International Sustainable Development Studies Institute
สถาบันการศึกษาการพัฒนาที่ยั่งยืนนานาชาติ

Society, Culture, and the Arts of Thailand

Semester in Chiang Mai: Society and Culture of Thailand
Short Name: Thai Society, Culture & Art
Credits: 4
Contact hours: 56 total
Lecture Hours: 33
Directed Field Studies: 23 (46 hours at 2:1 ratio)

Course Description

Thailand's society and culture are shaped by deep historical roots, rapid modernization, and global influences. This course offers an interdisciplinary exploration of contemporary Thai society, focusing on the dynamic interplay between tradition and change. Students will examine key cultural, social, and political forces shaping modern Thailand, including religion, gender, globalization, migration, economic development, and political transformations.

While the arts provide a rich lens for understanding these societal shifts, the course also incorporates broader cultural elements such as social norms, family structures, education, governance, media, and urban-rural dynamics. Through a mix of academic seminars, field studies, and hands-on experiences, students will explore a wide range of topics—from Buddhist temples and folk traditions to popular culture and contemporary lifestyles. Visits to cultural sites, museums, markets, and local communities will provide firsthand exposure to the lived realities of contemporary Thai society.

By integrating historical perspectives with current events, this course encourages students to think critically about Thailand's position within Southeast Asia and the world. Students will not only gain insights into Thai culture but will also reflect on broader themes of identity, power, and change in an increasingly interconnected world.

Course Objectives

The objectives for this course are to:

• Analyze major social, cultural, and political factors shaping contemporary Thai society.

• Examine the interplay between tradition and modernity in different aspects of Thai life, including family structures, religion, education, and governance.

• Investigate how globalization, economic development, and digital media influence cultural expression and identity in Thailand.

• Explore the role of the arts—both traditional and contemporary—as a reflection of and response to social and cultural changes.

• Engage with local communities and cultural practitioners to gain diverse perspectives on Thai society.

• Compare urban and rural experiences in Thailand, understanding regional diversity and its impact on culture and daily life.

• Critically reflect on issues such as gender, class, ethnicity, and cultural identity in the Thai context.

• Develop an interdisciplinary approach to understanding Thailand by integrating history, anthropology, political science, and the arts.

Methodology

The course will integrate course lectures and readings with group discussions and seminars. Experiential field studies will be an important component of the course, both formal and informal. Guest lecturers will be a part of the course to share their experiences and perspective with students. Keeping up with readings, materials presented in class, and assignments is critical for success during this course.

Grading and Assessment

Course Component Details	Total
Participation	**15**
In class participation: This means being an active participant in classes, contributing meaningfully to the discussions, questions, and ongoing learning.	5
Field Studies: Participating in field studies outside of the classroom, both through asking questions in the field, engaging in activities, and being an active and engaged learner during field studies.	10
Writing	**45**
Seminar Notes: An important component of learning to observe and analyze the issues during this course is taking notes in class. Include questions and analysis as you go along.	5
Observation Notes: Keeping an on-going journal of observations outside the classroom. This means writing daily in your journal, even if only for brief or signifiant observations. This is NOT a daily diary, but your field observations, questions, and analysis.	5
Field Study Assignments: Each course will assign work to do during some of the field studies. You need to take notes and answer questions that you are assigned to observe and answer.	15
Essays: For this course essays are longer reflections and analysis. There are four essays during the course. Essays should be 2-3 A4 pages, and cover the following points: • How this issue or topic links to the overall topic of the course. • Why you are interested in this specific issue or topic? • An analysis of a specific issue observed or learned about during that week — describe this and why it is important. • Reference to a reading either from the course readings or outside sources. • Other questions that this issue raises for you to explore further.	20
Independent Field Research Project/Focused Inquiry	**30**
Each student will choose an issue related to the course to study independently. This should be a combination of research, observations, and analysis of a topic that the student is interested in. The **emphasis is primarily on field observations** broadly defined, drawing on both class related field studies as well as independent observations in Thailand on your own time.	
Proposal: The IFRP proposal will be a 1 page written description explaining what you are interested in studying, how data will be gathered, the feasibility of studying this during the course, and any potential challenges you may anticipate running into.	5
Progress update: This part of the IFRP is a short update during the course delivered orally on what the student has discovered about their topic so far, what further questions this raises, any challenges they have faced and how they have overcome them, as well as further information they will be looking for during the second half of the field study.	10
Final Presentation: On the last day of the course each student will give a presentation on their topic, focusing on the initial question, methods, challenges, and the outcome of their focused inquiry. This should be presented with supporting slides. This will be followed by questions and comments from fellow students and instructors. **Rubric for final presentation** 1. Clarity and organization — is the issue clearly explained, linked to the topic and readings of the course, and well organized? 2. Experiential learning/field studies/observations — does the presentation link to specific examples of observations? 3. Interviews — does the presentation reflect discussions, interviews, and talks with local people and community members? 4. Depth — is the issue analyzed and explained well and thoroughly?	15
Final Exam	**10**
Final: The final exam is a series of short answer questions drawn from the entire semester of the course.	10

