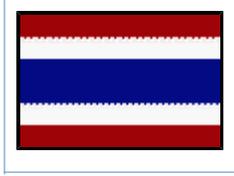


Thailand

Encyclopædia Britannica Article

Introduction



country located in the centre of mainland Southeast Asia. Located wholly within the tropics, Thailand encompasses diverse ecosystems, including the hilly forested areas of the northern frontier, the fertile rice fields of the central plains, the broad plateau of the northeast, and the rugged coasts along the narrow southern peninsula.



Until the second half of the 20th century, Thailand was primarily an agricultural country, but since the 1960s increasing numbers of people have moved to Bangkok, the capital, and to other cities. Although the greater Bangkok metropolitan area remains the preeminent urban centre in the country, there are other sizable cities, such as Chiang Mai in the north, Nakhon Ratchasima (Khorat), Khon Kaen, and Udon Thani in the northeast, Pattaya in the southeast, and Hat Yai in the far south.



Siam, as Thailand was officially called until 1939, was never brought under European colonial domination. Independent Siam was ruled by an absolute monarchy until a revolution there in 1932. Since that time, Thailand has been a constitutional monarchy, and all subsequent constitutions have provided for an

elected parliament. Political authority, however, has often been held by the military, which has taken power through coups. During the last two decades of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st, parliamentary democracy steadily gained wider popular support. Although a crisis emerged in 2006, when the military, aligned with the monarchy, overthrew an elected government, new parliamentary elections were held—as promised by the interim government—in 2007.

Land

Thailand, which has about the same land area as Spain or France, consists of two broad geographic areas: a larger main section in the north and a smaller peninsular extension in the south. The main body of the country is surrounded by Myanmar (Burma) to the west, Laos to the north and east, Cambodia to the southeast, and the Gulf of Thailand to the south. Peninsular Thailand stretches southward from the southwestern corner of the country along the eastern edge of the Malay Peninsula; Myanmar extends along the western portion of the peninsula as far as the Isthmus of Kra, after which Thailand occupies the entire peninsula until reaching its southern border with Malaysia at roughly latitude 6° N.

Relief



Thailand's landscapes vary from low mountains to fertile alluvial

plains dotted with rice paddies to sandy beaches set amid the equatorial latitudes of the Asian monsoons. The country is divided into five distinct physiographic regions: the folded mountains in the north and west, the Khorat Plateau in the northeast, the Chao Phraya River basin in the centre, the maritime corner of the central region in the southeast, and the long, slender peninsular portion in the southwest.

The northern mountains, the southeastern continuation of the uplift process that formed the Himalayas, extend southward along the Thai-Myanmar border and reach as far south as northern Malaysia. Long granitic ridges were formed when great masses of molten rock forced their way upward through the older sedimentary strata. Peaks average about 5,200 feet (1,600 metres) above sea level. Mount Inthanon, at 8,481 feet (2,585 metres) the highest in the country, is in northwestern Thailand, near the historical city of Chiang Mai. The city is overshadowed by Mount Suthep, site of a famous Buddhist shrine and the royal summer palace. Some of the rugged limestone hills contain caves from which remains of prehistoric humans have been excavated.

The northeast is coterminous with the Khorat Plateau, a vast tableland bounded by the Mekong River on the north and east. It was formed by uplifting along two perpendicularly arranged crustal faults—one trending north-south in the west and the other east-west in the south. As a result, the underlying sedimentary rocks were tilted rather than uniformly uplifted. This tilting created ranges of low hills and mountains along the western and southern edges of the plateau: the Phetchabun and Dangrek (Thai: Dong Rak) mountains, respectively. The escarpments of these uplands overlook the plain of the Chao Phraya basin to the west and the Cambodian plain to the south. Surface elevations on the Khorat Plateau range from about 650 feet (200 metres) in the northwest to some 300 feet (90 metres) in the southeast. The terrain is rolling, and the hilltops generally slope to the southeast in conformity with the tilt of the land.

Situated between the northern and western mountain ranges and the Khorat Plateau is the extensive Chao Phraya River basin, which is the cultural and economic heartland of Thailand. The region, sometimes called the Central Plain, consists of two portions: heavily dissected rolling plains in the north and the flat, low-lying floodplain and delta of the Chao Phraya in the south. It was formed by the outwash of immense quantities of sediment brought down from the mountains by the Chao Phraya's tributaries, which produced vast fan-shaped alluvial deposits.

The generally rolling countryside of the southeast has high hills in the centre and along the eastern boundary with Cambodia. Notable peaks are Mount Khieo, which rises to 2,614 feet (797 metres), and Mount Soi Dao, which attains a height of 5,471 feet (1,668 metres). The hills, reaching nearly to the sea, create a markedly indented coastline fringed with many islands. With their long stretches of sandy beach, such coastal towns as Chon Buri and Rayong and some of the islands have become popular year-round tourist resorts.

The southwestern portion of the country consists of a peninsula with a mountainous spine and a gently sloping sandy coastline. Higher mountains reaching about 4,900 feet (1,500 metres) line the peninsula on the west and contain narrow passes linking Thailand and Myanmar. These ranges separate the Andaman and South China seas as the peninsula narrows near the Malaysian border. Off the rugged and much-indented west coast lie numerous large islands, including tin-rich Phuket Island, which, with

other islands such as Samui and Phiphi, have become tourist destinations, surpassing in popularity Hua Hin, the old coastal resort located in the northern part of the peninsula.

Drainage



Mangrove trees at low tide on the coast of Thailand.

Thailand is drained largely by two river systems: the Chao Phraya in the west and the Mekong in the east. Three major rivers in the northern mountains—from west to east, the Ping (and its tributary the Wang), the Yom, and the Nan—flow generally south through narrow valleys to the plains and then merge to form the Chao Phraya, Thailand's principal river. The delta floodplain of the Chao Phraya is braided into numerous small channels and is joined by other rivers—notably the Pa Sak—as the river flows toward its mouth in the Gulf of Thailand.

The flooding of the flat delta in the wet season is an asset to rice cultivation, although higher ground on the extreme eastern and western edges of the plain requires irrigation. The entire delta was once part of the Gulf of Thailand, but over time the sediment carried down from the north has filled it in. Such silting is a continuing obstruction to river navigation, but it also extends the river's mouth into the gulf by several feet each year.

The rivers of the Khorat Plateau flow generally southeastward and empty into the Mekong. Floodwaters from these rivers have been important sources of water for rice production in the area. However, the floods have long been unpredictable, in terms of both quantity and frequency, and flooding problems have worsened as more land has been deforested and put under cultivation. The region also has a high water table that contains mostly brackish, unpotable water. Much of the Mekong itself, which lies on the boundary between Thailand and Laos, is either studded with islands or broken up by impassable rapids.

The southeast and the peninsula are drained by short streams and rivers. In the southeast the rivers in the north flow into the Chao Phraya delta, while those in the west and south run directly into the sea, where they have built up small alluvial basins and deltas along the coast. The mouths of the rivers along the southern coast consist of tidal flats and mangrove swamps. Nearly all the rivers on the peninsula drain into the Gulf of Thailand.

Between the 1950s and '80s, a number of dams were built, mainly in the north and northeast of the country, that have improved flood control and made it possible to increase the production of hydroelectric power and to expand agricultural areas that can be irrigated.

Soils

The great alluvial deposits in the river valleys contain the most fertile soils in Thailand and are replenished annually with sediment washed down by rivers swollen with the annual monsoon rains. Chief among these areas is the delta floodplain of the Chao Phraya, but the relatively flat basins in the northern mountains, scattered lands along the Mun and Chi rivers on the Khorat Plateau, and much of the coast also have rich alluvial soils. Soils elsewhere tend to be relatively infertile, highly

leached laterites. Near the Mekong, a high salt content in some soils limits crop production, although salt deposits there are mined commercially.

Climate

The major influences on Thailand's climate are its location in the tropical monsoon zone of mainland Southeast Asia and certain topographic features that affect the distribution of precipitation. Beginning in May, the warm, humid air masses of the southwest monsoon flow northeastward over the region from the Indian Ocean, depositing great quantities of precipitation; rainfall reaches a maximum in September. Between November and February the winds reverse direction, and the northeast monsoon brings cool, relatively dry air in a southwesterly flow to create cooler temperatures for much of the country. Stagnant air in March and April produces a distinct hot-and-dry intermonsoonal period.

Uplands cause local variations in the general weather patterns, especially on the peninsula: Ranong on the west coast receives approximately 160 inches (4,000 mm) of precipitation annually, while Hua Hin on the east coast receives less than 40 inches (1,000 mm). Similar but less-pronounced rain-shadow effects occur along the western margins of the Central Plain and on the Khorat Plateau. Songkhla, at the southern end of peninsular Thailand, has its rainy period during the cool season, the result of moisture picked up by the northeast monsoon winds while passing over the Gulf of Thailand.

Nationwide, temperatures are relatively steady throughout the year, averaging between 77 and 84 °F (25 and 29 °C). The greatest fluctuations are in the north, where frost occasionally occurs in December at higher elevations; conversely, maritime influences moderate the climate in the south. The cooler, drier air of the northeast monsoon produces frequent morning fogs that generally dissipate by midday in the north and northeast regions. Humidity is extremely high during the rainy season.

Plant and animal life

Thailand is a country of forests, shrub-studded grasslands, and swampy wetlands dotted with lotuses and water lilies. Since the mid-20th century, the total land area covered by forests has declined from more than half to less than one-third. Forest clearing for agriculture (including for tree plantations), excessive logging, and poor management are the main causes of this decline. Forests consist largely of such hardwoods as teak and timber- and resin-producing trees of the *Dipterocarpaceae* family. As elsewhere in Southeast Asia, bamboo, palms, rattan, and many kinds of ferns are common. Where forests have been logged and not replanted, a secondary growth of grasses and shrubs has sprung up that often limits land use for farming. Lotuses and water lilies dot most ponds and swamps throughout the country.

The Thai people traditionally used water buffalo, oxen, horses, and elephants for plowing and harrowing fields, transporting goods and people, and moving heavy loads. By the 1980s, however, draft animals had been replaced by machines, and, except in remote areas of the country, animals used for transportation had been replaced by motorcycles, trucks, cars, and buses. The demand for work elephants almost completely disappeared after the logging ban in 1989, and domesticated

elephants were absorbed into the tourist industry.

Rapid deforestation coupled with a marked rise in demand for exotic animals has been detrimental to wildlife. Rhinoceroses and tapirs, once found in many parts of the country, have all but disappeared, as have herds of wild elephants. A similar fate has befallen gibbons and some species of monkeys and birds. Although serious efforts have been made to prevent the illegal sale of endangered species, they have met with only limited success. Like other conservation legislation, which has a long history in Thailand, the laws have been difficult to implement and enforce.

Thailand's once abundant freshwater and marine fish have been rapidly depleted by overfishing and disruption of their natural habitats, as have shrimp, prawns, and sea crabs. Many of the shrimp and prawns now sold in both domestic and export markets come from shrimp farms. Snakes, including the king cobra and several species of poisonous water snakes, while still common in the wild, are today more likely to be seen at snake farms. The same is true for crocodiles, although they still exist in the wild in the south.

Mosquitoes, ants, beetles, and other insects—as well as the lizards that eat them—are always in evidence, even in urban environments. The silkworm has contributed much to the silk industry, for which Thailand has become famous.

People

When the modern political boundaries of Thailand were fixed at the end of the 19th century and in the first part of the 20th, the country included peoples of diverse cultural, linguistic, and religious backgrounds. This diversity is characteristic of most Southeast Asian countries, where shifting political boundaries have done little to impede the centuries-long migrations of people. Thailand's central position on the mainland has made it a crossroads for these population movements.

Ethnic groups

Although the vast majority of the inhabitants of Thailand are descendants of speakers of Tai languages who have been dominant in the area since the late 13th century, the population also includes numerous non-Tai peoples. Members of the largest indigenous minority speak a dialect of Malay. Other significant indigenous minorities include speakers of Mon, Khmer, and other Mon-Khmer languages of the Austroasiatic family. In the uplands of western and northern Thailand are found peoples who speak languages belonging to several other language families. Thailand is also home to large numbers of immigrants and their descendants, most from China but some from South Asia. Most members of indigenous and immigrant communities in Thailand identify strongly with Thai national culture and are speakers of Thai.

Thai

The ancestors of the Thai first entered the central part of the Southeast Asian mainland about 1000 CE and began establishing independent principalities in the 13th century. It was once thought that the ancestors of the Thai came from southwestern China, but strong linguistic evidence has emerged that places the

original home of Tai-speaking peoples in what is today northwestern Vietnam. The Tai who settled in the area now belonging to Thailand brought with them cultural characteristics shaped by contact with the Chinese. In their new home, they were influenced by Khmer and Mon peoples, whose traditions largely originated in India. The Tai who became dominant in the 13th century ultimately combined the linguistic, cultural, and sociopolitical heritage of their Tai ancestors with the Buddhism of the Mon and the statecraft of the Indianized Khmer to form what would become a distinctive Thai culture. In contemporary Thailand, those who accept a national identity as Thai include not only the Tai-speaking people of central Thailand but also several other Tai-speaking groups, the largest of which are the Lao-speaking peoples of northeastern Thailand and the Kammüang-speaking peoples of the northern part of the country.

Mon-Khmer

The remnants of the autochthonous communities of present-day Thailand live in the northeastern part of the country and are closely related to the Khmer of Cambodia. They constitute the largest percentage of Mon-Khmer speakers in Thailand. The Kuy (whom are called Suai by most Thai) of the northeastern region were once known as elephant hunters; today they are recognized as skilled trainers of elephants for work. There are also small numbers of upland-dwelling peoples such as the Lawa or Lua in the north, and a somewhat larger population of Mon in the west. Most of the Mon are descendants of migrants from Burma in the 17th to the 19th century, but some are more recent refugees from Myanmar. Mon-Khmer-speaking peoples have long been bilingual, also speaking Thai or other locally prominent languages. Because most follow the same Buddhist traditions as others in Thailand, they are well integrated into the country's social fabric.

Chinese

Thailand has attracted large numbers of immigrants from neighbouring countries since the mid-19th century, owing to the expansion of the Thai economy and political upheavals elsewhere in Asia. The largest number of immigrants by far have come from China, and they constitute a significant minority in Thailand. In the commercial centres of Bangkok and other cities, people of Chinese descent operate both large and small commercial enterprises and work as middlemen and storekeepers.

In the early 1900s about one-seventh of the population of the country was identifiable as Chinese, but by the early 21st century roughly one-tenth of the population still recognized its Chinese ancestry. The overwhelming majority of people of Chinese descent (Thai: *luk cin*) in contemporary Thailand have assimilated to Thai culture, largely by adopting Standard Thai as their primary, or even exclusive, language and by becoming Theravada Buddhists. These assimilated Chinese are known in English as Sino-Thai. There remains, however, a smaller number of people who are still recognizably "Chinese" by virtue of the languages they speak and occupations they follow. Although there was discrimination against Chinese in the first half of the 20th century, the Sino-Thai

have come to play a preeminent role not only in the economy but also in politics. Since the 1990s several prime ministers and a majority of members of parliament have had Chinese ancestors.

Malays, upland peoples, and new immigrants

Not all peoples living within the borders of Thailand have been fully integrated into the national community. Malay-speaking peoples form the vast majority of the population in the four southernmost provinces of the country. Because this region constituted a separate Malay sultanate until the late 19th century, and because its inhabitants have a distinct linguistic identity and religious heritage (as practitioners of Islam), some of the residents of the area have supported movements seeking greater autonomy or even independence from the predominantly Buddhist and Tai-speaking rest of the country.

Upland-dwelling peoples (also known as “hill tribes”) such as the Karen, Hmong, Yao, Lahu, Lisu, and Akha also follow distinctive traditions that set them apart from the country's Tai-speaking majority. In the past such peoples were considered by the Thai to be peoples of the forest, and this association has continued to shape the popular image of upland communities in the 21st century. Most upland peoples at one time followed local religious traditions. While some have become Buddhists, more have converted to Christianity, a feature that further distinguishes them from the majority of the population.

A number of stigmas have plagued the upland peoples, including a history of growing opium poppies and engaging in swidden (slash-and-burn) agriculture—both banned in the 1950s—as well as a widespread inability or failure to obtain national identification cards. A more positive role for Thailand's upland peoples has been fostered by King Bhumibol and other members of the royal family, who have not only made many visits to these areas but also have established projects that replaced opium cultivation with other products that have improved the livelihoods of upland peoples. Cultural tourism has also contributed to improving the image of the upland communities. In addition, several nongovernmental organizations have worked to gain citizenship for upland peoples and to protect their rights to land without being displaced.

Until the mid-20th century most permanent immigrants to Thailand were allowed—even encouraged—to become citizens. However, the situation changed for later immigrants, many of whom entered Thailand as political refugees from neighbouring countries. The first significant group of refugees arrived from Vietnam just after World War II, and most were eventually granted Thai citizenship. Thailand was inundated with a much larger wave of refugees in the 1970s following the establishment of communist governments in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Although the majority of these refugees were ultimately resettled in other countries, some Hmong from Laos remained in refugee centres in Thailand. In the late 1980s an even greater number of refugees began to enter the country from Myanmar in search of employment and political asylum. This influx has continued into the 21st century, and although some of the immigrants have been accorded guest-worker status, tens of thousands of refugees from Myanmar, as well as Cambodia, Laos, and China, have continued to live and work illegally throughout the country.

Languages

Most of the languages spoken in Thailand belong to one of four major language families: Tai (a subfamily of Tai-Kadai languages), Mon-Khmer (a subfamily of Austroasiatic languages), Austronesian, and Sino-Tibetan. In addition, English is widely used in Thailand for commercial and many official purposes. It is a required school subject from the primary grades on up, although only children who go beyond those grades, and especially those who attend elite schools, gain significant competence in the language.

