed through the court system and state their grounds for separation.⁶⁵ 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.^{66, 67, 68}



Muslim Thai woman alone
Flickr/Marcus

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 be made to save the marriage.⁶⁹ 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.⁷⁰ 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.⁷¹

In recent years, Thailand's divorce rate has increased to about 35% for new marriages.⁷² In 2012, the health minister reported that divorce was up 27% over the previous decade.⁷³ One major factor is the stress related to changing family relationships, and diminished connections to extended family. Without support from extended family, many Thai parents find it difficult to deal with the pressure of raising and providing for their children. Another factor is the increased independence of women who have entered the workforce and are better able to support themselves.⁷⁴ The expanding economy has led to more financial independence and a wider scope of professional choices for women. Many rural people who commute to urban areas, or other countries for work, are absent from their families for long periods. The prolonged separation of family members has had a detrimental effect on some marriages.^{75,76}

Birth and Birth Ceremonies

Traditionally, the time and day of the week on which a baby is born is important in Thailand. Thais generally believe the time and day of the week a baby is born will influence the type of personality the child will have.⁷⁷ For example, Monday and Friday are especially favorable days for girls to be born, while Tuesday, Saturday and Sunday are considered the most favorable for boys. Thursday is a good day for both girls and boys to be born, but Wednesday is generally considered an unfavorable day for either girls or boys.⁷⁸

Shortly after birth, a Thai baby receives a nickname, usually consisting of one syllable.⁷⁹ 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.⁸⁰

Three days after birth, the Thai hold a *tham khwan sam wan* ceremony. The baby is placed on a winnowing tray and rocked from side to side in a symbolic separating of the grain from the chaff. An old woman, pretending to be the mother, offers a coin to the spirit to buy the baby. This is to deceive spirits who may try to take the child later but will be fooled into going to the wrong “mother” believing it to be the old woman.^{81, 82}



*Thai man with baby at baptism
Flickr/Michael Sarver*

The baby gets his or her first haircut at one month. This ceremony, called *tham khwan duan*, is a more public affair than *tham khwan sam wan*. Parents announce the festivities, which can be attended by many people; the ceremony usually involves a feast for all guests. This day signifies that the child has survived a very dangerous period and has avoided evil spirits, so the child is now ready to be formally announced to the Buddhist community.^{83, 84}

The life cycle of a Thai is measured in twelve-year intervals. For this reason, every 12th birthday typically involves a special celebration. Nine monks are invited to the home to chant and give blessings. The most important birthday is the 60th, which for Thais marks a withdrawal from the active world.⁸⁵

Family Social Events

Weddings

Thai wedding ceremonies are non-religious and no vows are exchanged, despite the fact that Buddhist monks or Muslim Imams might be present. The ceremonies are largely symbolic and are designed to ensure good luck for the couple. Consequently, Thais can gain recognition as a married couple simply by living together and having children. Most couples,



*A wedding ceremony in Thailand
Flickr/Justin Yoshida*

however, prefer to have some kind of wedding ceremony. Legally, all marriages must be registered at the district office.⁸⁶ Traditional Thai weddings were elaborate and complex but they have become less so in recent years.⁸⁷

Wedding ceremonies in different parts of the country often vary, depending on the religion and ethnicity of the couple. For instance, a basic wedding ceremony in the predominantly Muslim south will look very different from a wedding in the predominantly Buddhist north (for example, Chiang Mai). Additionally, some rural villages continue to incorporate old customs into the ceremony that pre-date Buddhism or Islam. Thai weddings are generally small affairs. Only close friends and close relatives attend. Because the wedding is not a religious event, monks and imams do not play any special role, although they may attend.^{88, 89}

Thai Buddhist weddings are an all-day affair, with the actual wedding taking place early in the morning. Nine monks will be invited to visit the home of the couple for this early morning ceremony, where they chant, pray, and place a lit candle in a bowl of water. This water will be used later to bless the couple. After the monks have completed their prayers, the couple and their relatives offer them food; the monks will give the couple their blessings once they have finished eating.⁹⁰ The couple will also typically donate money to the local wat (Buddhist temple) by giving an envelope of money to the monks when they leave. It is believed that in return for their donation, they will receive a lifetime of love in their marriage.⁹¹

The main wedding ceremony, called *rodnamsang*, is held in the afternoon. During the *rodnamsang*, the bride and groom sit closely together, with the groom on the right

and the bride on the left. They hold their hands in an elevated wai greeting position, symbolizing their greeting to the Lord Buddha, and a chain of flowers is placed over their hands. The most senior and respected person in attendance will place loops of specially prepared white thread, called sai monkon, over the couple's heads. Water is then poured over the couple's hands and allowed to drip into bowls of flowers. Guests provide their blessings by pouring more water on the couple's hands.^{92, 93, 94, 95}

Exchange 19: I wish you both happiness.

