



Thai Culture

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People

One of the most distinctive Thai customs is the wai, which is similar to the Indian namaste gesture. Showing greeting, farewell, or acknowledgment, it comes in several forms reflecting the relative status of those involved, but generally it involves a prayer-like gesture with the hands and a bow of the head.

Physical demonstrations of affection in public are common between friends, but less so between lovers. It is thus common to see friends walking together holding hands, but couples rarely do so except in westernized areas.

A notable social norm holds that touching someone on the head may be considered rude. It is also considered rude to place one's feet at a level above someone else's head, especially if that person is of higher social standing. This is because the Thai people consider the foot to be the dirtiest and fattest part of the body, and the head the most respected and highest part of the body. This also influences how Thais sit when on the ground -- their feet always pointing away from others, tucked to the side or behind them. Pointing at or touching something with the feet is also considered rude.

It is also considered extremely rude to step on a Thai coin, because the king's head appears on the coin. When sitting in a temple, one is expected to point one's feet away from images of the Buddha. Shrines inside Thai residences are arranged so as to ensure that the feet are not pointed towards the religious icons -- such as placing the shrine on the same wall as the head of a bed, if a house is too small to remove the shrine from the bedroom entirely.

It is also customary to remove one's footwear before entering a home or a temple, and not to step on the threshold.

There are a number of Thai customs relating to the special status of monks in Thai society. Because of their religious discipline, Thai monks are forbidden physical contact with women. Women are therefore expected to make way for passing monks to ensure that accidental contact does not occur. A variety of methods are employed to ensure that no incidental contact (or the appearance of such contact) between women and monks occurs. Women making offerings to monks place their donation at the feet of the monk, or on a cloth laid on the ground or a table. Powders or unguents intended to carry a blessing are applied to Thai women by monks using the end of a candle or stick. Lay people are expected to sit or stand with their heads at a lower level than that of a monk. Within a temple, monks may sit on a raised platform during ceremonies to make this easier to achieve.

Marriage

Thai marriage ceremonies between Buddhists are generally divided into two parts: a Buddhist component, which includes the recitation of prayers and the offering of food and other gifts to monks and images of the Buddha, and a non-Buddhist component rooted in folk traditions, which centers on the couple's family.

In former times, it was unknown for Buddhist monks to be present at any stage of the marriage ceremony itself. As monks were required to attend to the dead during funerals, their presence at a marriage (which was associated with fertility, and intended to produce children) was considered a bad omen. A couple would

seek a blessing from their local temple before or after being married, and might consult a monk for astrological advice in setting an auspicious date for the wedding. The non-Buddhist portions of the wedding would take place away from the temple, and would often take place on a separate day.

In modern times, these prohibitions have been significantly relaxed. It is not uncommon for a visit to a temple to be made on the same day as the non-Buddhist portions of a wedding, or even for the wedding to take place within the temple. While a division is still commonly observed between the "religious" and "secular" portions of a wedding service, it may be as simple as the monks present for the Buddhist ceremony departing to take lunch once their role is complete.

During the Buddhist component of the wedding service, the couple first bow before the image of the Buddha. They then recite certain basic Buddhist prayers or chants (typically including taking the Three Refuges and the Five Precepts), and light incense and candles before the image. The parents of the couple may then be called upon to 'connect' them, by placing upon the heads of the bride and groom twin loops of string or thread that link the couple together. The couple may then make offerings of food, flowers, and medicine to the monks present. Cash gifts (usually placed in an envelope) may also be presented to the temple at this time.

The monks may then unwind a small length of thread that is held between the hands of the assembled monks. They begin a series of recitations of Pali scriptures intended to bring merit and blessings to the new couple. The string terminates with the lead monk, who may connect it to a container of water that will be 'sanctified' for the ceremony. Merit is said to travel through the string and be conveyed to the water; a similar arrangement is used to transfer merit to the dead at a funeral, further evidence of the weakening of the taboo on mixing funerary imagery and trappings with marriage ceremonies. Blessed water may be mixed with wax drippings from a candle lit before the Buddha image and other unguents and herbs to create a 'paste' that is then applied to the foreheads of the bride and groom to create a small 'dot', similar to the marking sometimes made with red ochre on Hindu devotees. The bride's mark is created with the butt end of the candle rather than the monk's thumb, in keeping with the Vinaya prohibition against touching women.

The highest-ranking monk present may elect to say a few words to the couple, offering advice or encouragement. The couple may then make offerings of food to the monks, at which point the Buddhist portion of the ceremony is concluded.

The Thai dowry system is known as the 'Sin Sodt'. Traditionally, the groom will be expected to pay a sum of money to the family, to compensate them and to demonstrate that the groom is financially capable of taking care of their daughter. Sometimes, this sum is purely symbolic, and will be returned to the bride and groom after the wedding has taken place.

The religious component of marriage ceremonies between Thai Muslims are markedly different from that described above. The Imam of the local mosque, the groom, the father of the bride, men in the immediate family and important men in the community sit in a circle during the ceremony, conducted by the Imam. All the women, including the bride, sit in a separate room and do not have any direct participation in the ceremony. The secular component of the ceremony, however, is often nearly identical to the secular part of Thai Buddhist wedding ceremonies. The only notable difference here is the type of meat served to guests (goat and/or beef instead of pork). Thai Muslims frequently, though not always, also follow the conventions of the Thai dowry system.

Funerals

Traditionally funerals last for a week. Crying is discouraged during the funeral, so as not to worry the spirit of the deceased. Many activities surrounding the funeral are intended to make merit for the deceased. Copies of Buddhist scriptures may be printed and distributed in the name of the deceased, and gifts are usually given to a local temple. Monks are invited to chant prayers that are intended to provide merit for the deceased, as well as to provide protection against the possibility of the dead relative returning as a malicious spirit. A picture of the deceased from his/her best days will often be displayed next to the coffin. Often, a thread is connected to the corpse or coffin which is held by the chanting monks during their recitation; this thread is intended to transfer the merit of the monks' recitation to the deceased. The corpse is cremated, and the urn with the ash is usually kept in a chedi in the local temple. The Chinese minority however buries the deceased. West culture too.

Holidays

Important holidays in Thai culture include Thai New Year, or Songkran, which officially observed from April 13 to 15 each year. Falling at the end of the dry season and during the hot season in Thailand, the

celebrations notoriously feature boisterous water throwing. The water throwing stemmed from washing Buddha images and lightly sprinkling scented water on the hands of elderly people. Small amounts of scented talcum powder were also used in the annual cleansing rite. But in recent decades the use of water has intensified with the use of hoses, barrels, squirt guns, high-pressure tubes and copious amounts of powder.