Tai

The national language of Thailand, known as Standard Thai, is based on the language spoken in central Thailand. Nearly every person in the country is able to speak and write Standard Thai, having learned the language from government schools and through its use in print and broadcast media. While Standard Thai has strongly influenced all the languages of Thailand, a number of distinct Tai languages continue to be spoken. Most people living in Bangkok and surrounding urban areas as well as in up-country towns and cities use Standard Thai as both their domestic and public language, while people in rural areas speak languages in a domestic setting that are sharply different from Standard Thai. Dialects related to the Lao language of Laos are spoken by nearly one-fourth of the population, primarily by those living on the Khorat Plateau, in northeastern Thailand near the border with Laos. Speakers of other Tai languages—notably Kammüang (also known as Northern Thai, or Yuan in its written form) in northern Thailand and Pak Tai (Southern Thai) in the south—account for about another one-sixth of the population. Tai-speaking peoples are found not only in Thailand but also in Laos, where a Tai language is also the national language, as well as in Myanmar, Vietnam, northern Malaysia, and southern China.

Mon-Khmer

Prior to the 13th century the major languages spoken in what is today Thailand belonged primarily to the Mon-Khmer language group of the Austroasiatic language family rather than to the Tai language family. The peoples speaking these languages were displaced by the arriving Tai speakers and driven into the hills. Later, wars pitting Thailand against the Burmese and Khmer kingdoms brought more speakers of Mon and Khmer languages into Thailand as refugees and prisoners of war. The Mon settled in the north, centre, and west, although they are now concentrated in an area just west of the country, while the Khmer settled in the east along the Cambodian border.

Most speakers of Mon-Khmer languages were subsequently assimilated into the Tai peoples who became politically dominant after the 13th century; there remain, however, a few communities in western Thailand that continue to speak Mon (although their numbers have rapidly declined since the beginning of the 20th century). Significant numbers of Khmer speakers remain in northeastern and eastern Thailand. Small numbers of upland-dwelling speakers of Mon-Khmer languages are also found in northern and northeastern Thailand. The Lua, for instance, speak Lawa, an Austroasiatic language, possibly of the Mon-Khmer

subfamily. According to some historians, these people inhabited the delta plain until they were driven into the hills by the invading Tai speakers.

Austronesian

A dialect of Malay, which belongs to the Austronesian language family, is widely spoken in the far southern provinces of the country. In contrast to the speakers of Mon-Khmer languages, speakers of Malay have been very resistant to assimilation to Thai national culture. Their resistance, however, has been as much a consequence of their adherence to Islam as it has been of their speaking a different language.

Sino-Tibetan and other languages

Descendants of migrants from southern China constitute the largest portion of the population of Thailand who speak Sino-Tibetan languages. Some of these migrants still speak such diverse Chinese languages as Teochew, Hokkien, Hainanese, and Cantonese. These languages, which were once spoken by a considerable portion of the population in Thailand, have steadily been abandoned by the descendants of Chinese migrants in favour of Standard Thai. Those who decide today to learn Chinese choose Mandarin because of its utility in international trade.

In addition to those who continue to speak dialects of Chinese, a small number of people, mostly living in the highlands of northern and western Thailand, speak languages belonging to other subfamilies of the Sino-Tibetan language family. These peoples include the Karen (Karennic subfamily) and the Lahu and Lisu (Tibeto-Burman subfamily). Thailand is also home to speakers of languages from the Hmong-Mien family, including the Hmong (Hmongic subfamily) and Iu-Mien or Yao (Miennic subfamily). Of all these minority groups, the Karen, originally from Myanmar, have been in the region for centuries, while others, such as the Hmong and Lahu, have migrated from Myanmar, Laos, and southern China only since the beginning of the 20th century.

Religion

The vast majority of people in Thailand are adherents of Buddhism. The Theravada tradition of Buddhism came to Thailand from Sri Lanka and is shared by peoples in Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, and parts of southern China and southern Vietnam. The community of monks (*sangha*) is central to this tradition. In Thailand almost every settlement has at least one temple-monastery (*wat*), where monks in their distinctive yellow robes reside and where communal rituals take place.

When Thailand was still primarily an agrarian society, rituals held according to the Buddhist calendar at the *wat* were central to communal life. At most of these rites, laypeople offered various combinations of food, clothing, medicine, and shelter to monks. Laypeople acquired Buddhist merit (*bun*) from these gifts, which would improve their chances for a good rebirth. Monks also conveyed the teachings of the Buddha through sermons and actions that exemplified the lessons. The Buddhist

ritual cycle continues to be followed in villages, but in urban settings it has become less pronounced.

There has long been a tradition among the Thai for young men to ordain as monks for at least one period of *phansa* (the Buddhist Lent), which lasts for three months during the rainy season. With the expansion of secular schooling and increased opportunities for nonagricultural work, however, fewer men have adhered to the tradition. In the 21st century, many young men have chosen not to enter the monkhood, or they have spent a much shorter period of time as members of the *sangha*.

Thai religion has incorporated beliefs and practices from local religion as well as from Hinduism. Although there are only a small number of Hindus in Thailand, largely the descendants of immigrants from India, Hindu religious elements are common. Since the 16th century the Thai court has engaged court Brahmans to oversee some of the most elaborate rites associated with the monarchy. Shrines to Hindu deities are found throughout the country, and the shrine to Brahma at the Erawan Hotel in Bangkok attracts hundreds of people each day who seek the help of this deity in confronting the vicissitudes of urban life.

A number of distinct and competing movements have developed among Thai Buddhists since the late 20th century. These include fundamentalist and evangelical Buddhists, some of whom are considered heterodox by establishment Buddhists. Others take their inspiration from Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (1906-93), considered to have been the most outstanding Thai monk of the 20th century in promoting a socially engaged Buddhism. Both lay and clerical leaders in this movement advocate the alleviation of social injustice, protection of the environment, and dialogues with those of other faiths. There has also been a significant revival of spirit mediumship among nominal Buddhists, particularly in urban areas.

While Buddhism is the dominant religion, other religions are also found in the country. A small but significant minority of Muslims lives primarily in southern Thailand, but also in and around Bangkok. Although Christian missionaries first came to the country in the 16th century, only a tiny fraction of Thai have converted to Roman Catholicism or Protestantism, and most Christians are members of ethnic minorities, mainly Sino-Thai. The influence of Christianity is not, however, limited to those who have converted to the religion, since many of the non-Christian elite attended Christian schools. Although several of the hill tribes have converted to Buddhism or Christianity, most follow local religions.

Settlement patterns

Regions

Thailand can be divided into four major regions—the north, northeast (also known as Isan), centre, and south (southern peninsula). Two additional subregions are the eastern seaboard, which straddles the central and northeast regions, and the west, which is part of the southern peninsula. These regions (*phak*) were formally recognized as distinct cultural, linguistic, and administrative entities during the process of building a unified country in the late 19th century, and the northern and northeastern ones, as well as part of the far southern peninsula, correspond to what had been semiautonomous domains

within the Siamese empire prior to the reign of King Chulalongkorn (reigned 1868-1910). The two subregions have distinct characteristics.

North

The mountainous provinces located in the upper part of the northern region are often referred to collectively as Lan Na Thai, from the name for the loosely structured federation of principalities, with its capital at Chiang Mai, that existed in the area until the end of the 19th century. The people of Lan Na Thai speak the Kammüang (Northern Thai) dialect and follow Buddhist traditions akin to those practiced in Myanmar. The mountains of the north are also home to many upland minority groups.

The provinces of the lower north include the heartland of the first Thai kingdom, Sukhothai, which was named for its capital city. Peoples in this subregion speak dialects related to Standard Thai, rather than Kammüang, and follow cultural traditions similar to those of the Thai living in the central region.

Northeast (Isan)

The majority of peoples living in the northeast region, which corresponds to the Khorat Plateau, share linguistic, cultural, and religious traditions with the Lao living across the Mekong River. Until the late 19th century this region was made up of relatively independent realms. In the early 20th century the region was officially designated as Isan, a term derived from Sanskrit meaning "northeast." The Lao-speaking people of this region, who constitute the large majority of the population, differentiate themselves not only from the Lao of Laos but also from the central Thai by referring to themselves as Khon Isan.

The Khmer and Kuy (Suai) living in the southernmost part of the northeast region speak languages and follow traditions more closely related to those of Cambodia than to those of either the Thai or the Lao. The large province of Nakhon Ratchasima, also known as Khorat, in the southwestern part of the northeast, was long an outpost of the Siamese empire and includes peoples known as Thai Khorat, who speak dialects closely related to central Thai. Although the northeast remains home to much of the country's rural population, it also includes a burgeoning urban society. Among the fastest growing cities are Khorat, Khon Kaen, Ubon Ratchathani, and Udon Thani.

Centre

The Central Plain, occupying most of the Chao Phraya basin, is the political, economic, and cultural core of old Siam and present-day Thailand, and it is home to those who speak dialects closely related to Standard Thai. Historically, the people of central Thailand have followed a Buddhist tradition closely linked to that of the Khmer of Cambodia. Commercial and industrial activity is heavily concentrated in the region, especially in Bangkok, and economic growth has been faster there than elsewhere. This rapidly growing

economic heartland continues to be a strong magnet, attracting people from other parts of the country, particularly from the northeast, who seek greater economic and social opportunities. Thus, while Standard Thai is the dominant language of Bangkok, Chinese and Isan (Lao) dialects are also spoken by a substantial number of people in the city.

Southern peninsula

The upper part of the southern-peninsula region, also called Pak Tai, has a distinctive identity linked to the historical role of towns such as Nakhon Si Thammarat, once known as Ligor. Because of the region's historical ties to the later Siamese kingdoms, the language and customs of the southern Thai are similar to those of the Thai of central Thailand. The lower part of the southern region is inhabited by Malay-speaking Thai, most of whom are Muslims. The southern region has also attracted a large number of Chinese migrants, especially to work in the tin industry. Today the largest city in the south, Hat Yai, which serves as the centre of trade with Malaysia, is populated primarily by Sino-Thai.

West

The western and southwestern region, consisting mostly of hilly to mountainous terrain along the Myanmar border, is still sparsely populated. The upland Karen, who have long lived in the dense forests of the region, continue to engage in shifting cultivation. The western region became politically significant in the last decades of the 20th century as environmental groups pressured the government to ensure that old-growth forests in the area be preserved rather than cut by logging companies or inundated by the reservoirs created by hydroelectric dams. The region has also long been the locus of overland connections to Myanmar. During World War II the Japanese forced Allied prisoners of war to build a rail line in the region to connect Thailand and Burma (Myanmar), as dramatized in the 1957 British movie *The Bridge on the River Kwai*. In the 1990s the construction of a pipeline through the region to carry natural gas from Myanmar to Thailand was strongly protested by both environmentalists and those opposed to the military regime in Myanmar.

Eastern seaboard

The eastern seaboard subregion, stretching along the eastern side of the Gulf of Thailand, is undulating and hilly and extends eastward from Bangkok to the Cambodian border. The region contains significant numbers of people living along the border with Cambodia who speak Khmer or Khmer-related languages and follow cultural traditions related to the Khmer. Starting in the late 19th century, the region began to attract large numbers of Sino-Thai. This new migration was associated with the development of sugarcane and fruit plantations, sugarcane and lumber mills, and fish-sauce factories. A number of deepwater ports were developed in the 1970s. One of these, established by the U.S. Navy at Sattahip, has continued to be a major naval base, while

another, at Laem Chabang, has become one of the largest commercial ports in the country. As the region developed into the most important port and industrial area of Thailand behind Bangkok, it, like the Greater Bangkok Metropolitan Area, attracted significant numbers of migrants from northeastern Thailand. The resort town of Pattaya has become the major urban area in this region.

Rural settlement



A Lisu hill settlement near Pai, northwestern Thailand.

The dominant settlement pattern in Thailand remains the rural village, where the primary occupation is wet-rice cultivation. Migration to urban areas has increased significantly since the mid-20th century, but the majority of the country's people still consider their principal place of residence to be the village, even when they live and work for extended periods in urban environments.

There are a number of settlement types that vary depending on location. Villagers in the northeast live in houses clustered together on higher ground, surrounded by rice fields. In the north, by contrast, where most villages are found in the alluvial basins of major rivers, population growth and improvements in transportation have tended to disperse the villages away from the rivers and toward the main railroads and highways, reducing the amount of land available for growing rice. The north also contains the majority of the country's hill settlements, which are similar to, though smaller than, the nucleated villages of northeastern Thailand.

The Chao Phraya delta is densely settled along areas of high ground that are free from flooding. A vast network of irrigation canals has modified the pattern of settlement and transportation. The mobility offered by small motorboats utilizing the canals has made it possible to establish villages to the east and west, away from the rivers. New highways have also modified settlement patterns, especially at river crossings and canals where new towns have appeared.

In the south and southeast, plantations, especially those producing fruit, rubber, and palm oil, are scattered along the fertile slopes, alternating with the low and narrow rice fields; the villages are interspersed among these plantations and fields. Most are linked by good roads and highways. Alluvial deposits containing tin, no matter how remote, can be reached by road and waterway. Settlement is almost continuous along both sides of the peninsula. Many people living in coastal settlements have long been fishermen, taking their boats out into the Andaman Sea or Gulf of Thailand.

Urban settlement

Urbanization in Thailand, as in many other developing countries, has proceeded rapidly since World War II, but growth has been highly uneven. The Greater Bangkok Metropolitan Area, which generally includes Bangkok proper and its twin city, Thonburi, and the contiguous cities of Samut Prakan to the southeast and Nonthaburi to the north, remains the dominant and only major urban centre in the country. The total population of this area is some 30 times larger than that

of Udon Thani, the next largest city, and several times larger than that of the next 10 largest cities combined. Nonetheless, cities such as Khon Kaen, Ubon Ratchasima, Udon Thani, and Nakhon Ratchasima in the northeast; Chiang Mai in the north; Hat Yai, Surat Thani, and Nakhon Si Thammarat in the south; and Pattaya on the eastern seaboard grew quite significantly since the last decades of the 20th century and have assumed some of the urban characteristics of Bangkok.

Demographic trends

Thailand's population rose rapidly in the 20th century, especially during the period between 1950 and 1970, when the government supported such growth. Since then, however, official policies and private family-planning programs have slowed this growth dramatically, making the country a model for other countries seeking to reduce their high population growth rates. The population profile that resulted from the earlier increase has nonetheless placed demands on the country's education, housing, health, and employment systems.

From the mid-19th century to World War II, immigration, primarily from China, contributed markedly to the growth of the population. In the postwar period immigration has been restricted, and most of the refugees from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam who obtained asylum in Thailand after the wars ended in those countries were not allowed to become permanent residents of Thailand. Some of the refugees were resettled in other countries, and a small number were repatriated to their own countries. Since the late 1980s hundreds of thousands of people from Myanmar have entered Thailand as refugees, as illegal immigrants, or, in a small number of cases, as legal guest workers. Although only a few of these people have been granted the right to remain permanently in Thailand, many have lived in the country for years or even decades.

Internal migration, notably the movement of people from the countryside to Bangkok, has produced major changes in the society. Bangkok has received a major share of all interregional migrants, most from the central and northeast regions. Although roughly one-third of Thailand's total population is classified as urban, the figure does not take into account the large number of people who work primarily in urban areas while still retaining official residence in their villages. As in most other regions of the world, these migrants are mainly young adults less than 30 years of age.

Economy

Prior to the 1960s, the Thai economy was based primarily on the production of rice and other foods and goods for domestic consumption and of rice, rubber, teak, and tin for export. The government then began to promote a shift from agriculture to the manufacture of textiles, consumer goods, and, eventually, electronic components for export. By the 1980s, Thailand had embarked on a solid path of industrialization; even the economic crisis of the late 20th century only slowed, but did not halt, this economic transformation.

From 1963 until 1997 the Thai economy was one of the fastest growing in the world. The adoption of the first national development plan in 1963 spurred the shift from

agriculture to industry. During the 1980s and '90s numerous export-oriented industries emerged, primarily in the areas surrounding Bangkok. The large-scale migration of young women and men from rural communities to the greater Bangkok area drained labour from the countryside. Those continuing to pursue agriculture turned increasingly to machines to make up for the shortage of workers, bringing about a shift in the rural economy from subsistence to market-oriented agriculture. Most of the investment in new technology in the agricultural sector came from the savings of family members who had gone to work in the cities.

Hydroelectric complexes needed to sustain the growth of the industrial economy have displaced thousands of villagers from their homes and fields, inundated large areas of forest, transformed flood patterns, and reduced the supply of fish, on which many depend for their livelihood. By the 1980s villagers were organizing mass demonstrations to protest the inadequate compensation given to those displaced; they were joined by environmentalists and social activists mobilized by the negative impact of these projects. Other large protests have been mounted against government policies promoting the commercial exploitation of forests. These protests, together with rising concerns among the middle class about the environment, spurred governments of the late 20th and early 21st centuries to undertake projects with greater sensitivity to environmental issues than had been shown by previous governments.

Export-oriented industries and financial institutions, especially those created in the 1980s and '90s, have relied heavily on foreign capital, making the Thai economy more vulnerable to changes in global economic conditions. In 1997 a sudden and rapid decline in the value of the Thai currency, the baht, triggered a financial crisis that quickly spread to other Asian countries. The crisis not only exposed the overdependence of Thailand on foreign capital but also focused attention on the consequences of unequal development and on weaknesses in several sectors of the economy. By the beginning of the 21st century, the economy had begun to recover, but the economic crisis and the emergence of a more democratic political order caused economic policies to become the object of intense public debate. A coup in September 2006 rekindled uncertainties about the future of the Thai economy. While announcing, rescinding, and subsequently reimposing various restrictions on foreign investment, the interim government promoted the king's philosophy of "sufficiency economy," an ideal emphasizing self-reliance and moderation in consumption, without rejecting capitalist investment.

