

Thai Language and Society: History and Society Section

Culture, Ecology, and Community Semester

Course Description

This course explores the history and politics of Thailand, from its place among the ancient kingdoms in Southeast Asia to contemporary social and political issues. Special emphasis will be on understanding how contemporary Thai society and politics have deep cultural and historical roots.

Thailand is unique among the countries of Southeast Asia in never having been colonized by a foreign power. However, as with many aspects of Thai history and society, digging into what actually happened and how that history shapes current Thailand is complex. This course will look at various social institutions, including Thai families, patron-client relationships, marginalization and the formation of the Thai state to better understand the current context of development, contemporary political struggles, and social change.

Thailand is also not a monolithic country with a single culture and language. While the hegemony of the centralized state is a present reality and “Central Thai” is taught in schools nation-wide, the current geographic space known as Thailand is made of up different ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and religious groups. These also have deep historical roots, from the ancient Lanna Kingdom in Northern Thailand to upland ethnic minorities that have historically not recognized national boundaries or the concept of nation state.

The goal of this course is to give students studying in Thailand a good foundation to understanding Thai society and culture in its own right, and also help them to better contextualize their other courses.

Assessment includes assignments, as well as essays, and written and oral exams, as well as a presentation.

Course Objectives

The objectives for this course are to:

- Understand the historical background and broader social context of contemporary Thai society.
 - Relate specific issues in the historical and political legacy of Thailand to contemporary social issues.
 - Understand the complexity of regional, ethnic, and marginalized identities and how this shapes Thai society.
 - More broadly understand how the process of development and change has shaped Thai society and social institutions.
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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

Component	Details	Total
Engagement	This means participation in and out of the classroom, being an active member of the course, and being fully present and engaged in the field. This includes participation in discussions during seminars and in the village, etc. This also means being an active and supportive member of the course, including as a designated leader and active follower/self leadership.	15
Writing	Seminar Notes (10): An important component of learning to observe and analyze the issues during this course, including guest speakers and taking notes in class. Pay special attention to writing down any questions you might have so that you can follow up later in your reading and essays. Field Study Notes (15): Take notes on your observations during the field studies. Your notes can be in any format, but need to be clear about what you are writing about, what you are observing, and any questions you might have about the field study. Be sure to write the date on the top of the page of each field study observation. Essays (20): For this course essays are longer reflections and analysis. There are two (2) essays during the course, due on Friday of the second week and the last day of the course. Choose a topic that you studied during those two weeks that you're interested in and take some time to reflect on what you've learned. Essays should be 4-5 pages handwritten in your field notebook, and cover the following points: • How this issue or topic links to the overall topic of the course. (1) • Why you are interested in this specific issue or topic. (1) • A description and analysis of the specific issue and why it is important. (5) • Reference at least 2 interviews and at least 2 observations during the course. (2) • Other questions that this issue raises for you to explore further. (1)	45
Independent Field Research Project (IFRP)	Each student will choose an issue related to the course to study. 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 drawing on field studies as well as independent observations. This is not a book report or literature review, but field research. Students must receive instructor approval for their chosen topic/issue. Proposal (5): The IFRP proposal is a written outline and a short presentation to the class explaining the question, how it is related to the course topic, how data will be gathered, and any potential challenges you may anticipate running into. 2 page typed as well as an in-class presentation. Progress update (5): An update during the course on what the students have discovered about their topic so far, what further questions this raises, any challenges and how they have been overcome, as well as further information they will be looking for during the second half of the field study. 2 page typed as well as an in-class presentation. Final Presentation (10): On the last day of the course each group of students will give a ten minute presentation on their research. Focus on clarity, field observations, interviews/discussions with community members, and analytical depth. 5-10 slides in PDF format, as well as a 1 paragraph summary of your research findings. Organization for final presentation 1. What did you study/research focus? How is this related to the course topic? (1) 2. How did you study this, including observations and interviews? (4) 3. What did you learn? Findings and analysis. (8) 4. Further questions this raises for you. (1) 5. Final slide of references / interviews. (1)	20
Final Exam	The final exam will be a comprehensive review of course topics with an emphasis on what was learned during the field portion of the course. There will be 5 questions. Students may use their notes but not their readers or the internet during the exam.	20

Schedule

PLEASE NOTE: Course and seminar times are subject to change. Please pay attention to any announcements and updates about the schedule.

A note on readings: Read strategically by reading abstracts, headings, and looking over the reading first. Readings should be completed before the seminar or field study they are listed for.

In the syllabus “RHCT” refers to the Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Thailand, Pavin Chachavalpongpun (Editor), Routledge, New York, 2020.

In addition to the Course Reader “Thai History and Society,” an additional book about Chiang Mai will be used: Easum, Taylor, Chiang Mai between Empire and Modern Thailand: A City in the Colonial Margins, Amsterdam University Press, 2023. This is referred to in the syllabus as “CMMT.”