Another holiday is Loy Krathong, which is held on the 12 full moon of the Thai lunar calendar. While not a government-observed holiday, it is nonetheless an auspicious day in Thai culture, in which Thai people "loi", meaning "to float" a "krathong", a small raft traditionally made from a section of banana tree, decorated with elaborately-folded banana leaves, flowers, candles, incense sticks etc. The act of floating away the candle raft is symbolic of letting go of all one's grudges, anger and defilements, so that one can start life afresh on a better foot.

Nicknames

Thais universally have one, or occasionally more, short nicknames that they use with friends and family. Often first given by friends or an older family member, these nicknames are typically one syllable (or worn down from two syllables to one). Though they may be simply shortened versions of a full name, they quite frequently have no relation to the Thai's full name and are often humorous and/or nonsense words. Traditionally call-names would be after things with low value, eg 'dirt', which was to convince bad spirits that the child was not worth their attention. Some common nicknames (the non-nonsense ones, anyway) would translate into English as fatty, pig, little one, frog, banana, green, or girl/boy. Though rare, sometimes Thai children are given nicknames after the order they were born into the family (i.e. one, two, three, etc.). Nicknames are useful because official Thai names are often long, particularly among Thais of Chinese descent, whose lengthy names stem from an attempt to translate Chinese names into Thai equivalents, or among Thai with similarly lengthy Sanskrit derived names.

Thai Values

Thai value systems regarding dress, social behavior, religion, authority figures, and sexuality are much more conservative than those of the average Westerner. Although the Thais are an extremely tolerant and forgiving race of people blessed with a gentle religion and an easygoing approach to life, visitors would do well to observe proper social customs to avoid embarrassment and misunderstanding.

Thai people are extremely polite and their behavior is tightly controlled by etiquette, much of it based on their Buddhist religion. It is a non confrontational society, in which public dispute or criticism is to be avoided at all costs. To show anger or impatience or to raise your voice is a sign of weakness and lack of mental control. It is also counter productive, since the Thai who will smile, embarrassed by your outburst of anger or frustration is far less likely to be helpful than if you had kept better control of your emotions.

Revealing clothing, worn by either men or women, is a little disgusting to most Thais. Short shorts, low cut dresses and T-shirts and skimpy bathing suits come into this category. In temples, long trousers or skirts must be worn, and monks should on no account be touched in any way by women. Shoes should always be removed when entering temples and private houses. For this reason, most Thais wear slip-on shoes to avoid constantly tying and untying laces.

The head is the most sacred part of the body, so should not be touched. The feet are the least sacred, so when sitting they should not point at anyone - most Thais sit on the floor with their feet tucked under their bodies behind them. To point, particularly with foot, is extremely insulting.

Avoid touching Thai people, it is too intimate a gesture and an invasion of personal space.

When eating, it is considered very rude to blow your nose or to lick your fingers. The right hand must be used to pick up food eaten with the fingers.

Clothing from the lower parts of the body should never be left anywhere in a high position. This applies particularly to socks and underwear, but also to shorts and skirts. This is the case even when washing and drying clothes. Thais have two clothes lines - a high one for most clothes and a low one for underwear and socks.

Thais do not traditionally shake hand, the wai is the usual greeting. The hands are placed together as in prayer, and raised upwards towards the face, while the head is lowered in a slight bow. The height to which the hands should be raised depends on the status of the person you are waiing. In the case of monks, dignitaries and old people the hands are raised to the bridge of the nose, with equals only as far as the

chest. Young people and inferiors are not wai, but nodded slightly to. You will be regarded as a little foolish should you wai to them.

When you consider that shaking hands, and kissing, are perhaps the easiest means of passing germs, the wai, is in fact a suitable greeting.

It is easy, entering a foreign culture for the first time, to make mistakes in etiquette. If you do so, just smile, wai the person you may have offended, and you are forgiven.

Thais are famous for their smiles. The Thai smile can say many things. Thais smile when they are happy, amused, embarrassed, uncertain, wrong, annoyed or furious. As westerners, we are not generally able to interpret the type of smile we are receiving but be aware that it may not mean what you think it means.

Modest Dress

A clean and conservative appearance is absolutely necessary when dealing with border officials, customs clerks, local police, and bureaucrats. A great deal of ill feeling has been generated by travelers who dress immodestly. When in doubt, look at the locals and dress as they do.

Shorts are considered improper and low-class attire in Thailand, only acceptable for schoolchildren, street beggars, and common laborers ...not wealthy tourists! Except at beach resorts, you should never wear skimpy shorts, halter tops, low-cut blouses, or anything else that will offend the locals. Long slacks and a collared shirt are recommended for men in urban environments. Women should keep well covered. Swimwear is only acceptable on the beach.

Emotions

Face is very important in Thailand. Candor and emotional honesty - qualities highly prized in some Western societies - are considered embarrassing and counterproductive in the East. Never lose your temper or raise your voice no matter how frustrating or desperate the situation. Only patience, humor, and jai yen (cool heart) bring results in Thailand.

The use of the word 'heart' (jai) is very common in the Thai language, here are but a few examples; jai lorn - angry, nam jai - feelings, nork jai - unfaithful (adulterous) jai dee - good hearted, jai dum - black hearted,

A Graceful Welcome

Thailand's traditional form of greeting is the wai, a lovely prayer-like gesture accompanied with a little head nodding. Social status is indicated by the height of your wai and depth of your bow: inferiors initiate the wai, while superiors return the wai with just a smile, under no circumstances should you wai waitresses, children, or clerks-this only makes you look ridiculous! Save your respect for royalty, monks, and immigration officials.

The 'wai' can be used to great effect on foreigners. Imagine if you will that you have just arrived from a delayed 12 hour flight, you are hot, tired, and somewhat short tempered. You arrive at your hotel to be greeted by the beautiful 'wai', this graceful unexpected gesture can easily dispel your short temper, making you content (sabai jai)

Homosexuality

In Thailand, Kathoey, or "ladyboys," have been a feature of Thai society for many centuries, and Thai kings had male as well as female lovers. While Kathoey may encompass simple effeminacy or transvestism, it most commonly is treated in Thai culture as a third gender. They are generally accepted by society, and Thailand has never had legal prohibitions against homosexuality or homosexual behavior.

Personal Space/Interactions

Thai anatomy has its own special considerations. Thais believe that the head - the most sacred part of the body - is inhabited by the kwan, the spiritual force of life. Never pat a Thai on the head even in the friendliest of circumstances. Standing over someone older, wiser, or more enlightened than yourself - is also considered rude behavior since it implies social superiority. As a sign of courtesy, lower your head as you pass a group of people. When in doubt, watch the Thais.