Agriculture, forestry, and fishing

Rice is not only the main staple crop of the country but also the primary agricultural export. Thailand has for decades been one of the world's largest rice exporters. Although high-yield varieties of rice were adopted in the 1960s, rice yields are much lower than in East Asia, owing primarily to less-efficient labour inputs. The main commercial rice-producing areas of Thailand are the Chao Phraya basin and the Khorat Plateau. Agricultural production has diversified significantly to meet domestic and world market demand. Among the crops produced for the market are cassava, corn (maize), kenaf (a jutelike fibre), longans, mangoes, pineapples, durians, cashews, vegetables, and flowers. Cash crops such as rubber, coffee, sugarcane, and many fruits are produced mostly on large holdings owned by the agribusinesses that began to emerge in the last decades of the 20th century. Tobacco was once an important cash crop, but it declined considerably as demand

dropped.

The northeast of Thailand has long been known for its water buffalo and cattle. As agriculture became increasingly mechanized, the demand for water buffalo, once used for plowing and harrowing, decreased markedly. However, cattle production in the northeast increased because of a significant rise in demand for beef in urban areas. The northeast is also a major producer of pigs, to meet a growing demand for pork. Chicken production expanded dramatically since the mid-20th century, but increasingly it has been undertaken in central Thailand by companies rather than by smallholders. The outbreak of bird flu (avian influenza) in Southeast Asia in the early 21st century prompted the government on several occasions to order the destruction of large numbers of chickens, leading to an overall decline in poultry production and heavy revenue losses for producers. Chickens and smaller numbers of ducks continue to be raised for the domestic market.

Thailand was once one of the major exporters of hardwoods, especially teak and *Dipterocarpus alatus*, known in Thai as *yang*. In 1989 the government imposed a ban on logging following a catastrophic landslide in the southern part of the country that was largely blamed on the deforestation caused by excessive logging in the region. Some cutting for local uses has continued, and, although other types of timber from Thai forests have been exported illegally, the ban has generally been successful. Concerted efforts have also been mounted to conserve existing forests and to expand forest reserves, but those actions led to conflicts with peoples who have long lived in the areas affected.

Fish and other aquatic life have been the major source of protein in the Thai diet since ancient times. As deforestation and pollution of streams and rivers led to a decline in freshwater wild fish, there has been a marked increase in the raising of fish in ponds, especially in northeastern Thailand. Since the 1970s, Thailand has been one of the world's major exporters of shrimp, fish, and fish products. However, the creation of shrimp farms and the overfishing of the Gulf of Thailand sparked disputes between commercial interests and villagers who depend on fish and shrimp as basic foodstuffs. Many traditional marine fishing areas have become polluted, and shrimp farms have been especially damaging to coastal mangrove forests. Some recovery efforts are under way.

Resources and power

Tin, mined mostly in the peninsula, has long been among Thailand's most valuable mineral resources, and the country has become one of the world's largest producers. Fluctuations in the world tin market, however, have caused output to be reduced. Other important mining and quarrying operations produce coal (lignite), zinc, gypsum, fluorite, tungsten, limestone, and marble. Rubies and sapphires are mined along the east coast of the peninsula.

Industrial expansion has increased demand for electricity and fossil fuels. Electricity in Thailand comes primarily from hydroelectric plants in the central plains, the north, the northeast, and Laos, with supplementary power coming from thermal plants using natural gas and lignite. Thailand has significant offshore natural gas reserves and less-abundant onshore oil resources. In the 1990s a controversial pipeline was constructed to transport natural gas from Myanmar to Thailand, but domestic production also expanded rapidly. By the early 21st century, Thailand's dependency on imported petroleum and natural gas for energy had decreased

markedly.

Manufacturing

The growth in manufacturing since 1970 has been especially dramatic, reflecting the large investments made by private firms. Although growth was initially spearheaded by the garment industry, electronic products assumed the vanguard in the mid-1980s, propelled by investment and transfer of production from Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore. Since the late 1990s, Thailand has been a notable exporter of motor vehicles and, more recently, telecommunications equipment. While industrial development has been concentrated in and around Bangkok, production has also expanded along the eastern seaboard and, more recently, into northern, especially northeastern, Thailand, where much of the labour for all industries originates.

Finance

The Bank of Thailand, established in 1942, issues the baht, acts as central banker to the government and to the commercial banks, and serves as the country's financial agent in dealing with international financial markets, international monetary organizations, and other central banks. Together with the Ministry of Finance, it is at the pinnacle of the government's economic technocracy and plays the key role in managing the economy. Three other government financial agencies are also important: the Board of Investment, which offers financial incentives to domestic and foreign entrepreneurs; the National Economic and Social Development Board, which formulates the government's five-year plans; and the Budget Bureau, which compiles the annual national budget. These government bodies focus primarily on creating the proper financial conditions for business to grow and prosper, leaving business decisions themselves to the private sector.

Commercial banks grew out of business syndicates established in the 1940s by business families with Chinese roots. In the post-World War II era, these banks have not only controlled the financing of trade; they have also played a key role in industry by channeling loans to business sectors and enterprises with high growth potential and by cultivating close working relationships with foreign investors. A restructuring of Thai commercial banking took place as a result of the economic crisis of the late 1990s; foreign holdings significantly increased, while the number of family-controlled banks dropped sharply. Some of the original family interests and leadership, however, persisted despite foreign ownership. Close ties between commercial banks and political leaders and government officials have been important for coordinating economic policy, but they have also been a breeding ground for corruption. In addition to banks, other important private-sector financial institutions include finance companies, which have become major sources of loans for the real estate market, and the securities firms active in the Securities Exchange of Thailand, the country's stock exchange.

In the mid-20th century foreign investment emerged as one of the most important factors in the rapid growth of the national economy. As part of the liberalization of the country's financial markets in the early 1990s, the government established the Bangkok International Banking Facility (BIBF), an offshore banking entity that became a major conduit for international capital. Originally envisioned as a means

to establish Bangkok as a major financial centre rivaling Hong Kong and Singapore and serving all of Southeast Asia, the BIBF in fact became a channel by which foreign funds (primarily in the form of short-term loans) could enter Thailand's domestic economy.

Trade

Thailand's trade patterns have changed dramatically from the early 1980s, when more than two-thirds of export earnings came from agriculture and less than one-third from manufacturing. By the early 21st century, agriculture contributed roughly one-eighth of export earnings and about one-tenth of gross domestic product, while manufacturing accounted for virtually all the rest; the share of import expenditures for machinery, components, and raw materials, moreover, had increased from less than half to more than three-fourths.

The country's main trading partners are Japan, the United States, China, Singapore, and Malaysia. The most important import categories by value are machinery; chemicals and related products; petroleum; iron, steel, and other metals; and raw materials of various types. Machinery is also an important manufactured export, along with chemicals and chemical products, telecommunications equipment, road vehicles, and clothing and accessories. The United States is among Thailand's largest export markets, and Japan is among the country's biggest sources of imports. In the 1990s Thailand's trade deficit grew markedly until the last part of the decade, when a trade surplus was achieved largely as a result of a contraction in imports. Foreign debt declined until the last part of the decade, when it jumped substantially, peaking in 2000, before beginning a descent in the early 21st century.

Services

Bangkok remains the centre of all retailing in the country, but many regional cities, such as Khorat and Khon Kaen in the northeast, Chiang Mai in the north, and Hat Yai in the south, have become significant subcentres. In those cities, as in many other towns throughout the country, large stores and shopping malls charging fixed prices have been established alongside the smaller shops and traditional markets where bargaining still takes place.

Thailand has been one of the most popular tourist destinations in Southeast Asia since the 1960s. The government actively began to promote tourism in the early 1980s, and tourism subsequently became the country's single largest source of foreign exchange and an important counterbalance to the country's frequent annual trade deficits. The number of tourists visiting the country each year almost tripled between the early 1960s and the early 21st century, helping to make the service sector more significant than manufacturing as a source of employment. Part of this activity was the result of a highly visible (though illegal) sex trade during those decades. However, by the end of the 20th century the increasing number of AIDS cases in Thailand and other factors had caused the trade to decline.

Thailand places great emphasis on providing quality service at its leading hotels and restaurants, which has helped to attract many foreign visitors. The most popular tourist destinations outside of Bangkok are the beach resorts of Pattaya, Phuket, and Koh Samui and the historical cities of Sukhotai, Ayutthaya, and Chiang Mai.

Resort areas such as Phuket and Kho Lak were heavily damaged by the December 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, but they recovered quickly.

Labour and taxation

The growth of an industrial export economy has been predicated on the existence of a large labour force that can be paid relatively low wages. For this reason, governments during the period of accelerated growth have imposed severe restrictions on unionization. These restrictions, however, have not prevented thousands of workers, beginning in the late 1980s, from staging periodic strikes and demonstrations in protest over low wages and occupational hazards.

The Labour Relations Act of 1975 provided a legal foundation for the establishment of unions. By the late 1990s there were more than 1,000 unions gathered together into labour federations. The main labour federations include the Labour Congress of Thailand, the National Congress of Thai Labour, and the Thai Trade Union Congress. Union participation, however, has remained low.

Women comprise nearly half of the total workforce. Although the Thai constitution guarantees equal rights for men and women, women still receive unequal treatment in the workplace in terms of pay, promotion, and benefits. International and local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have issued reports about the exploitation of women in sweatshop labour and in the sex industry.

Taxes generate the great bulk of the national revenue. The tax system relies on a combination of personal and corporate income taxes and a value added tax (VAT; a type of sales tax). The VAT was introduced in 1992 as part of a major restructuring of the tax system that also reduced personal and corporate income tax rates. The VAT was supposed to be applied only to the price retailers paid for certain goods and services, but in many cases retailers have also applied it to the price they charge consumers. In addition, excise taxes are levied on tobacco, petroleum products, alcoholic beverages and soft drinks, and other products. A national lottery is also a major source of revenue for the government. Additional tax revenue comes from tariffs on imported products and certain exports.

Transportation and telecommunications

Bangkok is the centre of Thailand's water, land, and air transport systems. The rivers of the Chao Phraya delta have been used since antiquity, and modern irrigation canals have added to the waterway transportation network. The rail system, constructed from early in the 20th century and essentially completed in the 1950s, still remains important. It has, however, been overshadowed by a system of highways and all-weather roads built with the support of the United States beginning in the 1950s. By the end of the 20th century, roads had been extended into even the remote upland areas of the north.

Premodern Siam was long involved in international trade, and the choice of Bangkok as the capital in the late 18th century was based partially on its attraction as a port. The port of Bangkok, at Khlong Toei, is the largest and busiest in the country, handling nearly all imports and exports. Newer port facilities on the eastern seaboard have become increasingly important, especially for the movement of goods to and from the northeastern region of the country.

Don Muang International Airport, north of Bangkok, was the hub of Thailand's air network until late 2006, when much of its commercial air traffic was then redirected to Suvarnabhumi, a large new international airport about 20 miles (30 km) east of the city. However, cracks in its runways and crowded conditions at the new facility led to the temporary reopening of Don Muang for both international and domestic flights. Several smaller provincial airports, mostly located at such popular tourist centres as Chiang Mai, Phuket, and Koh Samui, also handle international flights. Numerous other airports and airfields accommodating domestic flights are scattered throughout the country.

Telecommunications have developed rapidly in Thailand, although regionally the country has lagged behind Singapore and Malaysia. Government policies aimed at privatizing and opening the sector to greater domestic and international competition accelerated growth in the 1990s. Wireless phone service has expanded rapidly, owing to the inadequacy of the landline telephone infrastructure and to the greater flexibility of wireless phones. By the early 21st century almost every family, including those in rural areas, owned a wireless phone. Internet use has also grown rapidly since the 1990s, although it has been hindered to some extent by the high cost of line rental.

Government and society

Constitutional framework

Thailand is a constitutional monarchy with the monarch as the head of state. While almost every government since 1932 has accepted constitutional authority, the country has had 17 constitutions, the most recent drafted in 2007. All of these documents have provided for a National Assembly with a prime minister as head of government. Power is exercised by the bicameral National Assembly, the Council of Ministers, and the courts in accordance with the provisions of the constitution and laws passed by the National Assembly. The constitution of 2007 (largely based on that of 1997) provides for the direct election of members of the lower house of the Assembly, the House of Representatives, to four-year terms, five-sixths from single-member districts and the remainder based on proportional representation from the political parties. It also requires the prime minister to be a member of the House of Representatives. Members of the upper house, the Senate, are directly elected to six-year terms. Legislation originates in the House of Representatives, but it can be modified or rejected by the Senate.

The execution of laws is carried out by the civil service, whose members are known as *kharatchakan*, "servants of the king." The bureaucracy, particularly the Ministry of Interior, has always enjoyed a significant degree of autonomy in administering the country. The number of elective offices and senior civil-service positions occupied by women is small, though increasing slowly.

Local government

For most people in Thailand, government is experienced primarily through centrally appointed officials who hold posts in local administration, the main units of which are provinces (*changwat*) and districts (*amphur*). In the 1990s three new provinces were carved out of the existing ones, resulting in a total of 76.

A marked devolution of power has taken place since the 1980s. By far the most significant of the local governing bodies are those in the major cities, including Bangkok, Chiang Mai, and Pattaya. Locally elected provincial assemblies have little power, but they serve as incubators for local politicians who may later be elected to the National Assembly. In 1997, communes (*tambon*), units consisting of several villages, were given increased powers and the authorization to elect members of *tambon* administrative organizations. With new administrative and financial authority, these bodies have become the most important local democratic units in Thailand. Headmen of villages (*muban*) are also elected, but their authority is circumscribed by centrally appointed district officers and the *tambon* administrative organizations.

Justice

Thailand had a sophisticated legal system before Western influences led it to adopt a system of jurisprudence based on European models. The first law codes—dating from as early as the 15th century—were based on the Indian code of Manu, which arrived by way of the Mon and the Khmer. As part of the modernizing reforms of the late 19th century, a new legal system was developed, based primarily on the French (Napoleonic) model. The modernizing government of King Chulalongkorn also received legal advice from British advisers. A significant aspect of the legal reforms of the late 19th century was the creation of an independent judiciary. This ideal proved difficult to realize, however, because of interference by politicians and the continuing presence of corruption within the system. As part of a series of judicial reforms initiated at the end of the 20th century, the Supreme Court, with justices appointed by the monarch, was declared the final court of appeal for both civil and criminal cases; a system of intermediary appeals courts was established to handle cases from courts of first instance scattered throughout the country.

Political process

Prior to the 1980s the political process in Thailand was usually controlled by elites whose power was derived from the military. However, the idea of parliamentary government, first enshrined in the constitutions of the 1930s, never totally disappeared. Thailand has had universal suffrage since 1932, and the minimum voting age is 18. Although no laws have prevented women from involvement in politics, few women have stood for election to the legislature.

Elected parliaments began to gain influence over the political process in the 1980s, and since 1992 governmental power has been exercised through an elected National Assembly, except for a 15-month period in 2006-07, when the military took control.

The role the military has played in the Thai political process reflects an often enunciated principle by leaders of the armed forces that only a well-disciplined military can preserve public order and protect the monarchy. This principle has been challenged both inside and outside of the legislature by those who see laws developed and passed by an elected National Assembly as the basis for a diverse yet orderly society. Like military politicians, however, elected officials often have used their power to advance their own private interests rather than those of the society as a whole.

Major political parties since the 1990s have included the New Aspiration Party, Democrat Party, National Development Party, Thai Rak Thai ("Thais Love Thais"), Thai Nation, Social Action Party, and Thai Citizens' Party. Following a parliamentary election, the parties with the most legislative seats typically form a coalition government. In 2007 Thai Rak Thai, the party of the ousted prime minister, was dissolved, and a new party, People Power Party, was formed; it was widely viewed as the reincarnation of Thai Rak Thai.

Security

The creation of a technically trained professional military was a notable achievement of the modernizing reforms adopted at the end of the 19th century. By the 1920s the military, which had emerged as the most powerful institution of the government, included many officers who had risen by virtue of their training and ability, not because of kinship ties to the monarch or high-ranking members of the aristocracy. These officers played a critical role in overthrowing the absolute monarchy in 1932 and establishing a constitutional monarchy. The military includes army, navy, and air force branches, although the army has always been the dominant one.

All male citizens in Thailand are required to register for a draft at the age of 18. Only a small number are actually chosen for two years of required military service, beginning at age 21. Most of those inducted into the army are from rural communities.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the Royal Thai Army, Thailand's largest military unit, has been combating a violent insurgency in the far southern provinces, where the people are mainly Malay-speaking Muslims. The army also has continued to confront incursions on the western and northern frontiers by insurgents fighting the government in Myanmar and by the military forces from Myanmar that sometimes pursue those insurgents across the border.

The army has played a dominant role in Thailand's politics, especially since the end of absolute rule by the monarch in 1932; it has often taken power through a coup. Strong public protests against a coup in 1991, the resignation following royal intervention of a government headed by a general in 1992, and the subsequent moves to ensure democratic government that culminated in the constitution of 1997 initially seemed to have ended army dominance of the Thai political system. However, the military coup of September 2006 proved that the pattern was indeed persistent.

Health and welfare

The rapid growth of the Thai economy since the mid-20th century has enabled the government to improve health and welfare services significantly, but this economic growth also has produced marked inequalities in standards of living. A combination of public and private investment has made it possible for the upper and middle classes in Thailand to have access to some of the best medical care in the world. Public investments in health care for people living in rural areas culminated in the early 21st century in a national plan allowing most people access to health care at nominal costs. Such health-care initiatives have led to major reductions in infant

mortality, advances in the control of infectious diseases, and more reproductive health care. Nonetheless, the disparity between rural and urban communities in the quality and availability of health care has widened since the 1960s.