Course Topics and Schedule

Seminar Schedule: Wednesday 1-4
Please note: An important part of this course happens outside of seminars, including field studies, extended field studies, and other experiential learning opportunities. Each of these field studies are an integral part of the course, and will include assignments for the course.

Field Studies and Excursions
An important part of the course are experiential field studies outside of the classroom. Field studies will have assignments based on the topics of each course, and are an important part of the academic focus of the semester. Field studies may be re-scheduled based on community and organizational availability.

Weekly Schedule

Week 1: Introduction to Thai Society and Culture: This seminar provides an overview of Thailand's historical, social, and cultural landscape, introducing key themes such as tradition versus modernity, globalization, and identity.

- Overview of Thailand's historical, social, and cultural landscape

- Key themes of the course: tradition vs. modernity, globalization, and identity

- The role of cultural studies in understanding contemporary Thailand

Readings:

Kongpolphrom, W. (2018). Thainess realisation in selected travel websites. *Interdisciplinary Research Review*, *13*(4), 63–67. retrieved from https://ph02.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/jtir/article/view/133513

Chularatana, J. (2017). Indo-Persian Influence on Late Ayutthaya Art, Architecture, and Design. *The Journal of the Siam Society*, *105*, 43–72. retrieved from https://so06.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/pub_jss/article/view/158009

Watarachanakool, Pornvipa (2006) "Science, Technology and the Supernatural in Contemporary Thai Novels," *Manusya, Journal of Humanities*: Vol. 9: No. 1, Article 4. https://digital.car.chula.ac.th/manusya/vol9/iss1/4

Jackson, P. A. (2000). An Explosion of Thai Identities: Global Queering and Re-Imagining Queer Theory. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, *2*(4), 405–424. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3986699

Week 2: Thai Buddhism, Spirituality, and Everyday Life: This seminar explores the influence of Theravāda Buddhism on Thai culture, values, and daily practices, including animism, spirit houses, and folk religious traditions.

- The influence of Theravāda Buddhism on Thai culture, values, and daily practices

- Animism, spirit houses, and folk religious traditions

- The role of Buddhist temples as cultural and social centers

Readings:

Swearer, D. K. (2010). *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia: Second Edition*. State University of New York Press. http://www.jstor.org/stable/jj.18253560

Reynolds, F. E. (1989). [Review of *Sangha, State and Society: Thai Buddhism in History*, by Y. Ishii & P. Hawkes]. *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, *4*(2), 100–102. *http://www.jstor.org/stable/40860277*

Jackson, P. A. 1997 Withering Centre, Flourishing Margins: Buddhism's Changing Political Roles. https://www.academia.edu/20668282/1997_Withering_Centre_Flourishing_Margins_Buddhism_s_Changing_Political_Roles

McCargo, D. (2004). Buddhism, democracy and identity in Thailand. *Democratization*, *11*(4), 155–170. https://doi.org/10.1080/1351034042000234576

Week 3: Family, Kinship, and Changing Social Structures: This seminar examines traditional Thai family dynamics and gender roles, shifting family structures in urban versus rural settings, and the impact of economic changes and migration on family life.