Conversely, the foot is considered the lowest and dirtiest part of the body. The worst possible insult to a Thai is to point your unholy foot at his sacred head. Keep your feet under control; fold them underneath when sitting down, don't point them toward another person, and never place your feet on a coffee table.

The left hand is also unclean and should not be used to eat, receive gifts, or shake hands. Aggressive stances such as crossed arms or waving your arms are also consider boorish.

Food

Thai cuisine refers to typical foods, beverages, and cooking styles common to the country of Thailand in Southeast Asia. Thai Cuisine is well-known for being hot and spicy and for its balance of five fundamental flavors in each dish or the overall meal - hot (spicy), sour, sweet, salty, and bitter (optional).

Although popularly considered as a single cuisine, Thai food would be more accurately described as four regional cuisines corresponding to the four main regions of the country: Northern, Northeastern (or Isan), Central, and Southern, each cuisine sharing similar foods or derived from those of neighboring countries. Southern curries, for example, tend to contain coconut milk and fresh turmeric, while northeastern dishes often include lime juice. The cuisine of Northeastern (or Isan) Thailand is heavily influenced by Laos. Many popular dishes eaten in Thailand were originally Chinese dishes which were introduced to Thailand mainly by Teochew people who make up the majority of the Thai Chinese. Such dishes include Jok, Kway teow Rad Na, Khao Kha Moo (also known as Moo Pa-loh) and Khao Mun Gai.

Thai food is known for its enthusiastic use of fresh (rather than dried) herbs and spices as well as fish sauce. Thai food is popular in many Western countries especially in Australia, New Zealand, some countries in Europe such as the United Kingdom, as well as the United States, and Canada.

Serving

Instead of a multiple main course with side dishes found in Western cuisine, a Thai full meal typically consists of either a single dish or rice khao with many complementary dishes served concurrently and shared by all.

Nowadays, Thai food is eaten with a fork and spoon but traditionally, it was eaten with the right hand. Only noodle dishes (and then mainly only the noodle soups) are eaten with chopsticks and a spoon.

Rice is a staple component of Thai cuisine, as it is of most Asian cuisines. The highly prized, sweet-smelling jasmine rice is indigenous to Thailand. This naturally aromatic long-grained rice grows in abundance in the verdant patchwork of paddy fields that blanket Thailand's central plains. Steamed rice is accompanied by highly aromatic curries, stir-frys and other dishes, incorporating sometimes large quantities of chillies, lime juice and lemon grass. Curries, stir-frys and others may be poured onto the rice creating a single dish called khao rad gang, a popular meal when time is limited. Sticky rice is a unique variety of rice that contains an unusual balance of the starches present in all rice, causing it to cook up to a sticky texture. It is the daily bread of Laos and substitutes ordinary rice in rural Northern and Northeastern Thai cuisine, where Lao cultural influence is strong.

Noodles, known in much of Southeast Asia by the Chinese name kway teow, are popular as well but usually come as a single dish, like the stir-fried Pad Thai or noodle soups. Many Chinese cuisine are adapted to suit Thai taste, such as kway teow rua, sour and spicy rice noodle soup.

There is a uniquely Thai dish called nam prik hich refers to a chilli sauce or paste. Each region has its own special versions. It is prepared by crushing together chillies with various ingredients such as garlic and shrimp paste using a mortar and pestle. It is then often served with vegetables such as cucumbers, cabbage and yard-long beans, either raw or blanched. The vegetables are dipped into the sauce and eaten with rice. Nam prik may also be simply eaten alone with rice or, in a bit of Thai and Western fusion, spread on toast.

Thai food is generally eaten with a fork and a spoon. Chopsticks are used rarely, primarily for the consumption of noodle soups. The fork, held in the left hand, is used to push food into the spoon. However, it is common practice for Thais and hill tribe peoples in the North and Northeast to eat sticky rice with their right hands by making it into balls that are dipped into side dishes and eaten. Thai-Muslims also frequently eat meals with only their right hands.

Often Thai food is served with a variety of spicy condiments to embolden dishes. This can range from dried chili pieces, or sliced chili peppers in rice vinegar, to a spicy chili sauce such as the nam prik mentioned above.

Ingredients

The ingredient found in almost all Thai dishes and every region of the country is nam pla (Thai ปลาหมึก), a very aromatic and strong tasting fish sauce. Shrimp paste, a combination of ground shrimp and salt, is also extensively used.

Thai dishes in the Central and Southern regions use a wide variety of leaves rarely found in the West, such as kaffir lime leaves. The characteristic flavour of kaffir lime leaves appear in nearly every Thai soup (e.g., the hot and sour Tom yam) or curry from those areas. It is frequently combined with garlic, galangal, lemon grass, turmeric and/or fingerroot (krachai), blended together with liberal amounts of various chillies to make curry paste. Fresh Thai basil is also used to add fragrance in certain dishes such as Green curry. Other typical ingredients include the small green Thai eggplants, tamarind, palm and coconut sugars, lime juice, and coconut milk. A variety of chillies and spicy elements are found in most Thai dishes.

Other ingredients also include pahk chee (cilantro or coriander), rahk pahk chee (cilantro/coriander roots), curry pastes, pong kah-ree (curry powder), si-yu dahm (dark soy sauce), gung haeng (dried shrimp), pong pa-loh (five-spice powder), tua fahk yao (long beans or yard-long beans), nahmahh hoi (oyster sauce), prik Thai (Thai pepper), rice and tapioca flour, and nahm prik pao (roasted chilli paste).

Although broccoli is often used in Asian restaurants in the west in pad thai and rad na, it was never actually used in any traditional Thai food in Thailand and is still rarely seen in Thailand. Usually, kana (gailan) is used.

Transportation

Elephants and bamboo rafts, trains and planes, long-tail boats and ferries, tuk-tuks and taxis. The variety of travel options within Thailand is one of the country's pleasures — when it's not a source of frustration. Knowing all your options, then picking the best, will get you places faster and more enjoyably. Trying as many as you can, within the limits of common sense, will enrich your visit.

Most cab and boat drivers do not speak English. Nor can they read English. Nor can they read a map. So it's important to be sure the driver knows where you're going, before you get started. Hotels and other business establishments print their name and address (as well as directions, if necessary) in Thai script, on their business cards and advertising, expressly for this purpose. Hold on to that card! Without it you'll need the help of a guide, translator, or dispatcher.