The dramatic drop in birth rates beginning in the late 1960s, coupled with the rapid expansion of the economy, has made it possible for most people to improve their quality of life. At the same time, severe poverty continues to exist, particularly in rural areas where land quality is poor or where people do not own the land they work. Governments since the 1970s have instituted programs to alleviate poverty, but their policies relating to dam construction, logging, and fishing, combined with inadequate support for their poverty-reduction programs, have left a large segment of the rural population impoverished. The quality of life for many citizens actually declined in the 1990s owing to problems created by unregulated development and the AIDS epidemic. The situation was further exacerbated by the economic crisis that began in 1997.

A new welfare problem has been emerging in Thailand since the start of the 21st century, as the growing number of people employed in the country's many factories face serious risks because of poor regulation of occupational hazards. Deaths and injuries from industrial accidents have risen rapidly, prompting increased pressure for better enforcement of industrial safety laws. Moreover, the drop in birth rate and greater longevity have amounted to a shrinking workforce that must support a growing population of senior citizens.

While instances of traditional infectious diseases such as cholera, smallpox, malaria, and even leprosy have been greatly reduced, the number of cases of sexually transmitted diseases has increased exponentially. Because of cultural tolerance, the rise in disposable income, and a lack of political will to control the sex industry (which has attracted many tourists), Thailand has one of the highest per capita rates of prostitution in the world. The country was, therefore, particularly vulnerable when HIV infections began to spread across the globe. For some years Thailand had the highest rate of HIV and AIDS infection of any country in Asia. Aggressive programs launched by the government to promote safe sex practices, however, have reduced the rate of increase in new HIV infections significantly. Nonetheless, AIDS has continued to claim the lives of several tens of thousands of people each year, mostly working-age adults.

While the magnitude of the crisis has placed great strains on medical and community resources, many new types of community-based organizations have emerged, and the government has dedicated a higher percentage of its health budget to medical care for those afflicted with AIDS or HIV than have most other Asian countries. The government has also overcome resistance from foreign pharmaceutical companies in its efforts to make inexpensive drugs available to a broader segment of the afflicted population.

By the late 20th century, Thailand had established a noteworthy medical-service sector, which continued to develop in the 21st century. The high standards of medical care at the best private hospitals in Bangkok and other major cities began to attract attention not only from well-to-do Thai but also from increasing numbers of foreign patients, especially from the Middle East and Europe. Other health-care fields for which Thailand has been gaining recognition include cosmetic surgery and spa treatments.

Housing

Most Thai living outside of the Greater Bangkok Metropolitan Area occupy houses that their families own. The rapid growth of the Thai economy since the mid-1980s, the emergence of a prosperous middle class seeking better housing, and the lowering of mortgage interest rates spurred private-sector developers to construct new housing in urban areas. Beginning with low-cost row houses and town houses, developers gradually shifted to moderately priced condominiums aimed at middle-class urban families and luxury condominiums for the wealthy. Increasingly, middle-class urban Thai have chosen to live in condominiums while they save money to purchase single-family homes in the suburbs. Many villagers, using earnings from working in Thailand's cities or abroad, in turn have built new houses based on urban and suburban models. The older style of Thai house, constructed from a combination of hardwood and bamboo materials and set on piles, is rapidly disappearing.

Education

Compulsory education was instituted in the 1920s for the purpose of ensuring that all citizens—female as well as male—would share the national language and identify with the national heritage. Prior to that time, education had consisted primarily of males being taught by monks at Buddhist temples. By the late 1930s almost all children of school age in the country attended schools established by the government, although few went beyond the four years of basic primary education. Those who did attend secular secondary and tertiary institutions, monastic schools, or military and police academies typically entered government service after completing their schooling.

The linking of government-sponsored education to economic development goals in the 1960s precipitated a radical transformation in Thailand's educational system in the last decades of the 20th century. By the early 21st century, education had been made compulsory for nine years or until a person reached the age of 16, and three years of high school were provided by the government. Since 2004 two years of preschool have also been provided free of charge. Perhaps the most-dramatic changes have taken place in higher education. Universities have proliferated from the first one founded in Bangkok in 1917 (Chulalongkorn University) to dozens of state and private institutions spread across the country. There are also numerous teachers' colleges, as well as open universities, military and police academies, and universities for monks that offer bachelor's degrees. Some postsecondary students who do not attend university obtain further education in business and technical schools. Compared to other countries in the region, Thailand has one of the highest literacy rates: nearly universal for both men and women.

Cultural life

Prior to the modernizing reforms begun in the late 19th century under King Chulalongkorn, Thai cultural life revolved around the Siamese royal court and the *wat*, the Buddhist temple-monastery. Many ancient practices associated with the court and the *wat* have been transformed into elements of contemporary Thailand's national heritage. The monarchy, through its participation in royal functions, state ceremonies, and popular festivals, plays an important role in nurturing and preserving

this heritage. Many state functions, today often shown on television, begin with the king or other members of the royal family performing Buddhist rites. Certain Buddhist holy days have been recognized as national holidays. Among these are Visakha Puja, the festival celebrating the birth, enlightenment, and death of the Buddha, and the beginning and end of "Buddhist Lent" (*phansa*)—a three-month period corresponding to the monsoon season, during which both monks and laypeople give added attention to religious practices such as meditation.

The transformation of Thai cultural life is particularly evident in clothing. In the late 19th century, members of the Thai court began to adopt Western-style clothing and for a few years in the late 1930s and early '40s such clothing was mandatory. In the post-World War II period there was a significant revival of traditional styles of clothing, especially for women. The queen adopted the tie-dye silk tubular skirt traditionally worn by Lao women in the northeast, and she was widely emulated by middle- and upper-class women when they attended events at which national culture was expected to be on display. For everyday attire in both the cities and the villages, however, most people wear clothing of a style that is considered "cosmopolitan" (*sakon*), but which, in fact, derives from Western styles. For all its Western influences, however, contemporary Thai culture is a creative blend that remains clearly rooted in Thai tradition.

Daily life and social customs

Changing rural and urban lifestyles

Since the 1960s, more than four-fifths of both male and female villagers have left their home communities to work for a period of months or years in urban areas. While many of these migrants work in unskilled construction or service jobs, an increasing number have found work requiring high skills. As a consequence of the rapid growth of the Thai economy, there has been a marked expansion in the cities of both middle and working classes. While many in the working class continue to retain strong ties to the rural communities from which they came, many others now see themselves as primarily urban rather than rural people.

Urban life has also reshaped rural society. Government programs in the 1970s and '80s brought electricity to most villages in Thailand. This, along with economic growth and rising incomes, has made it possible for most households to purchase televisions and, increasingly, other electronic equipment. The arrival of television—and the urban-based culture that it offers—has drawn rural audiences away from older local forms of entertainment such as regional opera, even as rural opera of northeastern Thailand has in turn been repackaged for urban audiences.

Rural as well as urban Thai would generally agree that their quality of life has improved significantly, especially since the late 20th century. Most people live in better housing, while an increasing number of homes have running water, even in rural areas. Villagers benefit from much better health care than in the past, and in the urban areas the middle class has access to top-notch facilities and professionals. The large increases in per capita income since the 1960s have generated much more money for both urban and rural people to spend on luxury goods and entertainment. This growth, however, has been accompanied by a

notable decline in participation in community life. In the cities, families often see each other only briefly in the morning and evening, before and after long commutes to and from work and school. In the rural areas, family members are often absent for months or years, working not only in urban Thailand but also abroad in such places as the Middle East and Taiwan.

New social demands and professional options have led to an increase in divorce and in the number of women who choose to remain single. The expansion of the economy, coupled with equal education opportunities for both women and men, have made it possible for many women to become financially independent. Some women have shied away from marriage because of the fear that they might contract a sexually transmitted disease from men who have had many sexual partners. In the 1960s and '70s many Thai saw the marriage of the king and queen as a model, but since the 1980s the royal family—with the divorces of three of the children and the successful professional career of Princess Sirindhorn, who has never married—has become more like other Thai families.

In spite of these sweeping changes in social customs, the Thai continue to engage in many practices that are grounded in traditional culture. Even the most contemporary new business enterprises are opened only after the owners have consulted an astrologer for an auspicious date, and middle-class city dwellers are more likely to consult spirit mediums than are rural people. It is Buddhism, however, that remains central to Thai culture. The Buddhist concept of “merit” (*bun*) figures prominently in everyday discourse in such terms as *cai bun* (“generous”) or *mi bun* (“having merit,” i.e., being a good person), and most homes have shrines to the Buddha, if not a display of photographs of famous monks as well.

Cuisine

There is a popular saying that the Thai live by their stomachs. There have long been small vendors of Thai food on the streets of urban Thailand, but until late in the 20th century the best Thai food was usually produced in private homes. Most restaurants only offered Chinese food. Since the 1970s, Thai cuisine has become a public cuisine not only in Thailand but throughout the world. Bangkok today has hundreds of superb Thai restaurants and cooking schools, and some of the most popular restaurants in North America, Europe, and the Middle East offer Thai cuisine.

A good Thai meal typically includes a blend of spicy, mild, sweet, and sour dishes. Among the most popular Thai dishes are curries made with coconut milk, shrimp paste, garlic, chili peppers, and seasonings such as coriander, lemongrass, galangal, and Kaffir lime leaves. The Thai use fish sauce—today a commercially prepared extract—as a basic ingredient for many dishes in the same way that the Chinese use soy sauce. Although rice is fundamental to Thai cuisine, the Thai have adopted many foods, such as noodles, that form a basic element of Chinese and Sino-Chinese cuisine.

The peoples of Lan Na Thai in the north and Isan in the northeast prefer glutinous rice as their staple rather than the usual Thai fragrant long-grain rice. Since the 1980s Lao cuisine has become popular throughout the country. Typical Lao food includes grilled, marinated fish and chicken, as well as chopped beef, pork,

chicken, or fish that has been mixed with lime juice, lemongrass, garlic, shallots, and peppers and then lightly fried. Another Lao favourite commonly found at Thai restaurants is *som tam*, a salad made from green (unripe) papayas.

In Bangkok and other cities, fewer and fewer women cook at home or have servants to prepare meals; rather, prepared food is typically purchased at shops located between home and workplace, where freshly made dishes are offered daily.

The arts

Literature

Traditional Thai literature was deeply connected to the literature of both Buddhist and Hindu India. The best-known story of the premodern period—as recounted in sermons by monks and depicted in temple paintings—was that of Prince Wetsandorn (Vessantara). This story is the last and most important of the *Jataka* tales (i.e., stories about people or animals who were the Buddha in a previous life). Wetsandorn was a prince who was compelled to give away his wife and children to realize the last qualification necessary to be reborn as the Buddha. The gods restored his family to him when he succeeded in proving he had no attachments. Almost as important as this story was that of the Hindu deity Rama as told in the *Ramakian*, a Thai adaptation of the Hindu epic *Ramayana*. Rulers since the 15th century have identified themselves with Rama, and the Grand Palace in Bangkok contains extraordinary murals that depict his story.

Alongside the literature derived from Buddhism and India, indigenous literary traditions have always existed in Thailand. Kings were patrons of royal poets, and villages had rich traditions of folklore and legends recited by troubadour-like performers or enacted by local opera troupes. One story with both royal and popular versions is that of Khun Chang and Khun Phaen, two men in competition for the affections of the same woman.

Following the large-scale migration of Chinese to Thailand beginning in the mid-19th century, numerous Chinese assimilated to Thai culture, and a number of well-known works of Chinese traditional literature were translated into Thai. One of the first of these was the Chinese literary work *Sanguozhi yanyi* (“Romance of the Three Kingdoms”). The story has since been adapted in Thai plays, poems, and stories.

Modern Thai poetry has its origins in the work of Sunthon Phu (1787–1855), whose 30,000-line epic, *Phra Aphaimani*, named for the central figure, is the country's best-known work of literature. Echoes of that epic can be found in the writings of contemporary poets such as Naowarat Phongphaiboon, Angkarn Kalayanapong, and Chiranan Pitpreecha, who merge traditional verse forms with Western-influenced styles and themes.

The novel, based on Western models, began to develop in Thailand in the 20th century. The first novels were written in the 1930s by such authors as Dokmai Sot (pen name of Buppha Kunchon) and Siburapha (Kulap Saipradit), both of whom have remained popular in the 21st century. The early audience for fiction was

drawn from what was then a tiny middle class. As the economy expanded after World War II, so too did the reading public. The novel *Si phaen din (Four Reigns)*, first published in serial form in the newspaper *Siam Rath* in 1953, is probably the best-selling Thai novel of all time. The author, Kukrit Pramoj (1911-95), whose title (Mom Rajawong) indicates he was a descendant of a king, later became well-known as a politician (serving as prime minister in the mid-1970s) and as the publisher and editor of *Siam Rath*. *Four Reigns* is a portrayal of the experiences of a family under four consecutive kings—from the end of the reign of King Chulalongkorn in 1910 to just after the death of King Ananda in 1946. The story is told from the point of view of a woman, Mae Ploi, who early in life was attached to the royal household and whose family's history is deeply connected with that of the court. The novel has been considered influential in shaping a positive image of the monarchy.

While much contemporary literature has centred on issues of love and family, topics that are particularly popular among the middle class, Thai authors have also produced works that explore issues of social inequality, sexual exploitation, and political corruption. Much of the writing of Lao Khamhom (Khamsing Srinawak), for instance, focuses on rural people, often carrying a subversive political implication. A wave of writing categorized under the rubric "Literature for Life" appeared in the 1960s and '70s. Works in this vein were in essence a manifestation of Socialist Realism; although instrumental in catalyzing the toppling of the government in 1973, they were not widely popular.

Since the 1980s, other prose writers, such as Seni Saowaphong and Chart Korbjitti, have also focused on social issues, accumulating large followings within their country and earning literary honours abroad. Chart's work contrasts notably with that of the Literature for Life authors in that it forces readers to draw their own conclusions from the details rather than blatantly blaming a particular sector of society. Many writers have adapted their work for film.

Drama and film

Dramatic performance has deep roots in Thailand, with traditional genres continuing to be performed even as more-cosmopolitan forms have entered the scene. *Khon* classical masked dance-drama draws its material exclusively from the *Ramakian*. A separate genre of classical dance-drama, known as *lakhon*, also uses the *Ramakian*, as well as Buddhist *Jataka* tales, the *Inao* epic, and other Thai stories, as source material. Performances of traditional regional opera, such as *likay* in central Thailand and *nang* (shadow puppet theatre) in southern Thailand, still attract large audiences, despite their having lost some viewers to television and film. Theatre forms based on Western models, which emerged in the 1930s, are also performed, although they have largely been overshadowed by the rise of motion pictures.

Although the Thai film industry has had to compete with movies imported from the West and, more recently, from Japan, South Korea, and China, it has consistently produced films that are popular with the Thai public. The tale of Khun Chang and Khun Phaen has been enacted in plays and in film, and with its many episodes of warfare, encounters with the supernatural, and ribald humour, it can be seen as the forerunner of many of today's most popular television soap operas. The novel *Four Reigns* has also been serialized several times on

television. Television became accessible to most villagers in the late 20th century, and since that time, audiences have expanded dramatically.

The themes of most Thai movies and television soap operas deal with love triangles or ghosts, or they are action films derived from Western models. Especially prominent among Thailand's directors is Mom Chao (Prince) Chatrichalerm Yukol, more commonly known by his nickname, Than Mui. In the 1970s and '80s he produced a number of popular action films that explored the same themes of corruption, environmental degradation, and social inequality as did many fiction writers of the period. Than Mui is best known, however, for his epic films *Suriyothai* (2001), the story of a 16th-century warrior queen named Suriyothai, and *Naresuan* (2006), which recounts the life of King Naresuan of late 16th- and early 17th-century Ayutthaya.

Since the turn of the 21st century, Thai films have received increasingly critical and popular attention in the international arena. Wisit Sasanatieng directed the highly regarded *Fah talai jone* (2000; *Tears of the Black Tiger*), the story of an outlaw, which parodies other Thai as well as Western action films. Two films directed by Apichatpong Weerasethakul, *Sud pralad* (2004; *Tropical Malady*) and *Sud sanaeha* (2002; *Blissfully Yours*), were among the first Thai productions to win recognition at the Cannes Film Festival in France. *Sud pralad* traces the life of a young soldier; while posted up-country he enters into a homosexual romance, then turns to wandering in the jungle, where he is bedeviled by the spirit of a shaman. *Sud sanaeha* centres on the love between Roong, a Thai girl working in a factory, and Min, a Burmese illegal immigrant. Other Thai films that have found large international audiences include *Satri lek* (2001; *The Iron Ladies*), directed by Youngyooth Thongkongthun, which is about a transvestite volleyball team, and *Beautiful Boxer* (2003), directed by Ekachai Uekrongtham, a semidocumentary account of a famous kickboxer's decision to undergo a sex-change operation.

Music and dance

Thai classical music (*dontri Thai doem*) was originally played at court and was based on Khmer models. There are three types of orchestral groups for Thai classical music: a percussion-dominated ensemble, *pi phat*, which performs at court ceremonies and in the theatre; a string-dominated ensemble, *kruang sai*, typically heard in indoor instrumental settings; and *mahori*, a mixed ensemble that often accompanies vocalists, sometimes in the context of theatre. Thai classical music is also often used as an accompaniment to classical dance such as *khon*. The music played by the classical orchestras essentially uses a scale of seven equidistant tone-steps, although vocalists and instruments without fixed pitch may sometimes use additional tones.

Thai classical music and dance are highly valued symbols of national heritage. Although the traditions nearly disappeared between the 1930s and '60s, the '70s brought a revival. Thai music became a field of study at the university level, and several specialized high schools were established to train classical musicians and dancers. Now sustained primarily through the public educational system, Thai classical music can be heard frequently and at numerous venues throughout the country as well as on television.