- Traditional Thai family dynamics and gender roles

- Shifting family structures in urban vs. rural Thailand

- The impact of economic change and migration on family life

Readings:

Knodel, J. and Saengtienchai, C. (2007), Rural parents with urban children: social and economic implications of migration for the rural elderly in Thailand. Popul. Space Place, 13: 193-210. https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.436

Wongboonsin, P., Keeratipongpaiboon, T., & Wongboonsin, K. (2018). Chapter 3: Changes in family composition and care relations in the Kingdom of Thailand. In *Care relations in Southeast Asia* (pp. 99–154). Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004384330_004

VanLandingham, M., & Hirschman, C. (2001). Population pressure and fertility in pre-transition Thailand. *Population studies*, *55*(3), 233–248. https://doi.org/10.1080/00324720127694\

RAMBO, A. T. (2017). From Poor Peasants to Entrepreneurial Farmers: The Transformation of Rural Life in Northeast Thailand. East-West Center. http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep16019

Week 4: Extended Excursion and Field Study in Mae Taa Organic Farming Community

Week 5: Language, Identity, and the Power of Communication: This seminar delves into the role of the Thai language in shaping cultural identity, including aspects like honorifics, social hierarchy, linguistic politeness, and regional languages reflecting ethnic diversity.

- Thai language and its role in shaping cultural identity

- Honorifics, social hierarchy, and linguistic politeness

- Regional languages and ethnic diversity in Thailand

Readings:

Simpson, R. C. (1997). Metapragmatic Discourse and the Ideology of Impolite Pronouns in Thai. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, *7*(1), 38–62. http://www.jstor.org/stable/43103939

Tan, M. (2012). Passing over in silences: Ideology, ideals and ideas in Thai translation. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, *43*(1), 32–54. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41490295

Gray, C. E. (1991). Hegemonic Images: Language and Silence in the Royal Thai Polity. *Man*, *26*(1), 43–65. https://doi.org/10.2307/2803474

Djenar, D. N., & Sidnell, J. (Eds.). (2023). *Signs of Deference, Signs of Demeanour: Interlocutor Reference and Self-Other Relations across Southeast Asian Speech Communities*. NUS Press. *https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.285053*

Jackson, P. A. (2004). The tapestry of language and theory: Reading Rosalind Morris on post-structuralism and Thai modernity. *South East Asia Research*, *12*(3), 337–377. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23749994

Week 6: Power, Social Structures, and Inequality: This seminar investigates patronage systems, social hierarchy, class, ethnicity, rural-urban disparities, labor, migration, and the informal economy in Thailand.

- Patronage systems, hierarchy, and social mobility in Thailand

- Class, ethnicity, and rural-urban disparities

- Labor, migration, and the informal economy

Readings:

McCargo, D. (2005). Network monarchy and legitimacy crises in Thailand. The Pacific Review, 18(4), 499-519. https://doi.org/10.1080/09512740500338937

Turton, A. (1984). Limits of ideological domination and the formation of social consciousness. In A. Turton & S. Tanabe (Eds.), History and Peasant Consciousness in Southeast Asia (pp. 19-73). National Museum of Ethnology. https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/33970/

Thongsawang, S., Rehbein, B., & Chantavanich, S. (2020). Inequality, Sociocultures and Habitus in Thailand. *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, 35(3), 493–524. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26937815

Feeny, D. (2003). THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF REGIONAL INEQUALITY: The Northeast of Thailand 1800-2000. *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 17(1), 29–59. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40860806

Week 7: Traditional and Popular Performing Arts: This seminar explores Thailand's rich performing arts traditions, including classical Thai dance, music, and shadow puppetry. Students will examine the role of storytelling in Thai culture (e.g., the Ramakien and folk narratives) and how these traditions have evolved in contemporary Thai cinema, television, and music.

- Classical Thai dance, music, and shadow puppetry

- The role of storytelling in Thai culture (e.g., Ramakien, folk narratives)

- Contemporary adaptations: Thai cinema, television, and music

Readings:

Cho, F. (2017). The Meditative Discernment of Nang Nak. In *Seeing Like the Buddha: Enlightenment through Film* (pp. 49–66). State University of New York Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.18252549.8

Pisanthanakun, B. (Director). (2013). *Pee Mak* [Film]. Jorkwang Films; GTH.

Saihong, P. (2008). Storytellers and Storytelling in Northeast Thailand. *Storytelling, Self, Society*, 4(1), 20–35. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41948996

Foley, K. (2001). Hun: Thai Doll Puppetry. *Asian Theatre Journal*, 18(1), 81–86. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1124266

Week 8: Extended Field Study and Excursion to Karen Village on Doi Inthanon

Week 9: Semester Break (no classes)

Week 10: Rural and Urban Lifestyles in Thailand: This seminar examines the contrasts between rural and urban life in Thailand, focusing on economic development, migration, urbanization, local markets, food culture, and the evolving landscape of Thai communities.