Skytrain. Bangkok

The first portions of Bangkok's long-needed elevated rail opened in December, 1999. If it's going your way, it will generally be the cleanest and fastest way around this congested city. No other Thai cities have rail systems for travel within the city.

Metered cabs

Within major cities; also feasible for short excursions into the countryside. Comfortable, often air-conditioned, which counts for a lot if you're sitting in traffic. Drivers are required by law to charge on the meter. Some, especially late at night, will try to leave the meter off. Either insist that they turn it on, or negotiate a fare before you get in.

Tuk-tuks

Within a city. These 3-wheeled motorized cabs should be a part of your Thai experience, but are better for short distances. Anyone taller than 5'6" won't see much, and the open-air ride loses its charm after you sit too long in a smog-belt of traffic. Tuk-tuks are cheaper than a cab, and often faster, as tuk-tuk drivers will weave between traffic, or down the wrong side of the road, to speed up the journey. Officially built for two; you can squeeze in a third. Or a fourth. We once counted eight young soldiers in the same tuk-tuk, all beaming happily. Tuk-tuks are not metered; negotiate a fare in advance.

Samlor

Short distances, e.g., within a neighborhood. These are three-wheeled bicycle rickshaws, kind of like a tuk-tuk without a motor; the driver pedals you around. Slow, but you know you're in Asia. Samlors, along with

elephants, have been banned from Bangkok streets but are still pedalled in some other cities. Negotiate a fare in advance.

Train

City to city. The state-run rail system is inexpensive, and comfortable, but often slow. On some routes you have a selection of various speeds, from Special Express down to Ordinary. The slower trains can work to your advantage if you take a sleeper on an overnight train. You'll have time for a dinner (served on the train), a full night's sleep, and breakfast, when you journey, for example, from Bangkok to Surin Thani. Three classes of service are available. Most westerners will want to avoid the wooden benches of third class. Second class is comfortable with reclining seats and often air-conditioning, yet still economical. The pricier first-class ticket gets you a private air-conditioned cabin.

Local Bus

Within a city. Buses range from western-style passenger buses to songthaews, which are just trucks with a couple of benches in back. You'll certainly be rubbing elbows with the local population when you use buses, and they're so cheap as to seem practically free, for a westerner. Figuring out the routes and schedules is difficult if you don't speak Thai or have a guide. The songthaews often run when the driver feels they're full enough, rather than on a set schedule.

Inter-city coach

City to city. You can find direct bus or coach service from Bangkok to most other cities. It's often faster than train, priced about the same as a second-class train ticket, but will tend to feel more crowded than a train car.

Public ferries and boats

Within a city, or short distances to other cities and islands. In Bangkok, ferries on the Chao Phraya river are far more pleasant than cabs, as long as the river's going in your direction. Very inexpensive; pay as you board, and bring a map so you can watch for your stop. Any other place there's water — a river or a bay, canal or lagoon — boats may offer the fastest and most relaxing way to get around.

Chartered boats

Within Bangkok. You can charter a long-tail boat (named for the long rod mounted on the back, which holds the engine and propeller) to explore the khlongs, or canals, on the outskirts of Bangkok. For one or two people, try the aptly-named rocket boat and hold tight. But be wary about hopping into any boat that offers a ride: Shady operators occasionally take tourists to isolated islands, and demand a hefty "fuel charge" to get back. Smaller and private boats are best used when you're with a Thai-speaking guide.

Motorbike cabs

Certain cities. Some towns, such as Patong Beach, have licensed motorcyclists to get you around. Negotiate a fare, and hop on back. The locals hold onto the motorbike frame. As a westerner, you can pretend not to know better, and put an arm around your beefy driver.

Rental motorbike

Anywhere. We suggest you try various forms of transportation within the limits of common sense, and renting a motorbike arguably goes beyond those limits. Apart from breathing Bangkok air, this is perhaps the most dangerous thing you can do in Thailand. In most areas you'll be dodging potholes, kids, goats, and other crazy motorbike drivers, while trying to remember to drive on the left. But we promised to lay out all the options here. And a motorbike rental is cheap. A helmet is required in many cities, and insurance is seldom included.

Rental bicycle

Certain cities and countryside. There are spots where a rented bicycle is the ideal way to get around. (The ancient capital of Ayutthaya is one of them. Bangkok is not.) If you're in such a location, you'll see other farangs pedaling about. Ask where you can get one. Good-quality rental bikes are a specialty item, and in contrast to many of the bargains available in Thailand, may cost about what they would in the U.S.

Rental car

Anywhere. It's safer than renting a motorbike. Still, with other forms of transportation (including private charters) so inexpensive, we recommend looking at alternatives before renting a car. You'll need an international driving license.

Education System

Education in Thailand is provided mainly by the Thai government through the Ministry of Education from pre-school to senior high school. A free basic education of twelve years is guaranteed by the constitution, and a minimum of nine years' school attendance is mandatory.

Formal education consists of at least twelve years of basic education, and higher education. Basic education is divided into six years of primary education and six years of secondary education, the latter being further divided into three years of lower- and upper-secondary levels. Kindergarten levels of pre-primary education, also part of the basic education level, spans 2-3 years depending on the locale, and is variably provided. Non-formal education is also supported by the state. Independent schools contribute significantly to the general education infrastructure.

Administration and control of public and private universities is carried out by the Ministry of University Affairs.

Recent History

From early 2001, under Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, the Ministry of Education began developing new National Curricula in an endeavour to model the system of education on child, or student-centred learning methods.

The years from 2001 to 2006 showed some of the greatest improvements in education, such as computers in the schools and an increase in the number of qualified native speaker teachers for foreign languages. Experiments had also been tried with restructuring the administrative regions for education or partly decentralising the responsibility of education to the provinces. By 2008, however, little real change had been felt, and many attempts to establish a clear form of university entrance qualification had also failed due to combinations of political interference, attempts to confer independence (or to remove it) on the universities, huge administrative errors, and inappropriate or mismatched syllabuses in the schools.

On return to democracy in early 2008, after the December election, the newly formed coalition led by the People's Power Party (Thailand) - a party formed by the remnants of deposed Thaksin Shinawatra's Thai Rak Thai party) - announced new allocations of funds for education, an increase in the number of teachers, and more changes to the national curriculum and university entrance system.

Primary and secondary levels

At primary levels, students follow 8 core subjects each semester: Thai language, Mathematics, Science, Social Science, Health and Physical Education, Arts and Music, Technology, and Foreign languages. At age 13 (Matthayom 2), students are allowed to choose one or two elective courses. The Science program (Wit-Kanit) and the Mathematics program (Sil-Kamnuan) are among the most popular. Foreign language programs (Sil-Phasa) and the Social Science program (sometimes called the General Program) are also offered.