Much more popular than Thai classical music, however, is *phlaeng luk thung* (literally, “songs of the children of the fields”), a type of Thai “country music” that originated in rural central Thailand. Also popular are modified versions of Western pop, rock, and rap music. Because most of the working class of Bangkok and other urban centres came originally from rural northeastern Thailand, a synthesis of traditional northeastern Thai music known as *mawlam* and Western pop music enjoys a wide audience in the cities. This music is distinguished by the use of a *khaen*, a traditional wood-and-bamboo mouth organ that has become a symbol of northeastern Thai (and Lao) culture.

The *lamwong* (“circle dance”) is the most popular form of dance at rural temple festivals and other celebrations. It is typically performed to *mawlam* or *luk thung* music. In the cities, however, Western forms of dance predominate, especially in the nightclubs.

Visual arts

Buddhism has had a major influence on Thai art, architecture, sculpture, and painting. Some of the most beautiful older *wat* structures are to be found in Ayutthaya, the capital from the 14th to the 18th century, and in Chiang Mai. The framework of a *wat* is usually made of wood, while its walls consist of brick and plaster. The ornamental parts of the structure are often adorned with glass mosaic, gold leaf, porcelain, stucco, lacquer, and inlaid mother-of-pearl. Remnants of the original palaces and temples can still be seen in many of the old provincial centres. In Chiang Mai, numerous Buddhist temples are scattered inside and outside the ancient city walls, which are still standing. Even newer ritual and ceremonial halls typically incorporate traditional designs, including curved finials, high-pitched roofs, intricately carved doors and windows, and stairways flanked by *naga*, or giant snakes.



Buddha statue at Wat Phra Si Sanphet, Ayutthaya, Thailand.

Every *wat* contains dozens, if not hundreds, of images of the Buddha made of bronze, wood, lacquerware, and stucco. Images continue to be produced in large numbers, primarily for religious purposes, although some are sold—often accompanied by claims that they are genuine antiques—to tourists. Whether antiques or facsimiles, images of the Buddha are considered sacred; technically, they are not to be removed from the country without a license from the Department of Fine Arts. Many images are gilded with gold leaf; the gilding of Buddhist images and temples is believed

to bring religious merit.

Traditional Thai painting is probably derived from Indian and Sri Lankan models and is mostly religious. The paintings, executed by anonymous monks or dedicated laypeople, are usually drawn on temple walls. Many *wat* contain mural paintings depicting the life of the Buddha or other Buddhist stories.

Contemporary Thai art has been strongly shaped not only by traditional Buddhist art but also by Western genres. Italian influences were particularly significant for the development of modern art and architecture in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The public culture of Bangkok was transformed by Italian architects and sculptors who were hired early in the 20th century to build new official

buildings and national monuments. The equestrian statue of King Chulalongkorn in front of the National Assembly is unequivocally Western in character and has no antecedents in traditional Thai culture. In the statue the king wears a style of Western military dress that became the model for upper-class male dress in the early 20th century. Its Western character notwithstanding, the statue has since the 1980s been the focus of a cult movement. The most respected of Thai modern art and architecture reflects a creative synthesis between Western styles and traditional Thai designs.

Crafts

Thai craft traditions are flourishing not only because of royal patronage and an increasing interest among the expanding middle class but also because of a growing market created by tourism. Thailand is renowned worldwide for its silk, and its range of colours and designs, including those employing tie-dye techniques, are highly prized both within and outside of the country. Handwoven cotton and embroidered textiles, many of which are produced by upland minorities, have also proved to be commercially viable.

Pieces of early Thai porcelain and pottery, often originally designed for utilitarian purposes, have come to be regarded as works of art. In the 15th and 16th centuries ceramics were exported from Siam throughout Southeast Asia. These earlier pieces have inspired contemporary styles, notably the jade-green form known as Thai celadon ware. Thailand is also famous for its lacquerware and wood carving, although the latter has declined somewhat since the 1989 ban on the cutting of teak. Silver work is another craft for which Thailand is well-known, and Bangkok is a major centre for jewelry using rubies and sapphires mined not only within the country but also in neighbouring Myanmar and Cambodia.

Cultural institutions

A number of institutions, some of them established during the reign of King Chulalongkorn, have officially been accorded the authority to perpetuate the national heritage. These include the Department of Fine Arts, the academies of the Royal Institute, the Office of the National Cultural Commission of the Ministry of Education, the Siam Society, the National Museum (with hundreds of branches throughout the country), Silpakorn University, and the National Theatre. Silpakorn University, located in Bangkok, provides training in all of the Thai fine arts, including drama and music. Its faculty members also design buildings for the government and for religious institutions in styles that preserve traditional Thai architectural forms. The royal family, especially Princess Sirindhorn, has assumed the role of patron of the national heritage.

Sports and recreation

The traditional martial art of Thai boxing (*muay Thai*) is Thailand's national sport. It is a spectacular form of unarmed combat that is accompanied by a traditional music ensemble—as well as frenzied ringside betting. Any part of the body is a fair target,

and only the head may not be used to strike a blow. Before a *muay Thai* bout the boxers perform the *ram muay*, a five-minute dance that pays tribute to their teacher and to the guardian spirit of Thai boxing. After falling from favour, the sport was revived in the 1930s under modern regulations based on the Marquess of Queensberry rules; it has also spread to the West, where it is often called kickboxing. Several standard boxers have won world boxing championships, including Khaosai Galaxy, who was inducted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame in 1999.

The traditional game of *takraw*, in which participants attempt to keep a woven rattan ball from touching the ground without using their hands, is very popular among young men; it is an internationally competitive sport within the Southeast Asian region. In the 20th century Thailand also adopted several Western sports. Football (soccer) is a highly popular spectator sport, and tennis, swimming, and badminton are pursued throughout the country. Thai athletes have enjoyed success in many of these sports at the Southeast Asian Games.

Thailand first competed in the Summer Olympic Games in 1952 and in the Winter Games in 2002. Thailand has had its best success in boxing events, and in 1996 featherweight boxer Somluck Kamsing earned the country's first Olympic gold medal. The country has hosted the Asian Games several times.

Temple festivals remain the most important recreational activities for Thai living in rural communities. Members of the growing urban middle class, who generally have much more disposable income, often travel up-country to temple festivals, but they seek recreation in many other ways as well. Some attend gyms or spas; others play tennis or golf. Indeed, so many golf courses were built in Thailand in the 1980s and '90s that environmentalists began to raise concerns that the allocation of irrigation water for golf courses was having a negative impact on agriculture in neighbouring areas. Thai urban centres also offer many other forms of recreation, ranging from nightclubs with cabaret performances to formal concerts with famous musicians from other parts of the world. *Sanuk*, the enjoyment of life, is fundamental to social life in Thailand, whether in villages or in the cities.

Media and publishing

Mass media in Thailand originated in the 19th century, when print type and the electronic transmission of messages by telegraph were introduced. By the beginning of the 20th century, newspapers in Thai, Chinese, and English were being published in the country. Radio transmissions began in the 1920s, and television was introduced in the 1950s.

Since the 1950s, newspapers and other periodicals (which are all privately owned) have become increasingly independent, although often subject to censorship laws. By the 1980s Thailand had the highest degree of press freedom in Southeast Asia, a freedom later guaranteed by the country's 1997 and 2007 constitutions. *Lèse-majesté* (crimes against the sovereign) laws, however, continue to ensure that only positive stories about the royal family appear in the press. Foreign journalists have on occasion been ordered to leave the country, and some Thai journalists have been prosecuted for writing reports on the monarchy that are considered inappropriate. Such interventions, however, are rare, since most of the press practices self-censorship on the topic.

With the dramatic increase in television ownership and viewing since the 1980s, television has become the most influential of the mass media. Radio and television, in contrast to print media, have remained almost entirely under government or military control. In 1995 the first license was granted to establish a private television company. The government has also given concessions to companies to provide cable television service. Although cable television can be obtained only by paid subscription, the number of subscribers has grown, even outside of Bangkok. Cable service, however, is also subject to strong government regulation. Consequently, most viewers watch television for entertainment rather than for news.

Radio stations multiplied rapidly in the last decades of the 20th century, but like television stations, most of them have been controlled or strongly regulated by government agencies, and shut down if deemed too critical. Since the 1990s an increasing number of Thai, especially those who are young and urban, have turned to the Internet for news as well as for entertainment. Although the government has sought to block some Web sites, those sites critical of the government have found ways to circumvent such censorship.

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History

The Thai are descended from a much larger group of Tai-speaking peoples. The latter are found from extreme northeastern India in the west to northern Vietnam in the east and from southern China in the north to as far south as the central Malay Peninsula. In the past, scholars held that a parent group called the Proto-Tai originated in southern China and pushed south and west from the China landmass into northern mainland Southeast Asia. Most scholars now believe that the Tai came from northern Vietnam around the Dien Bien Phu area and that about 1,000 years ago they spread from there northward into southern China, westward into southwestern China, northern Myanmar (Burma), and northeastern India, and southward into what are now Laos and Thailand. For a discussion of Thai history in its regional context, *see* Southeast Asia, history of.

Early Tai culture

Tai-speaking peoples historically settled along river valleys, where they formed small settlements and engaged in subsistence rice agriculture, fishing, and gathering of forest products. Early in their history the Tai domesticated animals; they used water buffalo for plowing and ritual purposes, and they raised pigs and fowl for food. Women were accorded relatively high social status and could inherit property. The Tai followed local religions that involved propitiation of both malevolent and benevolent spirits through offerings and special ceremonies.

The basic unit of Tai political organization was the *müang*, or group of villages, ruled by a *chao*, or hereditary chief or lord. During the 1st millennium CE the political strengths of the *müang* system enabled the Tai to move out of their original homeland until, by the 8th century, they had expanded across much of southeastern

China and northern mainland Southeast Asia. By the 11th century they had begun to filter down into the area of what is now Thailand, and by the middle of the following century they had formed petty principalities there.

Mon-Khmer civilizations

As the Tai moved into mainland Southeast Asia, they came in contact with peoples speaking Mon-Khmer languages who had long inhabited the region. Indian traders traveling to China during the early centuries of the 1st millennium CE had carried Hindu and Buddhist beliefs and practices to some of these peoples, including the Mon, who lived in what is now Myanmar. The Mon were the first people in mainland Southeast Asia to adopt Buddhism. Between the 6th and 9th centuries the Mon established several small Buddhist kingdoms within the area encompassed by present-day southern Myanmar and central Thailand. From what are now the towns of Nakhon Pathom and Lop Buri in central Thailand, they extended their power eastward across the Khorat Plateau, northward as far as Chiang Mai, and northeastward into what is now Laos. These Mon kingdoms are collectively called Dvaravati. The Dvaravati period is noted for its artwork, particularly its Buddhist sculptures and votive images made of terra-cotta or stucco.

As the Tai moved south into mainland Southeast Asia, they also encountered the Khmer of Cambodia. Between the 9th and the 13th century, Khmer rulers expanded their domains from their capital at Angkor, establishing an empire that, at its height under Jayavarman VII (reigned 1181–c. 1220), extended over approximately half of modern Thailand. While Mon kingdoms were predominantly Buddhist in character, Khmer civilization—which found its supreme expression in the great temple complex at Angkor—was heavily influenced by Hindu ideas and practices. The Tai borrowed from the Khmer many elements of Indianized culture, including royal ceremonies, customs followed at the court, and especially the Indian epic *Ramayana*, which influenced not only literature but also classical dance. Even in modern Thai culture the legacy of the Indianized culture of Angkor is still evident.

By the beginning of the 13th century, the Tai were starting to place pressure on both the Mon and Khmer empires. The Tai had settled throughout the Chao Phraya basin, and a Tai ruler was established as far south as the principality of Nakhon Si Thammarat, on the Malay Peninsula. Through Nakhon Si Thammarat a dynamic new form of Buddhism, Theravada, had entered mainland Southeast Asia from Sri Lanka. Theravada Buddhism was carried by monks not only to areas under Mon or Khmer rule but also to the new Tai principalities that were beginning to emerge. Sukhothai and Lan Na (Lanna), the first major Tai kingdoms in Thai history, were Theravada Buddhist.

Sukhothai and Lan Na



Buddhist

The kingdom of Sukhothai, situated in the upper Chao Phraya basin, was founded in the mid-13th century when a local Tai ruler led a revolt against Khmer rule at an outpost of the Khmer empire. Under its first two rulers, Sukhothai remained only a small local power. Its third ruler, Ramkhamhaeng (reigned c. 1279–98), however, extended Sukhothai power to the south as far as Nakhon Si Thammarat, to the west into present-day

sanctuary, 13th century, Sukhothai, Thai.

Myanmar, and to the northeast as far as Luang Prabang in modern Laos. Not all these territories were conquered by force; many became vassal or tributary states to Sukhothai based on kinship ties or personal loyalty, and they were linked to it in a loose confederation.

Ramkhamhaeng is renowned not only for extending the territory under Sukhothai control but also for leaving a remarkable stone inscription, considered by most scholars to contain the earliest example of writing in any Tai language. Written in 1292 and utilizing Khmer script adapted to the sounds and tones of Tai speech, it pictures the Sukhothai kingdom as prosperous, active in trade, and benevolently governed by a paternal monarch. According to the inscription, the state taxed its citizens modestly, treated all subjects (including non-Tai) equally, and provided justice for all.

The Sukhothai period, from the mid-13th to the mid-15th century, is noted for its sculpture and pottery. Graceful bronze sculptures of the Buddha, especially those showing him in the walking position, are typical of the period. The celadon ware made at Sukhothai and nearby Sawankhalok was exported throughout Southeast Asia.

Sukhothai was not the only Tai state in Southeast Asia during this period. In the mid-13th century in what is today northern Thailand, a Tai ruler, Mangrai (reigned c. 1259-1317; from 1292 to 1317 in Chiang Mai), conquered the ancient Mon kingdom of Haripunjaya and built a new capital at Chiang Mai. Under Mangrai and his successors, Lan Na—with Chiang Mai as its capital—became not only powerful but also a centre for the spread of Theravada Buddhism to Tai peoples in what are now northeastern Myanmar, southern China, and northern Laos. Under Tilokaracha (reigned 1441-87), Lan Na became famous for its Buddhist scholarship and literature. During the 16th century Lan Na was conquered by the Burmese and incorporated into the Burman empire, where it would remain until the late 18th century.

The Ayutthayan period, 1351-1767



Ayutthaya (Ayudhya) kingdom, mid-15th century.

Whereas Sukhothai was an independent kingdom for only about 200 years, its successor, Ayutthaya—situated in the rich rice plains of the Chao Phraya River basin, about 55 miles (90 km) north of present-day Bangkok—lasted more than 400 years. During the Ayutthayan period the Tai consolidated their position as the leading power in what is now central and north-central Thailand, as well as throughout much of its southern peninsular region. Since many of Ayutthaya's neighbours called the country "Siam" or a name similar to it, the Tai of Ayutthaya came to be known as the Siamese.

Ayutthaya at first was only a small city-kingdom on the northwestern edge of the powerful Khmer empire. Within less than a century, however, Tai kings succeeded in pushing back the Khmer, and in 1431 they sacked their great capital of

Angkor. Wars against neighbouring powers continued throughout the Ayutthayan period. In 1438 a greatly weakened Sukhothai was made a province of Ayutthaya. Lan Na, however, remained free of Ayutthayan control, although it was later

brought under Burman influence.

When the Siamese conquered Angkor, they brought many Khmer captives back to Ayutthaya with them, some of whom had been officials or craftsmen at the Khmer royal court. From them Ayutthaya's rulers adopted many of the Hindu ideas and practices that had been followed by the Khmer, including the concept of the ruler as god-king (*devaraja*). The king acquired power to determine the life and death of all his people. None but members of the royal family might gaze upon his face. He could be addressed only in a special language used exclusively for royalty, while those speaking to the king referred to themselves as "the dust beneath your majesty's feet."

The power of the ruler was enhanced not only through symbolic and ideological concepts drawn from Khmer-Hindu beliefs about the god-king but also through the centralization of political power. Trailok (reigned 1448-88) created a state in which the ruler stood at the centre of a series of concentric circles. As in the *müang* system, the outer circles were governed by hereditary lords, or *chao*. The inner circles, however, were administered by officeholders appointed by the king; to a limited degree these operated on bureaucratic rather than hereditary lines.

The kings of Ayutthaya also issued formal codes of civil and criminal law based on the ancient Indian body of jurisprudence called the *dharmashastra*. At the same time, a formal and highly complex hierarchical system assigned to each social status a specified number of units (called *sakdi na*) that determined the rank within society of the person occupying the status. At the bottom of the scale, a slave was worth 5 units, freemen were ranked at 25 and above, while the heir apparent to the throne was assigned no fewer than 100,000 units.

In Ayutthayan times the mass of the people, whether freemen or slaves, worked in the fields. Slaves included war captives and those held in bondage to pay off debts. Freemen were obliged to work for six months each year for the local representatives of the king, to pay taxes, and to provide military service as required. An intricate patronage system extended throughout society whereby clients provided their patrons with services in return for their protection. Ayutthaya was an underpopulated society, and the constant need for manpower and its scarcity helped protect clients from excessive demands by patrons; if the demands of a patron became too burdensome, a freeman could, as a last resort, move and take up new land.

Theravada Buddhism took deep root throughout Siam during Ayutthayan times, alongside the Brahmanism that already characterized court ritual and the earlier religious practices that pervaded all levels of society. The Buddhist monastic establishment (*sangha*) played an important role in society, forming a focal point for village life, providing young males with an education, and offering those who elected to remain in the *sangha* a channel for upward social mobility.