- The contrasts between village life and city life

- Economic development, migration, and urbanization

- Local markets, food culture, and the changing landscape of Thai communities

Readings:

Panya, O. (1991). Social Ecology of Thai Peasant Society: The Impact of Larger and External Social Relations (1850–1950). In A. T. Rambo & K. Gillogly (Eds.), *Profiles in Cultural Evolution: Papers from a Conference in Honor of Elman R. Service* (pp. 405–428). University of Michigan Press. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3998/mpub.11394721.23

Gullette, G. S. (2013). The Role of Urbanity, Status, and Identity on Migrant Remittance Management and Rural Development Potentials in Thailand. *Human Organization*, 72(2), 132–143. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44148704

Minten, B., & Reardon, T. (2008). Food Prices, Quality, and Quality's Pricing in Supermarkets versus Traditional Markets in Developing Countries. *Review of Agricultural Economics*, 30(3), 480–490. http://www.jstor.org/stable/30225891

Trupp, A. (2015). Agency, Social Capital, and Mixed Embeddedness among Akha Ethnic Minority Street Vendors in Thailand's Tourist Areas. *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, 30(3), 780–818. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24779769

Week 11: The Role of Art and Architecture in Thai Society: This seminar explores Thai temple architecture, traditional crafts, mural painting, textile arts, and the role of contemporary art in reflecting cultural shifts within Thai society.

- Thai temple architecture: symbolism and religious significance

- Traditional crafts, mural painting, and textile arts

- The role of contemporary art in reflecting Thai cultural shifts

Readings:

Ferguson, J. P., & Johannsen, C. B. (1976). Modern Buddhist Murals in Northern Thailand: A Study of Religious Symbols and Meaning. *American Ethnologist*, 3(4), 645–669. http://www.jstor.org/stable/643343

Mabry, M. C., & Mabry, B. D. (1981). The role of the arts in developing countries: Thailand, a case study. *Ekistics*, 48(288), 247–250. http://www.jstor.org/stable/43620542

Dalferro, A. (2024). Silky Bodies and Nation-Making: Historical and Contemporary Practices of Caring for Silkworms in Thailand. *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, 39(1), 1–27. https://www.jstor.org/stable/27300972

Cate, S. (2003). Thai Art and the Authority of the Past. In *Making Merit, Making Art: A Thai Temple in Wimbledon* (pp. 43–70). University of Hawai'i Press. http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt6wqvdj.7

Week 12: Extended Field Study and Excursion: Coastal Community

Week 13: Media, Digital Culture, and Globalization: This seminar investigates the influence of social media, entertainment, digital culture, celebrity culture, influencers, online activism, and the effects of globalization on Thai cultural identity.

- The influence of social media, entertainment, and digital culture in Thailand

- Thai celebrity culture, influencers, and online communities

- Globalization and its effects on Thai cultural identity

Readings:

Lim, M. (2023). "Everything everywhere all at once": Social Media, Algorithmic/Marketing Culture, and Activism in Southeast Asia. Georgetown Journal of International Affairs, 24(2), 181-190. https://doi.org/10.1353/gia.2023.a913644

Arissara P. Srisai. (2025). The Role of Social Media in Political Mobilization Among Youth in Thailand: Case Study of the 2020 Thai Protests. *ournal of esearch in ocial cience and umanities*, 4(1), 34–37. etrieved from https://www.pioneerpublisher.com/jrssh/article/view/1173

Chainan, P. (2020). Online Political Parody in Thailand: Political Communication under the Computer Crime Act (No.2) 2017. In: Yamahata, C., Sudo, S., Matsugi, T. (eds) Rights and Security in India, Myanmar, and Thailand. Palgrave Macmillan, Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-1439-5_8

Beeson, M. (2003). Sovereignty under Siege: Globalisation and the State in Southeast Asia. *Third World Quarterly*, 24(2), 357–374. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3993517

Week 14: Food, Festivals, and Cultural Celebrations: This seminar delves into Thai cuisine as an expression of regional identity and history, the significance of major Thai festivals (e.g., Songkran, Loy Krathong), and how food and festivals connect to religion, community, and national identity.