Vocational Education

Currently 412 colleges are governed by the Vocational Education Commission (VEC), of the Ministry of Education with more than a million students following the programs. In 2004, additionally, approximately 380,000 students were studying in 401 private vocational schools and colleges.[7]

Technical and vocational education (TVE) begins at the senior high school grade where students are divided into either general or vocational education. At present, around 60 per cent of students follow the general education programmes. However, the government is endeavouring to achieve an equal balance between general and vocational education.

Three levels of TVE are offered: the Certificate in Vocational Education (Bor Wor Saw) which is taken during the upper secondary period; the Technical Diploma (Bor Wor Chor), taken after school-leaving age, and the Higher Diploma on which admission to university for a Bachelor degree programme may be granted. Vocational education is also provided by private institutions.

Tertiary and higher education

The established public and private universities and colleges of higher education are under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of University Affairs in both the government and private sectors offer excellent programmes especially in the fields of Medicine, the Arts, Humanities, and Information Technology, although many students prefer to pursue studies of law and business in Western faculties abroad or in those which have

created local facilities in Thailand. During the first years of the 21st century, the number of universities increased dramatically on a controversial move by the Thaksin government to rename many public institutes as universities.

In the Times Higher Education Supplement World University Rankings 2004, Chulalongkorn University was ranked 46th in the world for social sciences and 60th for biomedicine. In September 2006, three universities in Thailand were ranked "Excellent" in both academic and research areas by Commission on Higher Education. Those universities are Chiang Mai University, Chulalongkorn University, and Mahidol University.[11] Over half of the provinces have a government Rajabhat University, formerly Rajabhat Institute, traditionally a Teacher Training College.

For a full list of universities and higher education institutions in Thailand see: List of universities in Thailand.

Admission

On graduating from high school, students need to pass the CUAS (Central University Admission System) which contains 50% of O-NET and A-NET results and the other half of the fourth level GPA (Grade Point Average). Many changes and experiments in the university admissions system have taken place since 2001, but by late 2007 a nationwide system had yet to be accepted by the students, the universities, and the government. On return to democracy in early 2008, after the December election, the newly formed coalition led by the People's Power Party (a party formed by the remnants of deposed Thaksin Shinwatra's Thai Rak Tai party) announced more changes to the national curriculum and university entrance system. At present, state-run universities screen 70% of their students directly, with the remaining 30% coming from the central admission system. The new system gives 20% weight to cumulative Grade Point Average, which varies upon a school's standard. Some students have voiced distrust of the new system and fear it will encounter score counting problems as happened with the A-Net in its first year. The new Aptitude Test, to be held for the first time in March 2009 and which will be supervised by the National Institute of Educational Testing Service, will replace the Advanced National Education Test (A-net). Students can sit for the Aptitude Test a maximum of three times, with their best scores counted. After the first tests in March 2009, the next two are scheduled for July and October. Direct admissions are normally held around October. The new test comprises the compulsory General Aptitude Test (Gat), which covers reading, writing, analytical thinking, problem solving and English communication. The voluntary Professional Aptitude Test (Pat) has a choice of seven subjects.

Programmes

Most Bachelor degree courses are programmes of four years full-time attendance. Exceptions are pharmacy and graphic arts that require five years, and the Doctor of Dental Surgery, Medicine, and Veterinary Medicine that comprise six years of study. Master degree study last for either one or two years and the degree is conferred on course credits with either a thesis or a final exam. On completion of a Master degree, students may apply for an admission exam to a two to five year doctoral programme. The Doctorate is conferred on coursework, research and the successful submission of a dissertation.

Thai teachers

Following the announcement of the University of Cambridge to launch a new course[16] and qualification for non-native speaker teachers, a survey was carried out in February 2006[17], with the collaboration of the University of Cambridge as part of a field trial, by one of the country's largest groups of independent schools of its 400 or so teachers of English.

The project reported that in over 60 percent of the teachers, the knowledge of the language and teaching methodology was below that of the syllabus level which they were teaching. Some teachers for age group 11 - or lower - in the language were actually attempting to teach age groups 15, 16, and even 17. Of the remaining top 40 per cent, only 3 percent had a reasonable level of fluency and only 20 per cent were teaching grades for which they were correctly qualified and competent.

Within the group of over 40 schools representing nearly 80,000 students in primary and secondary education, random parallel test groups of primary school pupils often scored higher in some tests than many of the teachers in other schools of the same group. The schools resisted the initiative of the central governing body to provide intensive upgrading programmes for the teachers. In spite of the evidence, the schools doubted the results, and to save face, argued that their teachers had qualified through their various universities and colleges and either had nothing more to learn or could not afford the time.

In the government schools the standards are similar and many primary teachers freely admit that they are forced to teach English although they have little or no knowledge of the language whatsoever. A debate

began in academic circles as to whether teaching English badly during the most influential years is in fact better than not teaching it at primary level. Whatever results that any formal research may provide, there clearly exists room for much improvement.

The situation is further exacerbated by a curriculum, which in its endeavour to improve standards and facilitate learning is subject to frequent change, and thus misinterpreted into syllabuses by the teachers themselves at levels often far too advanced for the cognitive development of the students.

Languages

Thai is the national and official language of Thailand and the mother tongue of the Thai people, Thailand's dominant ethnic group. Thai is a member of the Tai group of the Kradai language family. The Kradai languages are thought to have originated in what is now southern China, and some linguists have proposed links to the Austroasiatic, Austronesian, or Sino-Tibetan language families. It is a tonal and analytic language. The combination of tonality, a complex orthography, relational markers and a distinctive phonology can make Thai difficult to learn for those who do not already speak a related language. Thai is mutually intelligible with Lao.

Languages and dialects

Standard Thai, also known as Central Thai or Siamese, is the official language of Thailand, spoken by about 65 million people (1990) including speakers of Bangkok Thai (although the latter is sometimes considered as a separate dialect). Khorat Thai is spoken by about 400,000 (1984) in Nakhon Ratchasima; it occupies a linguistic position somewhere between Central Thai and the Isan on a dialect continuum, and may be considered a variant or dialect of either. A majority of the people in the Isan region of Thailand speaks a dialect of the Lao language, which has influenced the Central Thai dialect.