Ayutthaya in the 17th century, according to European visitors, was one of the wealthiest and most cosmopolitan cities in the world. Although it lay inland, it was easily accessible to oceangoing vessels traveling up the Chao Phraya River, and it became a thriving international trade emporium. It was during this period that European traders and travelers started coming to Siam. The Portuguese reached Siam as early as 1511, following their conquest of the sultanate of Malacca (Melaka) on the Malay Peninsula; they were followed in the 17th century by Dutch, English, Spanish, and French traders and missionaries. Ayutthayan kings permitted Chinese,

Indian, Persian, and European traders to establish settlements, employed Japanese warriors, and allowed Western missionaries to preach within Ayutthayan domains. In addition to engaging in extensive trade with China, Southeast Asia, and India, the rulers of Ayutthaya also sent triennial tribute missions to the Chinese imperial court, established Buddhist missions in Sri Lanka, and sent emissaries abroad as far afield as Europe. King Narai (reigned 1656–88) initiated a series of diplomatic exchanges between Ayutthaya and the French court at Versailles and even appointed a Greek adventurer, Constantine Phaulkon, as his chief minister. Eventually, however, the Europeans became overly zealous in their efforts to convert Buddhist Siamese to Christianity. In 1688 the Siamese expelled the French from Ayutthaya and all but closed their doors to the West for the next 150 years.

The primary threat to Ayutthayan sovereignty came not from Europe, however, but from Burmese kingdoms. In 1569 a force from the Burman state of Toungoo overran Ayutthaya and devastated the countryside for miles around. Ayutthaya under Naresuan (reigned 1590–1605) recovered its independence. Conflict with the Burmese kingdom persisted, however, and in the mid-18th century Burman armies once again captured Ayutthaya. This time the city did not recover. Following the sacking of the city in 1767, the king and members of the royal family, along with thousands of captives, were deported to the Burmese kingdom. All Ayutthayan records were burned and its works of art destroyed.

The Thon Buri and Early Bangkok periods

Thon Buri

A new era in Thai history began with the rise to power of Taksin, a military commander of great skill and charismatic personality who succeeded within a decade after the fall of Ayutthaya in expelling the Burmans and making himself king of Siam. In 1767 Taksin established his new capital at Thon Buri, on the opposite side of the Chao Phraya River from present-day Bangkok. The new location was less accessible to the armies of Myanmar than Ayutthaya had been and was ideally situated for the conduct of seaborne trade and commerce. Capitalizing on the trade relations that Siam had already developed with China, Taksin encouraged Chinese merchants and craftsmen to take advantage of the economic opportunities offered by the site of his new capital. Large numbers of Chinese settled permanently in Siam, where their involvement in business and trade—coupled with the tax revenues that these activities provided—helped restore the kingdom's devastated economy.

Taksin not only recovered the territories that had formerly been part of the Ayutthayan empire but also set out to extend Siamese control over new areas. His armies annexed part of what is now northeastern Cambodia and advanced up the Mekong River as far as present-day Vientiane in Laos. In the south they subdued the northern part of the Malay Peninsula, while to the north they pushed the Burmans out of the old northern Tai kingdom of Lan Na.

Within a few years of seizing power, however, Taksin showed signs of serious mental instability, and in 1782 he was overthrown and put to death. He was succeeded by his former military commander, known by his official name of Chao Phraya ("Great Lord") Chakri. The new king founded the Chakri (or Chakkri) dynasty, which has continued to the present day.

The early Chakri kings and a resurgent Siam

One of the first acts of the new king—who would come to be known as Rama I (reigned 1782-1809)—was to move his capital across the Chao Phraya River to Bangkok, which at the time was still a small village. By the mid-19th century, Bangkok had become a city of some 400,000 people, swelled by the huge numbers of Chinese who had poured into Siam during those years. In addition to settling in Bangkok, the Chinese established trading settlements inland, some of which grew into small towns. As time went on, the Chinese thus gained even greater control over both the internal and foreign trade of the country.

The Burmese kingdom continued to harass Siam throughout the early Chakri reigns. In 1785 it launched a massive invasion of the country, which was repelled only with great difficulty. Other lesser attacks followed. Not until the 1820s, when British encroachment on Burmese territory forced Burman attention inward, was Siam able to relax its vigilance along its western borders. In the east Rama I and later Rama III (reigned 1824-51) reduced Khmer territories to vassal status, while in the south Rama III strengthened Siamese control over tributary states of the Malay Peninsula. Rama III also put down a major uprising in the north led by Chao Anou, the young Lao ruler of the kingdom of Vien Chan (Vientiane). In 1827 Siamese armies razed and plundered Vientiane; thousands of Lao were taken prisoner and deported to central Siam.

The early Chakri kings sought to restore the cultural heritage of Ayutthaya. New temples and palaces were built in Bangkok following the same styles and even using some of the same bricks that had embellished Ayutthaya. Rama I reestablished court rituals, issued comprehensive law codes and authoritative Buddhist texts, and helped revive the *sangha* by placing learned and pious monks in leading positions within the Buddhist hierarchy. The early Bangkok period also produced a great literary flowering. The *Ramakian*, the Thai version of the Indian epic *Ramayana*, was set to verse during the reign of Rama I. Rama II (reigned 1809-24), an accomplished poet, was a patron of the arts, and Sunthon Phu, Thailand's greatest poet, wrote some of his best-known works during Rama II's reign.

Western influence also grew in mainland Southeast Asia during the early years of the 19th century, and with it came increasing Western pressures on Siam. When Britain declared war on the Burmese kingdom in 1824, Rama III feared that the British might also attack Siam. He subsequently agreed to sign the Burney Treaty (1826), which set conditions for the conduct of trade between the two countries.

Mongkut and the opening of Siam to the West

Demands for free trade and diplomatic representation in Siam accelerated with the British advances into Myanmar and Malaya and the opening of several Chinese ports following the first Opium War with China (1839-42). In 1855 Queen Victoria sent Sir John Bowring as her personal emissary to Siam to demand an end to all trade restrictions. He was also instructed to secure the right to establish a British consulate in Bangkok and, in addition, the right to set up separate law courts to try cases involving British subjects (an element of extraterritoriality). The

resulting Bowring Treaty (1855), in which Siam acceded to these demands, was followed shortly by similar treaties with other major European powers and the United States. Although these treaties left Siam intact politically, they severely reduced the country's sovereignty and independence.

The opening of Siam to world trade and the development of a cash economy brought major changes to the country. The Bowring Treaty deprived the Siamese government of large sums in customs duties, one of its major traditional sources of revenue, forcing it to increase taxes in their stead. Large areas of the Chao Phraya basin were planted with rice and other cash crops for the world market, while the need to transport goods from the interior to the port of Bangkok led to the growth of canal systems and marketing networks.

The years following the Bowring Treaty were also marked by an increase in foreign influence in Siam. King Mongkut (Rama IV; ruled 1851–68) appointed several Western advisers and assistants to his court, including the Englishwoman Anna Harriette Leonowens, who tutored his children. She later published a romanticized and inaccurate depiction of Mongkut's court that became the basis for the musical *The King and I* (1951), which was even more inaccurate though still highly popular with Western audiences. Foreign nationals began to take up long-term residence in Bangkok. Missionaries, although largely unsuccessful in converting Siamese to Christianity, set up the first Western medical facilities, secular schools, and printing presses in the country. Mongkut took great interest in the new Western ideas that were beginning to come into the country. He studied Latin, mathematics, and astronomy with the scholarly French Roman Catholic missionary Jean-Baptiste Pallegoix and English with American Protestant missionaries, one of whom, Dan Beach Bradley, later founded the country's first newspaper.

Mongkut was already 46 years old when he came to the throne. He had spent 26 years as a monk, during which time he had become a keen scholar of Pali (the language of the Theravada texts) and an expert in Buddhist doctrine. Mongkut also had become concerned that many superstitious practices had grown up around the core Theravada teachings, and he established a new sect, which was dedicated to purifying Buddhist practice. This new sect became the Thammayut order that later would dominate the Thai monkhood. Although Mongkut was an absolute monarch, he began to break down the age-old tradition of treating the king as a god. He traveled widely throughout his kingdom, inquiring about the conditions of his subjects. He also was the first Siamese monarch to allow his subjects to gaze directly upon his face. Mongkut's willingness to adapt traditional Siamese patterns to more-modern ideas helped pave the way for the more profound social and political changes that were to take place in Siam under his successor.

Chulalongkorn and the foundations of modern Thailand



Mongkut was succeeded by his 15-year-old son Chulalongkorn (Rama V; reigned 1868–1910). Because of Chulalongkorn's youth, the country was ruled by a regent until the prince came of age in 1873. Chulalongkorn was faced with continuing Western pressure, and he maintained his father's policy of making territorial concessions to the West in the

Chulalongkorn.

hope that Siam could retain its overall independence. In 1893, after French gunboats forced their way up the Chao Phraya River to Bangkok, he was forced to cede to France all Lao territories east of the Mekong River, and in 1907 the French took over three territories in northwestern Cambodia and Lao territory west of the Mekong that had been under Siamese suzerainty. Two years later the Siamese government lost rights over four Malay states to the British. The creation of a modern military was in fact a direct response to the threat of domination Siam faced, particularly from France, in the late 19th century.

At the same time that he sought to fend off the Western powers from without, Chulalongkorn undertook major reforms within the country. These were often difficult to achieve, since they undercut the power bases of influential men at court. The young king proceeded gradually, assisted by several of his brothers and half brothers; many of these—in particular the brilliant and energetic Prince Damrong Rajanubhab—were men of outstanding ability. The internal reforms carried through during Chulalongkorn's reign included reorganizing the government into ministries with functional responsibilities and creating a centralized bureaucracy, instituting a uniform and centralized system of administration over the outlying provinces, systematizing government revenue collection, abolishing slavery and labour-service requirements, establishing law courts and reforming the judiciary, introducing a modern school system, and constructing railways and telegraph systems. In addition, he backed a major reorganization of the Buddhist monkhood, bringing all monks throughout the country into the *sangha* as a nationwide religious hierarchy that was linked at its apex to the king. By any standards, the sheer scale of Chulalongkorn's reforms are remarkable, and his reign is commonly regarded as one of the greatest in Thai history. The modern state of Thailand is his legacy.

The last absolute monarchs of Siam

Chulalongkorn's policies were continued by his sons Vajiravudh (Rama VI; reigned 1910–25) and Prajadhipok (Rama VII; 1925–35). In 1917 Vajiravudh, the first Thai monarch to be educated abroad, opened Thailand's first university, which he named for his father. In 1921 he made universal primary education compulsory throughout the country. To assimilate the growing number of Chinese entering the country, he also passed an act that required all students be taught to read, write, and speak Standard Thai (Siamese) and be instructed in their duties as good Siamese citizens. Vajiravudh is noted principally, however, for promoting Thai nationalism. In his voluminous writings he stressed the need for his subjects to be loyal to nation, religion, and king. He not only strengthened the army and navy but also created a paramilitary organization, the Wild Tiger Corps, that was independent of the regular army. In 1917 he took Siam into World War I on the side of the Allies, and after the war he succeeded in persuading the Western powers to give up their extraterritorial rights in Siam. Vajiravudh also passed a law in 1913 that required all Siamese to adopt surnames, and he encouraged his people to adopt clothing styles based on European models, which were considered to be more modern, and to abandon such habits as chewing betel.

Vajiravudh was notorious for extravagance, and his successor, Prajadhipok, inherited serious fiscal problems from his brother. The new king ordered layoffs

throughout most government departments, both at the start of his reign and again during the Great Depression of the 1930s. The cuts caused severe economic hardships for many government officials and their families and added to popular discontent with the monarchy during his reign. A rising middle class was also growing increasingly unhappy with the domination of the government by members of the royal family and with the absence of wider participation in political decision making. An emerging popular press was able to give voice to these discontents.

The 1932 coup and the creation of a constitutional order

One focus of civilian discontent centred on a group of students who had been educated overseas and were deeply dissatisfied with the tight political control that Siam's ruling families held over the country. Some of these students became politically radicalized during the course of their education in Europe in the 1920s and early '30s. They were led by Pridi Phanomyong, a brilliant young lawyer studying in Paris, who became the leader of an organization of overseas Siamese students. He was closely associated with a career artillery officer, Luang Phibun Songkhram (Pibul Songgram), who was then studying military science in France. In 1927 Pridi and Phibun formed the People's Party, which became the nucleus of a revolutionary group plotting to overthrow Siam's absolute monarchy. On their return to Siam the two men and their associates, who became known as the Promoters, built up a revolutionary following among students, nonroyal government officials, and military officers.

On June 24, 1932, while Prajadhipok was away from Bangkok, the Promoters staged a bloodless coup, seizing control of the army, imprisoning the royal officials who had constituted the ruling group, and persuading the king to agree to rule under a constitution. A State Council and National Assembly were established under the new government. Many members of the new government had not played a direct part in the coup, and some were quite conservative in their political thinking. In early 1933, when Pridi drew up an economic plan for the country that was far more radical than many members of the new government could accept, feelings ran so high that the king was forced to suspend the National Assembly. The military leaders, fearing that the royalists would regain control of the government, forced the reconstitution of the National Assembly, which was followed by an attempted royalist countercoup in October 1933 under Prince Boworadet (Bavoradej), a cousin of the king. Although there was no evidence of royal collusion, Prajadhipok found his position untenable. In early 1934 he left for England, and in March 1935 he abdicated. A regency council was appointed to act for his successor, Prince Ananda Mahidol, then a schoolboy studying in Switzerland, until he came of age.

Although it never actually confronted an external threat until 1941, the new military, led by well-trained, disciplined officers and equipped with modern weaponry, contributed to a fundamental restructuring of power within the country. The 1932 revolution succeeded only because it was supported by military units led by nonroyal officers. Between 1933 and the end of 1938 the military grew ever stronger. The years just before World War II were marked by a tripling of the military budget, the establishment (1934) and subsequent spread of a paramilitary youth movement with fascist overtones, and a growing alliance with Japan.

The Phibun dictatorship and World War II

In December 1938 Phibun Songkhram took over as military dictator, and the following year he changed the name of the country from Siam to Thailand. He embarked on a strongly nationalistic policy that was chauvinistic and anti-Chinese at home and irredentist and pro-Japanese abroad, and he set out to elevate the position of the military—especially the army, in which he held the rank of field marshal—and to portray it as the defender of the country. Luang Wichit Watthakan, Phibun's influential ideologist, drew on a Japanese prototype for his ideal of *wiratham*, the “code of the warrior,” as the foundation for Thai nationalism. In November 1940, taking advantage of the defeat of France by Germany the previous June, Phibun ordered the invasion of French territories in western Laos and northwestern Cambodia that formerly had been under Thai control. Japan supported Thai claims to the disputed lands.

Thailand's leaders nonetheless sought help from Britain and France against an increasingly aggressive Japan, but the British were too deeply involved in Europe to provide them with meaningful support. On Dec. 8, 1941—following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii—Japanese troops entered Thailand and requested the right of passage through the country to facilitate their planned surprise rear attack on British-held Singapore. After a brief fight against the advancing Japanese, all Thai troops were ordered by Phibun to lay down their arms, and Thailand subsequently signed a full Treaty of Alliance with Japan; in January 1942 the Thai government declared war on Britain and the United States.

Thailand gained minor territorial concessions in Burma (Myanmar) and Malaya, as well as in Laos and Cambodia, from its wartime alliance with Japan, but the Thai economy suffered greatly, ultimately undermining public confidence in Phibun. From 1942 onward, overseas resistance groups based in the United States and Britain made contact with similar groups within Thailand led by Pridi Phanomyong, then serving as regent in the absence of the young king Ananda. The Free Thai, as these groups were collectively known, conducted raids against the Japanese and succeeded in infiltrating the government. In July 1944 Phibun was forced to resign, and in August 1945 Japan surrendered.

The postwar crisis and the return of Phibun

Following the end of the war, Thailand's primary aim was to restore its international reputation, given Phibun's wartime alliance with Japan. Thailand was generally supported in its aim, because most members of the international community—with the exception of Britain, which took a punitive stance toward the country—had never accepted Thailand's declaration of war, maintaining that it had been signed under duress. As soon as Thailand returned the territories seized from France in 1940-41, it was admitted to the United Nations (1946), and its standing in the international community was restored.

The immediate postwar years, however, were not easy ones for Thailand. Phibun narrowly escaped trial as a war criminal and temporarily retired from public life. Then, in June 1946, the recently enthroned Ananda Mahidol was found dead of a gunshot wound, an event that shocked the nation. The government, led by Pridi Phanomyong, the former head of the Free Thai movement, was unable to make a convincing investigation into the death, hampered by powerful elements in the police and military who had been associated with the Phibun regime. Pridi resigned, and his protégé, who succeeded him, was unable to quell the discontent fueled by rumours regarding the king's death. In November 1947 the military staged a coup,

and Pridi fled into exile. After Phibun returned as prime minister in 1948, Pridi was accused of regicide and found guilty in absentia. The cause of Ananda's death has never been conclusively determined, but evidence later emerged indicating that if King Ananda had been murdered, Phibun's allies were more likely than Pridi to have been responsible. However, Pridi did not live long enough for a regime to come to power that would allow him to return to Thailand; he died in exile in France in 1983. Only in the late 1990s would Pridi finally be recognized for the profound role he played in shaping contemporary Thailand.

With the coming of the Cold War, the West began to look to Thailand as a potential bastion against the rise of communism in Southeast Asia. Thailand sent troops to join the United Nations forces during the Korean War, and in 1954 it became a charter member of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), a regional anticommunist defense organization to which the United States pledged its support. The establishment of a communist regime in China in 1949 caused Phibun to fear the spread of communism within Thailand, and he carried out a series of measures directed against members of the Chinese community. He also imprisoned leaders from other groups whom he feared might try to secede from Thailand, in particular the Lao in the northeast and the Malays in the south.