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

Exchange 20: Congratulations!

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

The Buddhist wedding ceremony continues until it is time for the reception, which is a large celebration. Invited guests typically bring their friends and family with them, so the party can grow to around 100-300 people. Alcoholic drinks often flow freely, as Thais generally like to drink together when they celebrate.⁹⁶ After dinner, the couple receives a traditional send-off with roses.^{97, 98, 99}

Islamic marriages follow a different set of rules. According to the laws of Islam, marriage is based on a social contract, which is typically initiated by a man and the father or legal guardian of the potential bride. Before the wedding, a dowry is negotiated by either the bride's parents and the groom, or the bride and the groom if the bride does not have parents. During the wedding ceremony, verses from the Quran are read and the groom must repeat certain verses after the Imam with his hand on the Quran. Next, the bride is asked if she agrees to the terms of the contract, and if she answers that she is satisfied, the couple completes the marriage ritual by signing the marriage contract.¹⁰⁰

Funerals

Funerals and Buddhist cremation in Thailand, called *pithi ngan sop lae phao sop*, represent rebirth and the passage into the next level of existence. The more senior and respected the deceased was in life, the more elaborate the funeral.¹⁰¹ The majority of Thais are cremated according to Buddhist rites; Muslims are never cremated, however, and their bodies are buried within 24 hours.¹⁰² Buddhist funerals are usually held at the temple or wat.^{103, 104}



*Funeral at a temple in Thailand
Flickr/Adam Stanhope*

During a Buddhist funeral, family members ritually wash the deceased's body and then place a one-baht coin in the mouth to allow passage into the next plane of existence. The hands are tied with a white thread in the gesture of a wai. The family sends candles, joss sticks, and flowers to extended family before placing the body in a coffin with the head facing west, in the direction of the setting sun. Family and friends help the immediate family prepare the funeral meal and gain merit by giving a small sum of paper money, which is often placed on sticks that are fixed on the side of the coffin. For three days after death, monks visit the home to chant and receive meals from the family.^{105, 106, 107}

The coffin is typically kept in the home or temple for a period of 7-100 days. Each day, monks chant over the deceased and every seven days, a more elaborate ritual is performed. Several days before the deceased is cremated, the family places the coffin in a funeral bier made of wood and crepe paper and they hold a two-day wake outdoors with music, gambling, and barbeques.¹⁰⁸

Exchange 21: I would like to give my condolences.

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



*Funeral at a temple in Thailand
Flickr/Adam Stanhope*

When it is time for the cremation ceremony, the coffin is carried from the house or temple feet first. Family members lead a procession to either an open funeral pyre (usually in remote rural areas) or a crematorium, typically inside a monastery. They are followed by monks walking in pairs, holding a white thread tied to the foot of the coffin.^{109, 110}

The coffin is carried around the crematorium or open funeral pyre three times in a clockwise direction. Monks pour coconut water onto the corpse's face, after which villagers pour scented water onto the body.¹¹¹ The string is removed from foot of the coffin while monks chant the suadnitcha. The white cloth covering the coffin is removed by the most senior monk; the coffin is then placed onto the pyre or in the crematorium and the body is consumed by fire.¹¹² Mourners wear subdued colors. Family members dress in black. Thai mourners are generally stoic and while there may be a few tears, it is unusual to hear loud wailing.^{113, 114}

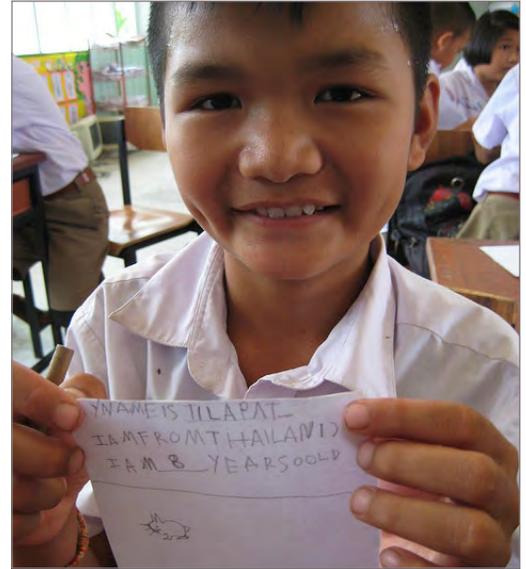
Exchange 22: Please be strong.