In addition to Standard Thai, Thailand is home to other related Tai languages, including:

- Isan (Northeastern Thai), the language of the Isan region of Thailand, considered by some[who?][weasel words] to be a dialect of the Lao language, which it very closely resembles (although it is written in the Thai alphabet). It is spoken by about 15 million people (1983).
- Nyaw language, spoken mostly in Nakhon Phanom Province, Sakon Nakhon Province, Udon Thani Province of Northeast Thailand.
- Galung language, spoken in Nakhon Phanom Province of Northeast Thailand.
- Lü (Tai Lue, Dai), spoken by about 78,000 (1993) in northern Thailand.
- Northern Thai (Lanna, Kam Meuang, or Thai Yuan), spoken by about 6 million (1983) in the formerly independent kingdom of Lanna (Chiang Mai).
- Phuan, spoken by an unknown number of people in central Thailand, Isan and Northern Laos.
- Phu Thai, spoken by about 156,000 around Nakhon Phanom Province (1993).
- Shan (Thai Luang, Tai Long, Thai Yai), spoken by about 56,000 in north-west Thailand along the border with the Shan States of Burma (1993).
- Song, spoken by about 20,000 to 30,000 in central and northern Thailand (1982).
- Southern Thai (Pak Dtai), spoken about 5 million (1990).
- Thai Dam, spoken by about 20,000 (1991) in Isan and Saraburi Province.

Statistics are from Ethnologue 2003-10-4.

Many of these languages are spoken by larger numbers outside of Thailand.[citation needed] Most speakers of dialects and minority languages speak Central Thai as well, since it is the language used in schools and universities all across the kingdom.

Numerous languages not related to Thai are spoken within Thailand by ethnic minority hill tribespeople. These languages include Hmong-Mien (Yao), Karen, Lisu, and others.

Standard Thai is composed of several distinct registers, forms for different social contexts:

Street Thai: informal, without polite terms of address, as used between close relatives and friends.

Elegant Thai: official and written version, includes respectful terms of address; used in simplified form in newspapers.

Rhetorical Thai: used for public speaking.

Religious Thai: (heavily influenced by Sanskrit and Pāli) used when discussing Buddhism or addressing monks.

Royal Thai: (influenced by Khmer) used when addressing members of the royal family or describing their activities.

Most of the Thais can speak and understand all of these contexts. Street and Elegant are the basis of all conversations;[citation needed] rhetorical, religious and royal Thai are taught in schools as the national curriculum.

Script

The Thai alphabet is derived from the Khmer alphabet, which is modeled after the Brahmic script from the Indic family. The language and its alphabet[citation needed] are closely related to the Lao language and alphabet. Most literate Lao are able to read and understand Thai, as more than half of the Thai vocabulary, grammar, intonation, vowels and so forth are common with the Lao language. Much like the Burmese adopted the Mon script (which also has Indic origins), the Thais adopted and modified the Khmer script to create their own writing system. While the oldest known inscription in the Khmer language dates from 611 CE, inscriptions in Thai writing began to appear around 1292 CE. Notable features include: It is an abugida script, in which the implicit vowel is a short /a/ in a syllable without final consonant and a short /o/ in a syllable with final consonant.

Tone markers are placed above the consonant just before the vowel sound of the syllable.

Vowels sounding after a consonant are nonsequential: they can be located before, after, above or below the consonant, or in a combination of these positions.

Employment and the Economy

The economy of Thailand is an emerging economy, which is heavily export-dependent; exports account for more than two thirds of gross domestic product (GDP).

Thailand has a GDP worth \$8.5 trillion Baht (on a purchasing power parity (PPP) basis), or US\$627 billion (PPP). This classifies Thailand as the 2nd largest economy in Southeast Asia after Indonesia. Despite this, Thailand ranks midway in the wealth spread in Southeast Asia as it is the 4th richest nation according to GDP per capita, after Singapore, Brunei and Malaysia.

It functions as an anchor economy for the neighboring developing economies of Laos, Burma, and Cambodia. Thailand's recovery from the 1997–1998 Asian financial crisis depended mainly on exports, among various other factors. Thailand ranks high among the world's automotive export industries along with manufacturing of electronic goods.

Most of Thailand's labour force is working in agriculture. However, the relative contribution of agriculture to GDP has declined while exports of goods and services have increased.

Tourism revenues are on the rise. With the instability surrounding the recent coup and the military rule, however, the GDP growth of Thailand has settled at around 4-5% from previous highs of 5-7% under the previous civilian administration, as investor and consumer confidence has been degraded somewhat due to political uncertainty.

The incumbent elected civilian administration under Samak Sundaravej in power since January 29, 2008 states that the economy will have grown by 5.5% to 6% by the end of 2008. Due to rising oil and food prices, the annual inflation rate for 2008 shot up to 9.2% in July; a 10-year high, but it will unlikely reach double digit rates later this year as oil and food prices are stabilizing.

Agriculture, forestry, and fishing

In 2007 agriculture, forestry, and fishing contributed only 11.4% percent to GDP. Thailand is the world's leading exporter of rice and a major exporter of shrimp. Other crops include coconuts, corn, rubber, soybeans, sugarcane and tapioca.

In 1985 Thailand officially designated 25 percent of the nation's land area for protected forests and 15 percent for timber production. Protected forests have been set aside for conservation and recreation, while production forests are available for the forestry industry. Between 1992 and 2001, exports of logs and sawn timber increased from 50,000 cubic meters to 2 million cubic meters per year.

The regional avian flu outbreak led to a contraction of Thailand's agricultural sector during 2004, and the tsunami disaster of December 26, 2004, devastated the west coast fisheries industry. In 2005 and 2006 agricultural GDP was stated to have contracted by 10 percent.

Mining and minerals

Thailand's major minerals include fluorite, gypsum, lead, lignite, natural gas, rubber, tantalum, tin and tungsten. The tin mining industry has declined sharply since 1985, and so Thailand has become a net importer of tin. As of 2008, the main mineral export was gypsum.

Thailand is the world's second largest exporter of gypsum after Canada, even though government policy limits gypsum exports to prevent price cuts. In 2003 Thailand produced more than 40 types of minerals with an annual value of about US\$740 million. However, more than 80 percent of these minerals were consumed domestically.

In September 2003, in order to encourage foreign investment in the mining industry, the government relaxed severe restrictions on mining by foreign companies and reduced mineral royalties payable to the state.

Industry and manufacturing

In 2007 industry contributed 43.9% of gross domestic product (GDP) but employed only 14% of the workforce. This proportion is the opposite of the one applying to agriculture. Industry expanded at an average annual rate of 3.4 percent during the 1995–2005 period. The most important subsector of industry is manufacturing, which accounted for 34.5 percent of GDP in 2004.