Between 1951 and 1957 the United States poured huge amounts of economic and military aid into Thailand to fortify the country's infrastructure and boost its military and police forces. This massive financial support laid the foundation for an economic boom in Thailand that continued almost steadily until the late 1990s. Access to these funds also rendered the military largely independent of the political process; an alliance of convenience developed between the military rulers—headed by Phibun and the newly emerging army chief, Sarit Thanarat—and the police, in which the latter suppressed the government's political opponents in return for a share of the political spoils.

Sarit was entrusted by Phibun with building up and modernizing the Thai army, and by 1954 he had risen to the rank of field marshal. Sarit became heavily involved in business activities and served on numerous corporate boards, as did a number of other upper-echelon military officials during that period. Under the Phibun government, most of the country's small number of manufacturing firms were government-owned, while imports and exports were tightly controlled. Sarit and many members of the middle class, particularly businessmen of Chinese descent, quickly became disappointed by the poor economic results of Phibun's policy of economic nationalism. Public confidence in the Phibun regime waned during the next three years, and in September 1957 Sarit staged a coup and took over the government.

Military dictatorship, economic growth, and the reemergence of the monarchy

Sarit remained in power from 1958 until his death in 1963. Throughout those years he concentrated on instituting new economic policies that favoured both domestic and foreign private investment. His commitment to economic development, coupled with a massive rise in foreign economic and military aid to Thailand (especially from the United States), led to a strong growth in Thailand's gross national product. Not only were large amounts of money funneled into the military, but there was also a major increase in the number of infrastructure investments, and many new

highways, irrigation projects, electrification schemes, and schools were built. Sarit, seeking the legitimacy of the throne, also encouraged Bhumibol Adulyadej, who had succeeded his brother as king in 1946, to make the public more aware of the monarchy. The king and queen made frequent trips around the country and sponsored numerous public service activities throughout the period of Sarit's rule, and by 1960 they had become widely known and popular throughout the land. The monarchy, which had been in eclipse since 1932, once again became a significant institution in Thailand.

Sarit was admired by many as a strong and decisive ruler, but his popularity diminished significantly after his death, when the extent of his personal corruption became widely known. The aura of corruption haunted his successors, Thanom Kittikachorn and Praphas Charusathian, who jointly held power throughout the decade following Sarit's death. Their rule was, nonetheless, also characterized by the continuing growth of the Thai economy. During the 1960s Thailand became increasingly involved with the United States in the Vietnam War. By 1969 Thailand had more than 11,000 troops serving in Vietnam, and throughout the conflict it was a staging base for the U.S. Air Force. Huge sums of American money continued to pour into Thailand throughout the Thanom-Praphas years, stimulating economic development but also contributing substantially to the growth of corruption and a rising gap in the standard of living between rich and poor. Popular disaffection grew, particularly in the impoverished northeast and among alienated groups such as the Muslim Malays in the south and the Hmong in the far north, gradually crystallizing into outright insurgency.

The 1973 revolution and its aftermath

Faced with growing internal dissent, Thanom made halfhearted attempts to introduce minor democratic reforms before reimposing direct military rule in 1971. For many Thai, especially the growing number of middle-class citizens educated abroad and exposed to Western democratic ideas, this undermined their vision of the country's future. Students in particular felt betrayed and held huge public demonstrations calling for the promulgation of a constitution. Violence between police and students escalated, culminating on Oct. 14, 1973, when government forces killed more than a hundred protestors. The army's commander, Gen. Kris Sivara, subsequently refused to use additional force, and Thanom and Praphas acceded to the urging of the king to go into exile. Most Thai today consider Oct. 14, 1973, to be an even more important date than June 24, 1932, the date of the coup that ended the absolute authority of Thailand's monarchy.

For the first time since 1932, the monarchy assumed a direct role in Thai politics. The king chose Judge Sanya Dharmasakti, a former rector of Thammasat University, to be interim prime minister and to oversee the drafting of a new constitution. The constitution, promulgated in 1974, ushered in a brief period of parliamentary democracy in Thailand. Ranking members of the military, however, interpreted the open policy debates in parliament as an indication of political instability, and the triumph of communist governments in Vietnam, Cambodia (Kampuchea), and Laos in 1975 was perceived as a threat requiring a stronger Thai government. In October 1976 the military, this time with the backing of the king, again took control of the government and abolished both parliament and the constitution.

The new coup polarized the country politically. Many students who had led or supported the movement of the early 1970s went into the jungle to join what had

previously been a small, rural-based communist insurgency. By mid-1977 the Communist Party of Thailand was beginning to mount an increasingly effective challenge to the military-backed government. Fearing increasing unrest, the military leaders—in yet another October coup—ousted the extreme right-wing government they had installed a year earlier and handed power over to Gen. Kriangsak Chomanand, who was open to a more democratic style of government.

Partial democracy and the search for a new political order

By 1980, when Kriangsak was replaced by Gen. Prem Tinsulanonda, Thailand had established a new system of government in which the military shared power with parliament through the mediation of the monarchy. Prem, who served as prime minister from 1980 to 1988, succeeded in eliminating the challenge of the Communist Party of Thailand and quelled dissent within the country by declaring a general amnesty for all previous insurgents. However, Thailand faced a new external threat along its eastern border following the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia in 1979; as one consequence of that occupation, Thailand found itself forced to shelter a growing number of Southeast Asian refugees, arriving primarily from Cambodia. In 1988 Prem was replaced as prime minister by Chatichai Choonhavan, leader of the Chat Thai political group, which had won the greatest number of seats in parliamentary elections held in July. Thus, for the first time since 1976, Thailand had a government headed by an elected, rather than a military, leader. The supremacy of parliament over the military, however, had not been firmly established.

In February 1991 Chatichai's government, already criticized for rampant corruption, went too far in challenging the military and was toppled by a junta calling itself the National Peacekeeping Council. Although nominally led by Gen. Sunthorn Kongsompong, another powerful leader of the junta was army chief Suchinda Kraprayoon. The junta promised elections and, as an indication of this commitment, appointed the politically liberal Anand Punyarachun, a former diplomat and business leader, as prime minister. Anand sought to remain independent of the military. After elections were held in March 1992, General Suchinda, who had not himself stood for election, reneged on his promise not to seek the premiership. A coalition of groups, drawn predominantly from the urban middle class, began to stage large-scale protests after he became prime minister in April. Chamlong Srimuang—who also was a former army general, as well as a former mayor of Bangkok and the leading lay supporter of a Buddhist fundamentalist movement—assumed the leadership of these protests. In May the army met the escalating antigovernment demonstrations with bloody repression. The king intervened and called Suchinda and Chamlong to an audience, after which Suchinda resigned. Anand was recalled by the king to head a caretaker government until new elections could be held in September 1992.

These elections ushered in what became the most democratic period in Thai history. Between September 1992 and April 2006 all governments were formed by parties commanding a majority in parliament. Although no single party gained an absolute majority in the elections held in 1992, 1995, and 1996, the Democrat Party, the oldest political party in Thailand, has been the most successful of any in putting together coalitions to form governments. Chuan Leekpai, the leader of the Democrats, headed governments between 1992 and 1995 and again between 1997 and 2001. However, his governments were not fully stable, and in the period

between 1995 and 1997 there were two elections and two other prime ministers. One of them, Gen. Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, faced one of the most serious economic crises in Thailand's postwar history, set off by the devaluation of the baht in July 1997.

The economic crisis provided a strong impetus for the completion of a new constitution, the drafting of which had been initiated in the aftermath of the crisis of 1992. In October 1997 King Bhumibol signed the new constitution, which recognized broader rights for the citizenry than any of the country's 15 previous constitutions. Conservative elements in the military and bureaucracy and their allies in parliament had sought to ensure that the new constitution protected some of their privileges, but the severe economic crisis that took place that year undermined their efforts.

The 1997 constitution showed the degree to which a new "civil society" was emerging in Thailand. It also reflected the influence of the nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that had proliferated in Thailand since the 1980s. Promoting the interests of such groups as farmers, environmentalists, urban labourers, ethnic and religious minorities, and people afflicted with AIDS, these NGOs drew their membership primarily from the same educated middle-class people who joined the student movements of the 1970s and succeeded in challenging military rule in May 1992. NGOs also attracted significant backing from many newspapers and magazines and from academics. Although the organizations were initially viewed with suspicion by Thai governments—and especially by ranking members of the civil service and the military—the country's parliamentary-based governments since 1992 have been forced to recognize the influence of NGOs on Thai politics.

Attempts to institute populist democracy

Thaksin Shinawatra

In parliamentary elections held in January 2001 the Thai Rak Thai ("Thais Love Thais") party, created in 1995, became dominant, and its founding leader, Thaksin Shinawatra, moved to the centre of Thai politics. Thaksin exemplified the new politician of the post-1992 period. A Sino-Thai from Chiang Mai in the north, he cultivated a constituency among up-country people in northern and northeastern Thailand that became the foundation of his party. As a highly successful entrepreneur and founder of the country's largest telecommunications company, Thaksin and his political network also drew much support from Thailand's wealthy business community.

Thaksin, with his immense financial resources, was able to fund political campaigns that employed sophisticated advertising methods. Because the Thai Rak Thai party often used funds from its own bank accounts to ensure strong voter turnouts, it came to be accused of buying votes. Thaksin's popularity in rural areas, however, was based less on monetary incentives than on the Thai Rak Thai commitment to providing reasonably priced health care for the poor, devolving more centralized authority to local governing organizations, providing substantial loan funds for villagers, and making larger investments in education.

In elections held in early 2005 the Thai Rak Thai party won an absolute majority of seats in parliament, the first time this had ever happened in Thailand in an

open election. Although Thaksin seemed positioned to shape Thai politics for the foreseeable future, he made some decisions that ultimately undermined his authority and led the country toward a political crisis. Notable among these was his order to use military force to suppress the insurgency in the Malay-Muslim populated areas of southern Thailand without also attempting to pursue political solutions to the problem. The move exacerbated the conflict, and as the violence intensified, key military figures, as well as the king and queen, became openly dissatisfied with the strategy.

Thaksin himself was publicly respectful of the monarchy, but he clearly began to position himself to play a decisive role for when King Bhumibol passed from the scene. As the king's 60th year on the throne approached in 2006, the public was acutely reminded that he would not be monarch for too much longer. The looming royal transition appeared to give Thaksin the opportunity to increase the power of an elected government with strong popular support at the expense of the old military and royalist elite.

However, it was Thaksin's willingness to use his power to manipulate both the parliament and the regulatory bodies created by the 1997 constitution to protect his and his family's wealth that led to his ouster. Many members of the urban middle class were deeply angered at the end of 2005 when it became public knowledge that the telecommunications corporation owned by members of Thaksin's family—but viewed as a national asset—had been sold to a Singaporean holding company without the family incurring any tax liability. Protest rallies were staged in Bangkok, led by the urban-based opposition People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD)—who came to be known as the “yellow shirts” for the colour they wore during demonstrations—and grew steadily in size. Because Thaksin had lost the loyalty of many ranking military officers, he was unable to order that force be used to suppress the demonstrations. Instead, he called a snap election to show that he had wide popular support throughout the countryside. The vote of April 2006, however, proved meaningless, as all opposition parties boycotted the election; the results were subsequently invalidated by the Supreme Court.

Thaksin remained in charge of a caretaker government for the next several months, while the public prepared for the celebration of the king's six decades as chief of state. However, in September 2006 military forces led by Gen. Sonthi Boonyaratkalin staged a coup while Thaksin was abroad. The junta, with the king's backing, appointed retired general Surayud Chulanont to head an interim government. The 1997 constitution was abrogated, and a carefully selected group was appointed to draft a new constitution; this document was ratified by a popular referendum in August 2007, and parliamentary elections were held in December. Although Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai party had been outlawed earlier that year, a new party backing the ousted prime minister—the People Power Party (PPP)—clearly won the most seats in parliament, which effectively amounted to a popular rejection of the coup. The head of the PPP, Samak Sundaravej, became prime minister.

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Yellow shirts and red shirts

Political tensions remained high, however, and, beginning in mid-2008, the yellow shirts began staging mass protests against the Samak government, charging that he was merely a stand-in for the ousted Thaksin. In September the prime minister and his entire cabinet were removed from office by order of a special Constitutional Court, and the parliament elected Somchai Wongsawat, brother-in-law of Thaksin, as prime minister. In October Thaksin, who by then was living in exile, was convicted in absentia on charges of corruption.

Meanwhile, the PAD mobilized thousands of yellow-shirt demonstrators against the selection of Somchai in large-scale protests that became increasingly violent. The country's two major airports in Bangkok were swamped, forcing temporary closure of both facilities. In response to the unrest, the army called for new elections and the dissolution of the parliament. The prime minister rejected the request, and on December 2 he, like his predecessor, was removed from office by the Constitutional Court, and his party was dissolved. Within two weeks, Abhisit Vejjajiva, leader of the opposition Democrat Party, was chosen by a special parliamentary vote to become the new prime minister—the fifth in a period of just over two years.

In early 2009 the supporters of Thaksin—popularly called the “red shirts” for the colour of their uniforms and mainly rural-based and from northern and northeastern Thailand but also including urban-dwelling democracy activists—formed a populist movement called the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD). The UDD organized protests against this latest change of government, which in April forced the cancellation of an ASEAN summit meeting outside Bangkok. Security forces were able to disperse the protesters, but antigovernment mass demonstrations by the red shirts erupted again later in the year and in early 2010.

The 2010 action, which began in mid-March, drew tens of thousands of red-shirted protesters to Bangkok. There the demonstrators barricaded themselves in the heart of the city's commercial district, demanding that the Abhisit government resign and new parliamentary elections be held. The situation remained calm until mid-April, when government forces unsuccessfully attempted to oust the red shirts from their encampment. More than 20 died and hundreds were injured during the encounter. An attempt at a negotiated settlement with the red shirts failed in early May, and the Thai military soon began an operation to force out the protesters. This action culminated on May 19, when troops took the protesters' camp by force and arrested the red-shirt leaders. In all, several dozen people were killed and hundreds more were wounded during that action.

About a year later, however, the red shirts scored a major victory. In July 2011 the Phak Puea Thai (PPT; “For Thais Party”), a pro-Thaksin party headed by Thaksin's younger sister, Yingluck Shinawatra, won the majority of parliamentary seats in the country's general elections. Until then, Yingluck, a newcomer to politics, had been involved in the family's business ventures. The PPT quickly formed a coalition with several smaller parties to create an even larger majority in parliament, and in early August Yingluck became the country's first female prime minister.

Ed.

Economic and foreign-policy developments

Thailand had one of the world's fastest growing economies from the 1960s to the late '90s. By the 1990s Thailand was considered to be part of a second wave of newly industrializing countries, or NICs, that included such countries in the region as Malaysia and Indonesia and that were following fast on the heels of such first-wave NICs as South Korea and Singapore. Unlike Japan and some of the first-wave NICs, where governments aggressively channeled capital into industrial sectors with high growth potential, Thailand relied on an independent central bank and other government financial agencies to create the proper conditions for economic growth and left it to the private sector to make specific business decisions. This growth substantially improved the standard of living in Thailand, especially among urban dwellers. In July 1997, however, a crisis in Thailand's financial markets forced the government to institute a drastic devaluation of the Thai currency, the baht, which triggered a wider crisis that soon swept across most of East and Southeast Asia. The crisis was especially severe in Thailand, where many financial institutions collapsed or were taken over; without new sources of capital, construction and new economic ventures slowed to a near halt. These events compelled the Thai government, with the backing of the International Monetary Fund, to institute a series of economic reforms, especially in the financial sector, after which the economy slowly began to recover.

Several factors led to Thailand's financial collapse. Among these were the wholesale financial liberalization of the early 1990s; the declining competitiveness of Thailand relative to China, Vietnam, and other Asian countries; the aggressiveness of Thai businesses in obtaining short-term loans from foreign sources to fund long-term obligations; the eagerness of international lenders to make these loans; the growing influence from the mid-1990s of political leaders over the previously independent Bank of Thailand and other governmental economic agencies; the lax regulation of financial markets and the Securities Exchange of Thailand by the Bank of Thailand and other government bodies; and the slowness of the authorities to act once the problems were recognized. Foremost among those responsible for the crisis were the many finance companies that made short-term loans to fund long-term property investments. These finance companies were the first financial institutions to collapse. In the aftermath of the crisis, major banks and financial institutions have gone bankrupt, have been combined with other firms, or have been purchased by foreign buyers.

Even before the onset of the economic crisis, there was already ample evidence that the country's rapid economic growth—while having brought a definite rise in the standard of living of most Thai—was also creating many social problems. Notable among the undesirable consequences were increased environmental pollution and degradation, a widening gap between rich and poor, the growth of slums and overcrowding in the cities, and urban traffic congestion. Added to these problems was the emergence of an HIV/AIDS epidemic in Thailand, which became the most serious in Asia. Increasingly, many of the NGOs and business leaders, even the king himself, have questioned the single-minded pursuit of new investments in industry and services, proposing instead that the country seek sustainable development that respects traditional ideas of community.

In contrast to the ideal of sustainable development, the government of Thaksin Shinawatra strongly emphasized free-market economics, and its policies succeeded in stimulating significant new growth in the economy. The Thaksin government used

increasing revenues to undertake a number of large-scale infrastructure projects, the most visible of which was the Suvarnabhumi international airport. However, these projects also brought accusations of corruption and shoddy workmanship—notably the discovery of structural flaws at the new airport shortly after it opened—and questions were raised about how beneficial such projects were to the country's economy.