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

Naming Conventions

The first thing a foreigner usually notices about Thai names is that they seem very long and complex. Most given names have two or three syllables and surnames are usually much longer.¹¹⁵ Every Thai person has two legal names—a given name and a surname.¹¹⁶ Personal names are listed first, followed by surnames.¹¹⁷ It is considered bad luck to give children born on Monday a name that contains certain vowels.¹¹⁸ Women's names often end in jit, jai, or tip. Men's names frequently end with thep, sa-art, and pradit.¹¹⁹ In addition to their given name, each person has a nickname that is commonly used by friends and family. Nicknames are shorter and often consist of only a single syllable.^{120, 121, 122,}

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*Thai child practices writing English
Flickr/Blue Delli quanti*

Women generally take their husband's name when they marry.¹²⁴ For example, if Parfun Theeravit marries Nattapong Bisalyaputra, she will be known as Parfun Bisalyaputra. Children usually assume their father's surname.¹²⁵ Surnames were not used in Thailand before 1913, when the king decided to take one. He personally invented surnames for high ranking and wealthy families. The king specified the Thai spelling and its Romanization to make certain that unrelated families would never have the same surname. This remains true for virtually everyone in the nation today. If two people have the same surname, it is likely that they are related in some way.^{126, 127, 128}

Thai surnames are rarely used on their own. They may be used in combination with given names in extremely formal situations. In most situations, Thais are referred to by their first name. A man named Somchai Vaiyasingha will be called Mr. Somchai and a woman named Sudarat Punyaratabandhu will be referred to as Mrs./Miss Sudarat. Additionally, Thais often use the title Khun before the first name when referring to either a man or a woman. Thus, Somchai Vaiyasingha becomes Khun Somchai and Sudarat Punyaratabandhu would be Khun Sudarat.^{129, 130, 131} Names in telephone directories are arranged by given names, rather than surnames.¹³²

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Family: Chapter 6 Assessment

1. The traditional extended family structure of rural Thailand has largely survived the move to urban settings.

False

In the last 30 years, the size of the average Thai household has decreased. Most households consist of an average of four people. Extended families are an important part of Thai life. It is not uncommon to find several generations living under the same roof.

2. Thai families are traditionally matrilineal, although males retain authority over their families.

True

Women have an advantage with respect to inheritance and property rights, and family lineage and customary lines of female authority are passed from mother to daughter(s). Female children are somewhat preferred over males.

3. Thai women still rarely work outside of the home.

False

More Thai women are entering the labor force than ever before, participating at higher levels than women in most other Asian countries.

4. One main role of the elderly in Thai extended families is to actively instruct young children in the family.

True

Older family members form close, supportive bonds with children who grow up within the family structure. They actively teach them to have respect and accept responsibility. Children learn to defer to older people in general, and they extend this to social interactions outside the family.

5. In Buddhist culture, marriage is considered a sacrament and divorce is considered improper.

False

In Thailand, divorce carries relatively little stigma. A 2008 poll showed that a majority of Thais (55%) felt that married women were not treated any worse than women in general

Thai Cultural Orientation: Final Assessment

Answer All: True or False?

1. The northern region is the most mountainous part of Thailand.
2. Thailand first began opening to the Western countries during the early part of the 20th century.
3. Until about two decades ago, Thailand's constitutional government was largely stable.
4. All broadcast media networks are controlled by the government.
5. All members of Thailand's legislature are elected for six-year terms.
6. Women in Thailand are prohibited from becoming ordained monks.
7. Showing disrespect for statues or other representations of Buddha is a criminal offense.
8. Thai communities use Buddhist temples, or wats, exclusively as sites of worship.
9. Spirit houses are built only at religious sites throughout Thailand.
10. It is unacceptable for a visitor to stand above a monk, even if he is outside the temple.
11. Gifts should not be wrapped in green or blue paper.

12. In Thailand, it is unacceptable to touch people on the head.
13. To show that you are full, it is appropriate to clean your plate.
14. The dress code in Thailand is generally conservative.
15. Thailand is one of the most densely populated countries in Southeast Asia.
16. Water taxis offer an accessible and inexpensive form of transportation in Bangkok.
17. Heavy demands on groundwater are causing Bangkok to sink.
18. Restaurant diners are expected to leave a tip equal to approximately 10% of the bill.
19. In Thailand, gangs often use small children as beggars in order to procure money from tourists.
20. It is appropriate to arrive about half an hour late when visiting at a Thai home.
21. In the most remote regions, long distances between home and school force some children to live at the school.
22. In Thailand, the kamnan is directly elected by popular vote to serve a five-year term.
23. The majority of agricultural land is classified as leasehold land.

24. The most heavily mined region in Thailand in the south where there is ongoing insurgent activity.
25. Traditional folk medicine is an integral part of Thailand's official healthcare system.
26. Many Thai families are separated for long periods because of economic migration.
27. Most marriages are arranged in Thailand, especially in rural villages.
28. Thai women are not considered equal under the constitution.
29. To be legal, Thai marriages must be registered at a district office.
30. In Thailand, two people who have the same surname are most likely related.

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