Thailand is becoming a center of automobile manufacturing for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) market. By 2004 automobile production had reached 930,000 units, more than twice as much as in 2001. Two automakers active in Thailand are Toyota and Ford. The expansion of the automotive industry has led to a boom in domestic steel production.

Thailand's electronics industry faces competition from Malaysia and Singapore, while its textile industry faces competition from China and Vietnam.

Energy

In 2004 Thailand's total energy consumption was estimated at 3.4 quadrillion British thermal units, representing about 0.7 percent of total world energy consumption. Thailand is a net importer of oil and natural gas, but the government is promoting the use of ethanol to reduce imports of petroleum and the gasoline additive methyl tertiary butyl ether.

In 2005 daily oil consumption of 838,000 barrels per day (133,200 m³/d) exceeded domestic production of 306,000 barrels per day (48,700 m³/d). Thailand's four oil refineries have a combined capacity of 703,100 barrels per day (111,780 m³/d). Thailand's government is considering establishing a regional oil processing and transportation hub, serving the needs of south-central China. In 2004 natural gas consumption of 1,055 billion cubic feet (2.99×10¹⁰ m³) exceeded domestic production of 790 billion cubic feet (2.2×10¹⁰ m³).

Also in 2004, estimated coal consumption of 30.4 million short tons exceeded coal production of 22.1 million short tons. As of January 2007, proven oil reserves totaled 290 million barrels (46,000,000 m³), and proven natural gas reserves were 14.8 trillion cubic feet (420 km³). In 2003 recoverable coal reserves totaled 1,492.5 million short tons.

In 2005 Thailand consumed about 117.7 billion kilowatt-hours of electricity. Electricity consumption rose by 4.7 percent in 2006 to 133 billion kilowatt-hours. According to the state electricity utility, the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand, power consumption by residential consumers has been increasing because of more favorable rates given to residential customers over the industry and business sectors. Thailand's state-controlled electric utility and petroleum monopolies are undergoing restructuring.

Services

In 2007 the services sector, which ranges from tourism to banking and finance, contributed 44.7% of gross domestic product and employed 37 percent of the workforce.[2]

Tourism

Tourism makes a larger contribution to Thailand's economy (typically about 6 percent of gross domestic product) than that of any other Asian nation. Most tourists come to Thailand for various reasons -- mostly for

the beaches and relaxation, although with the recent insurgency in the South, Bangkok has seen a large increase in tourism over the past 4 years.

Also, a sharp increase in American tourists has contributed largely to Thailand's economy even though the Baht is gaining strength to the dollar. In 2004 some 11 million tourists visited Thailand. However, terrorism in southern Thailand and in Indonesia and natural disasters, most notably the December 2004 tsunami, have taken their toll on tourism. One of the negative side effects of Thailand's tourism industry is a burgeoning sex tourism industry and a related threat from human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immune deficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS).

Banking and finances

Dangerous levels of nonperforming assets at Thai banks helped trigger the attack on the Thai baht by currency speculators that led to the Asian financial crisis in 1997–1998. By 2003 nonperforming assets had been cut in half to about 30 percent.

Despite a return to profitability, however, Thailand's banks continue to struggle with the legacy of the financial crisis in the form of unrealized losses and inadequate capital. Therefore, the government is considering various reforms, including establishing an integrated financial regulatory agency that would free up the Bank of Thailand to focus on monetary policy.

In addition, the Thai government is attempting to strengthen the financial sector through the consolidation of commercial, state-owned, and foreign-owned institutions. Specifically, the government's Financial Sector Reform Master Plan, which was first introduced in early 2004, provides tax breaks to financial institutions that engage in mergers and acquisitions.

The reform program has been deemed successful by outside experts. In 2007, there were three state-owned commercial banks and five state-owned specialized banks, 15 Thai commercial banks, and 17 foreign banks in Thailand.

The Bank of Thailand sought to stem the flow of foreign funds into the country in December 2006. This led within one day to the largest drop in stock prices on the Stock Exchange of Thailand since the 1997 Asian financial crisis. The massive selling by foreign investors amounted more than US\$708 million.

Labor

Thailand's labor force was estimated at 36.9 million in 2007. About 49% were employed in agriculture, 37% in services, and 14% in industry. In 2005 women constituted 48 percent of the labor force and held an increasing share of professional jobs. Less than 4% of the workforce is unionized, but 11% of industrial workers and 50% of state enterprise employees are unionized.

Although laws applying to private-sector workers' rights to form and join trade unions were unaffected by the September 19, 2006, military coup and its aftermath, workers who participate in union activities continue to have inadequate legal protection. According to the U.S. Department of State, union workers are inadequately protected. Thailand's unemployment rate lies at 1.5% percent of the labor force.

Religion

According to the last census (2000) 94.7% of Thais are Buddhists of the Theravada tradition. Muslims are the second largest religious group in Thailand at 4.6%. Thailand's southernmost provinces - Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat and part of Songkhla Chumphon have dominant Muslim populations, consisting of both ethnic Thai and Malay. Most often Muslims live in separate communities from non-Muslims. The southern tip of Thailand is mostly ethnic Malays. Christians, mainly Catholics, represent 0.75% of the population. A tiny but influential community of Sikhs in Thailand and some Hindus also live in the country's cities, and are heavily engaged in retail commerce. There is also a small Jewish community in Thailand, dating back to the 17th century. Since 2001, Muslim activists, generally described by the Thai government as terrorists or separatists, have rallied against the central government because of alleged corruption and ethnic bias on the part of officials.

Buddhism

Buddhism in Thailand is largely of the Theravada school. Nearly 95% of Thailand's population is Buddhist of the Theravada school, though Buddhism in this country has become integrated with folk beliefs such as ancestor worship as well as Chinese religions from the large Thai-Chinese population. Buddhist temples in

Thailand are characterized by tall golden stupas, and the Buddhist architecture of Thailand is similar to that in other Southeast Asian countries, particularly Cambodia and Laos, with which Thailand shares cultural and historical heritage.

Islam

Islam is most popular in southern Thailand, near the border with Malaysia, where the vast majority of the country's Muslims, predominantly Malay in origin, are found. The remaining Muslims are Pakistani immigrants in the urban centers, ethnic Thai in the rural areas of the Center and South (varying from entire Muslim communities to mixed settlements), and a few Chinese Muslims in the far north. Also, Cambodian Muslims can be found between the mutual border and Bangkok as well as the deep south. Education and maintenance of their own cultural traditions are vital interests of these groups.