From the 1950s through the '70s, Thailand's foreign policy was based on anticommunism and a special relationship with the United States. The withdrawal of American forces from Vietnam and the establishment of communist regimes in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos spurred Thailand to reassess its foreign policy, and since the 1980s the emphasis has been more on promoting economic relations than on security. The relationship with the United States has been downgraded, and closer ties have been forged with Japan and China. Following the end of the Cold War and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Thailand began to encourage regional trade relationships, even with its former enemies—Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.

Thailand was a charter member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and with its support Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar were all admitted to the organization between 1995 and 1998. Although ASEAN had not evolved into a free-trade bloc, by the early 21st century Thailand was increasingly oriented toward other Asian countries with which its economic relations had been strengthening, most notably China.

While economic concerns have been the underlying basis for Thailand's foreign policy since the 1980s, security concerns have not disappeared. The country has continued to grapple with refugees on its western border with Myanmar. At the same time, conflicts in southern Thailand have contributed to the government's willingness to work with the United States and others in efforts to control terrorists who have been identified as Islamic radicals.

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[Additional Reading](#)

Geography

General surveys of the country include CHARLES F. KEYES, *Thailand: Buddhist Kingdom as Modern Nation-State* (1987, reissued 1994), which provides a general introduction to the country. WOLF DONNER, *The Five Faces of Thailand: An Economic Geography* (1978), contains a good description of the geography of the country and surveys economic geography in detail through the 1970s. JONATHAN RIGG (ed.), *Counting the Costs: Economic Growth and Environmental Change in Thailand* (1995); MICHAEL J.G. PARNWELL (ed.), *Uneven Development in Thailand* (1996); PHILIP HIRSCH (ed.), *Seeing Forests for Trees: Environment and Environmentalism in Thailand* (1997); CHRIS DIXON, *The Thai Economy: Uneven Development and Internationalisation* (1999); and PASUK PHONGPAICHIT and CHRIS BAKER, *Thailand's Boom and Bust* (1998), provide in-depth analyses of the political economy and ecology of the country in the last decades of the 20th century. LUCIEN M. HANKS, *Rice and Man: Agricultural Ecology in Southeast Asia* (1972, reissued 1992), although dated, is one of the best introductions to daily

life and social and economic changes in rice-growing villages in central Thailand. H. FUKUI, Y. KAIDA, and M. KUCHIBA (eds.), *A Rice-Growing Village Revisited: An Integrated Study of Rural Development in Northeast Thailand*, 3 vol. (1985–88), provides a detailed agronomic and sociological analysis of rural life in northeastern Thailand. PHILIP HIRSCH (ed.), *The Village in Perspective: Community and Locality in Rural Thailand* (1993), offers insights into the transformation of rural life. Thai Buddhism and religion are examined at length by S.J. TAMBIAH, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer: A Study of Buddhism and Polity in Thailand Against a Historical Background* (1976); and PETER A. JACKSON, *Buddhism, Legitimation, and Conflict: The Political Functions of Urban Thai Buddhism* (1989). PHYA ANUMAN RAJADHON, *Essays on Thai Folklore* (1968, reissued 1988), introduces traditional Thai culture from a traditional Thai perspective. APINAN POSHYANANDA, *Modern Art in Thailand: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (1992); SHIGEHARU TANABE and CHARLES F. KEYES (eds.), *Cultural Crisis and Social Memory: Modernity and Identity in Thailand and Laos* (2002); and WILLIAM J. KLAUSNER, *Thai Culture in Transition*, 4th ed. (2002), offer perspectives on cultural change and contemporary culture.

History

General overviews include CHRIS BAKER and PASUK PHONGPAICHT, *A History of Thailand* (2005); and DAVID K. WYATT, *Thailand: A Short History* (1984). The founding of Siam is surveyed in CHARNVIT KASETSIRI, *The Rise of Ayudhya: A History of Siam in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries* (1976). Premodern social organization is delineated in AKIN RABIBHADANA, *The Organization of Thai Society in the Early Bangkok Period, 1782–1873* (1969). HONG LYSA (LYSA HONG), *Thailand in the Nineteenth Century: Evolution of the Economy and Society* (1984), traces the major economic transformations of the 19th century. THONGCHAI WINICHAKUL, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (1994); and MAURIZIO PELEGGI, *Lords of Things: The Fashioning of the Siamese Monarchy's Modern Image* (2002), analyze the transformations of Thailand under the modernizing regime of King Chulalongkorn (1868–1910). WALTER F. VELLA and DOROTHY B. VELLA, *Chaiyo!: King Vajiravudh and the Development of Thai Nationalism* (1978); and BENJAMIN A. BATSON, *The End of the Absolute Monarchy in Siam* (1984), analyze the development of Thai nationalism and the conditions that led to the end of the absolute monarchy. JUDITH A. STOWE, *Siam Becomes Thailand: A Story of Intrigue* (1991), describes the period from the abolition of the absolute monarchy in 1932 through World War II. THAK CHALOEMTIARANA, *Thailand: The Politics of Despotic Paternalism* (1979), analyzes the rise of the military from the return of Phibun in 1947 to the Sarit coup of 1957 and discusses the character of military rule in Thailand. JOHN L.S. GIRLING, *Thailand: Society and Politics* (1981); and DAVID MORELL and CHAI-ANAN SAMUDAVANIJA (CHAI ANAN SAMUTWANIT), *Political Conflict in Thailand: Reform, Reaction, Revolution* (1981), analyze the events of the turbulent 1970s. KEVIN HEWISON (ed.), *Political Change in Thailand: Democracy and Participation* (1997); DUNCAN MCCARGO, *Chamlong Srimuang and the New Thai Politics* (1997); and PASUK PHONGPAICHT and SUNGSIDH PIRIYARANGSAN (SANGSIT PHIRIYARANGSAN), *Corruption and Democracy in Thailand* (1994), describe the political changes in the 1980s and '90s. PAUL HANDLEY, *The King Never Smiles: A Biography of Thailand's Bhumipol Adulyadej* (2006), traces the unique role played in post-World War II Thailand by King Bhumipol. PASUK PHONGPAICHT and CHRIS BAKER, *Thaksin: The Business of Politics in Thailand* (2004), analyzes the populist and reformist leader Thaksin Shinawatra.

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Thanom Kittikachorn

Encyclopædia Britannica Article

born August 11, 1911, Tak, Siam [Thailand]

died June 16, 2004, Bangkok, Thailand

army general and prime minister of Thailand (1958, 1963–71, 1972–73).

Thanom entered the army from the royal military academy in 1931. He was a close associate of Sarit Thanarat and, as commander of the important First Army in Bangkok, assisted him in overthrowing the government of Luang Phibunsongkhram in 1957. In the ensuing "caretaker government" of Pote Sarasin, he served first as minister of defense and then, briefly in 1958, as prime minister. When Sarit took over the government late that year, he stayed on as deputy prime minister and minister of defense. On the death of Sarit in December 1963, Thanom succeeded him as prime minister.

Thanom promised to restore parliamentary democracy and appointed a commission to write Thailand's eighth constitution since the revolution of June 1932. It was adopted in June 1968, and elections were held in February 1969. Thanom's United Thai People's Party won a parliamentary majority, and Thanom continued as both prime minister and minister of defense.

Thanom's greatest problem was the growing threat of communist insurgency. Guerrillas, led by cadres trained in China and North Vietnam, became increasingly aggressive, particularly in the northeast, along the border with Laos. Thanom engaged U.S. pilots to fly Thai troops on counterinsurgency missions and employed U.S. "advisers" in a pattern similar to that adopted by South Vietnam in the early 1960s. A supporter of U.S. policies in Indochina, he sent Thai combat units to Vietnam and Laos and allowed American use of six airbases on Thai soil for missions over Indochina.

By the early 1970s, there was growing opposition to Thanom's rule amid allegations of human rights violations, corruption, and nepotism. Key figures in his regime included his son, Colonel Narong Kittikachorn, and Narong's father-in-law, Field Marshal Praphas Charusathien; the men became known as the "Three Tyrants." In November 1971 Thanom dissolved the cabinet and the parliament, suspended the constitution, and established a nine-man military directorate. In December 1972 an interim constitution was promulgated with Thanom as prime minister and foreign minister. In October 1973 students rioted, and during the uprising at least 77 students were killed and hundreds were injured. In the aftermath, Thanom was forced to flee the country. His surreptitious return to the country in August 1976 precipitated a return to authoritarian rule but without his direct participation.

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Chuan Leekpai

Encyclopædia Britannica Article

born July 28, 1938, Muang district, Trang province, Thai.

Prime minister of Thailand (1992-95, 1997-2001). Son of a schoolteacher, he became a lawyer and was first elected a member of Parliament in 1969. He served in various capacities in the government and was first made prime minister in 1992 after his predecessor resigned in the wake of street violence brought on by Thailand's worsening economic crisis. He lost elections in 1995 largely because his government was seen as plodding and slow, but he was returned to power in 1997; he stepped down in 2001 after his party had lost in national parliamentary elections. He was Thailand's first prime minister to come to power without either aristocratic or military backing.

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Shinawatra, Thaksin

Encyclopædia Britannica Article

born July 26, 1949, Chiang Mai, Thailand

Thai politician who served as prime minister of Thailand (2001-06).

A descendant of Chinese merchants who settled in the area before World War I, Thaksin originally planned for a career in the police force, although his father was a politician. He graduated from the Police Cadet Academy in 1973 and won a scholarship to study criminal justice at Eastern Kentucky University in the United States. On his return to Thailand, Thaksin first taught at the Police Cadet Academy before being tapped for special duties in the office of Prime Minister Seni Pramoj. Thaksin returned to the United States and in 1978 completed a doctorate at Sam Houston (Texas) State University. Back in Thailand, he worked in police planning and public relations positions and became adept in computer technology. After having attained the rank of lieutenant colonel in the police force, he left the force in 1987 to run his business in the computer field alongside his wife, Potjaman.

After a brush with bankruptcy, Thaksin eventually obtained a monopoly on satellite communications and a cell phone concession, and he rapidly translated these into a vast fortune. He first turned to politics in 1994, when he was asked to be foreign minister. Thaksin served three months until the fall of the government. The following year he assumed leadership of the Palang Dharma Party after winning a legislative seat in Bangkok. On the party's entrance into Prime Minister Banharn Silpaarcha's government coalition in 1995, he served briefly as deputy prime minister. Thaksin served as deputy prime minister a second time under Chavalit Yongchaiyudh in 1997.

Thaksin, who campaigned on a populist platform, led his newly created Thai Rak Thai (TRT) Party to a convincing win in national elections on January 6, 2001. He was appointed prime minister by King Bhumibol Adulyadej on February 9. Thaksin's tenure in office, however, came close to an abrupt end when the independent National Counter Corruption Commission prosecuted him on April 3 before the Constitutional Court on charges of having concealed assets in a mandatory declaration of wealth. He was acquitted by a vote of 8-7 on August 3, 2001. The following year he consolidated power after his party merged with two smaller coalition members to secure an enormous parliamentary majority. Despite allegations of cronyism and corruption, Thaksin generally enjoyed great public support, and his popularity increased with his swift response to the devastating Indian Ocean tsunami that struck Thailand in December 2004. The following year the TRT won an absolute majority in the parliament, the first time any party had achieved such a feat. With the majority, Thaksin formed a one-party government, another unprecedented event in Thailand, where coalition governments had been the norm.

In 2006 Thaksin sold his family-owned telecommunications corporation for nearly two billion dollars, and questions concerning the tax-free deal resulted in mass protests. Faced with calls for his resignation, he dissolved parliament in late February 2006 and called an election for April. Although his party won a majority, the election had been boycotted by major opposition parties, which ultimately led the Supreme Court to declare the results invalid. Thaksin, in turn, did not assume office but nevertheless remained in charge of an interim government, and elections were called for mid-October 2006. In September, while traveling abroad, Thaksin was ousted from the government by a military coup, and he subsequently went into exile.

The Thai government froze Thaksin's assets in June 2007, and the following February he returned to Thailand to face corruption charges. In August, shortly after his wife was convicted of tax evasion and while both were out on bail, the couple fled the country. Thaksin was tried in absentia, and in October 2008 he was found guilty of corruption and sentenced to two years in prison. The couple subsequently divorced, and Potjaman returned to Thailand, where her sentence was suspended. In February 2010 Thailand's Supreme Court ruled that the government would seize some \$1.4 billion (U.S.) of Thaksin's frozen assets (about 60 percent of the total) as part of his 2008 conviction. Several months earlier, in November 2009, the Cambodian government had appointed Thaksin as a special economic adviser. Thaksin resided mostly in Dubai and Britain after fleeing the country.

Despite living in exile, Thaksin maintained a strong following in his home country. In July 2011 For Thais Party (Phak Puea Thai), a pro-Thaksin party headed by Thaksin's younger sister, Yingluck Shinawatra, won the majority of parliamentary seats in the country's general elections, and in August Yingluck became prime minister. That victory opened the door for Thaksin's possible return to Thailand.

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Samak Sundaravej

Encyclopædia Britannica Article

born June 13, 1935, Bangkok, Thai.

died Nov. 24, 2009, Bangkok

Thai journalist and politician who served as prime minister of Thailand for several months (January–September) in 2008. He was the first Thai prime minister to be democratically elected since the ousting of Thaksin Shinawatra as prime minister in a September 2006 military coup.

Samak grew up in Bangkok, studied law in the city at Thammasat University, and worked for a number of years as a newspaper columnist before entering politics. Originally a member of the Democrat Party, he was elected to the parliament in 1973. He stirred controversy three years later by spearheading a radio campaign against pro-democracy activists at Thammasat University and voicing support for the October 1976 crackdown that claimed the lives of dozens of students. After serving as interior minister (1976–77), Samak founded his own political party, the Prachakorn Thai Party, which he led from 1979 to 2000.

In 1992, after a military junta had toppled the Thai government, Samak was appointed deputy prime minister. In May of that year he again conspicuously supported a bloody suppression of pro-democracy demonstrators by the Thai army. Samak later served with Thaksin in the cabinet of Prime Minister Banharn Silpa-archa. In 2000 Samak scored a resounding victory in the Bangkok mayoral race, but his four-year term in office ended amid allegations of corruption. He went on to host political talk shows as well as a popular cooking show on television, returning to politics in 2006 with a successful run for the Senate, where he served until Thaksin's overthrow. After a military-appointed tribunal dissolved Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party and many top-ranking TRT members were banned from participating in politics, Samak helped establish the pro-Thaksin People Power Party (PPP) in August 2007 and became leader of the party. Under Samak's leadership, the PPP achieved a comfortable plurality win in Thailand's general election the following December and subsequently was able to form a multiparty governing coalition.

On Jan. 28, 2008, the parliament of Thailand elected Samak as the country's new prime minister. King Bhumibol Adulyadej ratified the election the following day. One month after Samak assumed the prime ministership, Thaksin returned to Thailand from exile in Britain. How much power Thaksin would wield in Samak's government was the subject of much speculation. Critics alleged that Thaksin would control the government from behind the scenes. After Samak signaled his intention to amend Thailand's postcoup constitution, the opposition People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) launched a mass protest against him, describing the move as an attempt to lay the groundwork for a return to power by Thaksin. Samak resisted the PAD's calls for his resignation, but in early September he was forced to step down after the Constitutional Court found him guilty of having illegally accepted payment for TV cooking show appearances that he had made while serving as prime minister. Samak also lost a defamation suit later that month. A bid by some of Samak's supporters in the PPP to renominate him eventually died out. Amid renewed protests by the opposition, the PPP named Somchai Wongsawat, Thaksin's brother-in-law, as Samak's successor. Somchai was soon ousted, however, and the PPP was dissolved by the Constitutional Court.

Sherman Hollar

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Shinawatra, Yingluck

Encyclopædia Britannica Article

born June 21, 1967, San Kamphaeng town, Thailand

Thai businesswoman and politician, prime minister of Thailand (2011-). She was the younger sister of former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra and the first woman in the country to hold that office.

Yingluck was the youngest of nine children born into a wealthy family of Chinese descent that had settled in the Chiang Mai area of northwestern Thailand in the early 20th century. Her father was a member of parliament from the late 1960s to the mid-1970s, and her brother also served in parliament and in various ministerial posts before becoming prime minister in 2001. Thaksin was ousted from office in a bloodless military coup in September 2006.

Yingluck graduated from Chiang Mai University in 1988 and then attended Kentucky State University in Frankfort, where she earned a master's degree in public administration in 1991. After returning to Thailand, she began working in her family's various business enterprises, gradually taking on more responsibilities. She married Thai businessman Anusorn Amornchat in 1995, and the couple had one son.

Yingluck was a top executive in Advanced Info Service (AIS), the telecommunications branch of the family's large holding company in 2006 when the parent company was sold to a Singapore-based conglomerate—a controversial transaction that netted the family a huge profit but was one of the factors leading to Thaksin's downfall later that year. Yingluck then became president of the family's real-estate business while her brother went into exile. Thaksin remained popular in Thailand, however, especially among rural people in the northern part of the country. His supporters became known as the “red shirts,” while his opponents, mainly urban elites, were dubbed the “yellow shirts.” Tensions between the two groups mounted, culminating in prolonged mass protests by the red shirts in the spring of 2010 in central Bangkok that eventually were forcibly suppressed by the Thai military.

After Thaksin had been ousted from office, his political party was outlawed, and a successor to it, the For Thais Party (Phak Puea Thai; PPT), was formed in late 2008. Parliamentary elections were announced in early May 2011 for July 3, and Yingluck declared her candidacy for office shortly thereafter. Yingluck, seen as a fresh face in Thai politics and aided considerably by being Thaksin's sister, swept to victory at the polls, along with the PPT. Although the PPT gained a majority of seats in parliament, the party formed a ruling coalition with several smaller parties. Yingluck, emerging as party leader, was elected prime minister by parliament on August 5 and formally took office after she was endorsed in the post by King Bhumibol Adulyadej.

Kenneth Pletcher

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