- Thai cuisine as an expression of regional identity and history

- The significance of major Thai festivals (e.g., Songkran, Loy Krathong)
- How food and festivals connect to religion, community, and national identity

Readings:

Olson, G. A. (1991). Cries over Spilled Holy Water: "Complex" Responses to a Traditional Thai Religious Practice. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, *22*(1), 75–85. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20071264

chi, janine. (2014). CONSUMING RICE, BRANDING THE NATION. *Contexts*, *13*(3), 50–55. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24710552

Lodge, E. (2023). Burning for a Beloved Mushroom: Northern Thai Environmentalism and the Contested Narratives of a Wild Delicacy. *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, *38*(2), 133–167. https://www.jstor.org/stable/27219712

Denes, A. (2015). Folklorizing Northern Khmer Identity in Thailand: Intangible Cultural Heritage and the Production of "Good Culture." *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, *30*(1), 1–34. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24779828

Week 15: Looking Ahead – Thailand in the 21st Century: This seminar discusses future challenges and opportunities for Thai society, including sustainability, tourism, economic development, and encourages student reflections on key takeaways and interdisciplinary perspectives.

- Future challenges and opportunities for Thai society
- The role of sustainability, tourism, and economic development
- Student reflections: Key takeaways and interdisciplinary perspectives

Readings:

Glassman, J. (2010). Bounding the Mekong: The Asian Development Bank, China, and Thailand. University of Hawaii Press. https://uhpress.hawaii.edu/title/bounding-the-mekong-the-asian-development-bank-china-and-thailand/

Rigg, J. (2019). More than Rural: Textures of Thailand's Agrarian Transformation. University of Hawaii Press. https://uhpress.hawaii.edu/title/more-than-rural-textures-of-thailands-agrarian-transformation/

Ayal, E. B. (1961). Some Crucial Issues in Thailand's Economic Development. *Pacific Affairs*, *34*(2), 157–164. https://doi.org/10.2307/2752988

Pravit Ruyabhorn, & Dhira Phantumvanit. (1988). Coastal and Marine Resources of Thailand: Emerging Issues Facing an Industrializing Country. *Ambio*, *17*(3), 229–232. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4313459

Week 16: Final Classes and Wrap-Up
Final Exam and Presentations

Course Policies

Attendance Policy

Students are expected to be on time and attend all classes. If you are ill or otherwise need to miss a class, please inform your instructor or teaching assistant.

Academic Integrity

Academic integrity is essential to a positive teaching and learning environment. All students enrolled in ISDSI courses are expected to complete coursework responsibilities with fairness and honesty. Failure to do so by seeking unfair advantage over others or misrepresenting someone else's work as your own can result in disciplinary action.

Scholastic Dishonesty

Scholastic dishonesty means plagiarizing; cheating on assignments or examinations; engaging in unauthorized collaboration on academic work; taking, acquiring, or using test materials without faculty permission; submitting false or incomplete records of academic achievement; acting alone or in cooperation with another to falsify records or to obtain dishonestly grades, honors, awards, or professional endorsement; altering forging, or misusing an academic record; or fabricating or falsifying data, research procedures, or data analysis. Within this course, a student responsible for scholastic dishonesty can be assigned a penalty up to and including an "F" or "N" for the course. If you have any questions regarding the expectations for a specific assignment or exam, ask.

Grading Standards

Letter grade	Score or percentage	Description
A	93–100	Achievement that is outstanding relative to the level necessary to meet course requirements.
A-	90–92	Achievement that is significantly above the level necessary to meet course requirements.
B+	87–89	Achievement that is significantly above the level necessary to meet course requirements.
B	83–86	Achievement that is significantly above the level necessary to meet course requirements.
B-	80–82	Achievement that meets the course requirements in every respect.
C+	77–79	Achievement that meets the course requirements in every respect.
C	73–76	Achievement that meets the course requirements in every respect.
C-	70-72	Achievement that is worthy of credit even though it fails to meet fully the course requirements.
D+	67-69	Achievement that is worthy of credit even though it fails to meet fully the course requirements.
D	60-66	Achievement that is worthy of credit even though it fails to meet fully the course requirements.
F	0-59	Represents failure (or no credit) and signifies that the work was either (1) completed but at a level of achievement that is not worthy of credit or (2) was not completed and there was no agreement between the instructor and the student that the student would be awarded an Incomplete.