Hinduism

A number of Hindus remain in Thailand. They are mostly located in the cities. In the past, the nation came under the influence of the Khmer Empire, which had strong Hindu roots. The epic, Ramakien, is based on the Ramayana. The city, Ayutthaya, is named after Ayodhya, the birthplace of Rama. Numerous rituals derived from Brahminism are preserved in rituals, such as use of holy strings and pouring of lustral water from conch shells. Furthermore, Hindu deities are worshipped by many Thais alongside Buddhism, such as the famous Erawan shrine, and statues of Ganesh, Indra, and Shiva, as well as numerous symbols relating to Hindu deities are found, e.g., Garuda, a symbol of the monarchy.

Judaism

Jewish community life in Thailand dates back to the 17th century, first with the arrival of a few Baghdadi Jewish families, although the current community is comprised mainly of Ashkenazi descendants of refugees from Russia, and later the Soviet Union. Further augmenting the community were Persian Jews fleeing persecution in Iran in the 1970s and 1980s. Most of the Jewish community in Thailand, consisting of probably less than 1,000 individuals, resides in Bangkok [1] (especially in the Khaosan Road area), although smaller Jewish communities with synagogues are found in Phuket, Chiang Mai (home of Rabbi Levi Tzeitlin) and Koh Samui.

Sikhism

The first Sikh migrated to Thailand in 1890. His name was Ladha Singh. Sikhs began migrating to the Kingdom of Thailand in the early 1900s. By the year 1911, many Sikh families had settled in Thailand. Bangkok was indeed the centre of migrant Sikhs. During that time there was no Gurdwara, so religious prayers were held in the homes of the Sikhs in rotation on every Sunday and all the Gurdwarab days. The population of the Sikh community was on the rise, therefore in the year 1912, the Sikhs decided to establish a Gurdwara. A tiny but influential community of Sikhs also live in the country's cities, and are heavily engaged in retail commerce.

Christianity

Christianity was first introduced to Thailand by European missionaries in 16-17th centuries. The large part of the Christian converts came from ethnic minorities. By the information of United Bible Society, Thailand had 1.7% of Christians among the total population by 1998. The US State Department 2006 Report said, that there were 438,600 Christians (0.7%) in the country.

Freedom of Religion

The law provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice; however, it does not register new religious groups that have not been accepted into one of the existing religious governing bodies on doctrinal or other grounds. In practice, unregistered religious organizations operated freely, and the Government's practice of not recognizing any new religious groups did not restrict the activities of unregistered religious groups. The Government officially limits the number of foreign missionaries that may work in the country, although unregistered missionaries were present in large numbers and were allowed to live and work freely. There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious belief or practice; however, in the far southern border provinces, continued separatist violence resulted in increasingly tense relations between the Buddhist and Muslim communities.

Music

The music of Thailand reflects its geographic position at the intersection of China, India, Indonesia and Cambodia, and reflects trade routes that have historically included Persia, Africa, Greece and Rome. Thai musical instruments are varied and reflect ancient influence from far afield - including the klong thap and

khim (Persian origin), the jakhe (Indian origin), the klong jin (Chinese origin), and the klong kaek (Indonesian origin).

Though Thailand was never colonized by Western powers, pop music and other forms of European and American music have become extremely influential. The two most popular styles of traditional Thai music are luk thung and mor lam; the latter in particular has close affinities with the Music of Laos.

Aside from the Thai, ethnic minorities such as the Lao, Lawa, Hmong, Akha, Khmer, Lisu, Karen and Lahu peoples have retained traditional musical forms.

Traditional or folk

Luk thung

Luk thung, or Thai country music, developed in the mid-20th century to reflect daily trials and tribulations of rural Thais. Ponsri Woranut and Suraphol Sombatcharoen were the genre's first big stars, incorporating influences from, Asia. Many of the most popular artists have come from the central city of Suphanburi, including megastar Pumpuang Duangjan, who pioneered electronic luk thung.

Mor lam

Mor lam is the dominant folk music of Thailand's north-eastern Isan region, which has a mainly Lao population. It has much in common with luk thung, such as its focus on the life of the rural poor. It is characterized by rapid-fire, rhythmic vocals and a funk feel to the percussion. The lead singer, also called a mor lam, is most often accompanied by the khaen.

There are about fifteen regional variations of mor lam, plus modern versions such as mor lam sing. Some conservatives have criticized these as the commercialization of traditional cultures.

See also: Music of Laos

Kantrum

The people of Isan are also known for kantrum, which is much less famous than mor lam. Kantrum is played by Khmer living near the border with Cambodia. It is a swift and very traditional dance music. In its purest form, cho-kantrum, singers, percussion and tro (a type of fiddle) dominate the sound. A more modern form using electric instrumentation arose in the mid-1980s. Later in the decade, Darkie became the genre's biggest star, and he crossed into mainstream markets in the later 1990s.

See also: Music of Cambodia

Pop and rock

By the 1930s, however, Western classical music, showtunes, jazz and tango were popular. Soon, jazz grew to dominate Thai popular music, and Khru Eua Sunthornsanan soon set up the first Thai jazz band. The music he soon helped to invent along with influential band Suntharaporn was called pleng Thai sakorn, which incorporated Thai melodies with Western classical music. This music continued to evolve into luk grung, a romantic music that was popular with the upper-class. King Bhumibol is an accomplished jazz musician and composer.

Phleng pheua chiwit

By the 1960s, Western rock was popular and Thai artists began imitating bands like Cliff Richard & the Shadows; this music was called wong shadow, and it soon evolved into a form of Thai pop called string. Among the groups that emerged from this period was The Impossibles. The '70s also saw Rewat Buddhinar beginning to use the Thai language in rock music as well as the rise of protest songs called phleng pheua chiwit (songs for life).

The earliest phleng pheua chiwit band was called Caravan, and they were at the forefront of a movement for democracy. In 1976, police and right wing activists attacked students at Thammasat University; Caravan, along with other bands and activists, fled for the rural hills. There, Caravan continued playing music for local farmers, and wrote songs that would appear on their later albums.

In the 1980s, phleng pheua chiwit re-entered the mainstream with a grant of amnesty to dissidents. Bands like Carabao became best-sellers and incorporated sternly nationalistic elements in their lyrics. By the 1990s, phleng pheua chiwit had largely fallen from the top of the Thai charts, though artists like Pongsit Kamphee continued to command a large audience.

String

String pop took over mainstream listeners in Thailand in the 90s, and bubblegum pop stars like Tata Young, Bird Thongchai McIntyre and Asanee-Wasan became best-sellers. Simultaneously, Britpop influenced alternative rock artists like Modern Dog, Loso, Crub and Proud became popular in late 1990s. In 2006, famous Thai rock bands include Clash, Big Ass, Bodyslam and Silly Fools.

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