WEEK 1 — FOUNDATIONS OF THAI HISTORY AND THE CITY OF CHIANG MAI

Monday

Orientation 10:30–12:00

- Hopes and Fears
- Program Introduction

Thai History 1:00–3:30

- Southeast Asian kingdoms: Angkor, Pagan, Indonesia
- Thai kingdoms: Sukhothai, Ayutthaya, Lanna, Chakri dynasty

READING:

- Baker, Chris and Pasuk Phongpaichit, A History of Thailand, Cambridge University Press, 2014 — Glossary; Chronology
- Chapter 1: Before Bangkok
- Chapter 9: A political society, 1970s onwards

Tuesday

Orientation: 12:30–1:30

- Wellness
- Medical care/Insurance

Modern Era (1932–2025): 1:45–3:30

- Absolute king → parliamentary democracy
- Coups & democratic movements
- Military governments → 1970s → Thaksin → Pheu Thai (PT)

READING:

- Pavin Chachavalpongpun, “Introduction: a timeless Thailand,” in RHCT, 3-14
- Connors, Michael K., “The two faces of democracy,” in RHCT, 55-70

IFRP Research Group Meetings

Wednesday

Orientation: 12:30–2:00

- Cultural Adjustment
- Expectations

Chiang Mai History: 2:15–3:30

- Lanna history
- Geography
- Demographics & ethnicity
- Identity / Neo-colonialism

READING:

- Vandergeest, Peter, and Nancy Lee Peluso, “Territorialization and state power in Thailand,” in Theory and Society 24: 385-426, 1995

- “Introduction: Reading Urban Space in the Colonial Margins” in CMMT, 11-24
- “The City Founded: A Deep Urban History of Chiang Mai” in CMMT, 29-56
- Castro-Woodhouse, Leslie, Chapter 1 “Introducing Lan Na, Siam, and the Inland Constellation,” in *Woman between Two Kingdoms: Dara Rasami and the Making of Modern Thailand*, Cornell University Press, 2020

Thursday

Chiang Mai Urban Geography and Development: 1:00–3:30

- Urban development / schools / hospitals
- Language & culture
- Modern Chiang Mai as a Southeast Asian & global city

READING:

- “The City Stabilized: The Kawila Restoration and Chiang Mai in the Nineteenth Century” in CMMT, 61-106
- “The Region Transformed: Forests and Foreigners and State Formation in Chiang Mai and ‘The North’” in CMMT, 113-158

Friday

Chiang Mai Urban Transect Field Study

- Wat Kate
- Warorot Market
- Old City
- Wat Chedi Luang / Wat Phra Singh
- Chiang Mai City Arts & Cultural Centre

READING:

- “The City Reshaped: Power and Urban Space in Micro-Colonial Chiang Mai” in CMMT, 165-208

IFRP Group Meetings

WEEK 2 — RELIGION, GENDER, AND SOCIAL IDENTITY IN THAILAND

Monday

Maejo University (all day)

- Green University
- Thai culture

WRITTEN PROPOSAL DUE

Tuesday

Religion in Thailand: 1:00–3:30

- Buddhism / Islam / Christianity / Animism, etc.

READING:

- Michaels, Sara E. and Justin Thomas McDaniel, “Money and politics in Buddhist Sangha in modern Thailand,” in RHCT, 253-267
- Siani, Edorado, “Buddhism and power,” in RHCT, 268-277

IFRP Meeting: Proposal Presentation

FIELD STUDY NOTES HANDED IN

Wednesday

Field Study: Monk chat

Thursday

Gender & Sexuality: 1:00–3:30

READING:

- Sanders, Douglas, "Sex and gender diversity," in RHCT, 340-352
- Castro-Woodhouse, Leslie, Chapter 5 "Intertwined Fates: Monarchy, Women's Bodies, and the Thai State," in *Woman between Two Kingdoms: Dara Rasami and the Making of Modern Thailand*, Cornell University Press, 2020

Friday

Economics — Development and Current National Issues: 1:00–3:30

READING:

- Warr, Peter, "Economic development of post-war Thailand," in RHCT, 36-51

ESSAY #1 DUE

WEEK 3 — SOCIAL STRUCTURE, ETHNICITY, AND RURAL–URBAN DYNAMICS IN THAILAND

Monday

Maejo University (all day)

- Rural and Community Development

PROGRESS UPDATE DUE

Tuesday

Sociology of Thai Society (1:00–3:30)

- Thai social structure, hierarchy and patronage
- Development & rural / urban dynamics
- NGOs & environmental issues

READING:

- Thongchai Winichakul, "The Presence of Nationhood," 1-19 in *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation*, University of Hawaii Press, 1994
- Saichol Sattayanurak, "Thai identity and nationalism," in RHCT, 241-252
- Glassman, Jim, "Class, race, and uneven development in Thailand," in RHCT, 305-317
- Kanokwan Manorum, "NGOs and civil society in Thailand," in RHCT, 366-378

IFRP Meeting: Progress Update Presentation

Wednesday

Ethnicity & Race: 1:00–3:30

READING:

- Streckfuss, David, "An 'ethnic' reading of 'Thai' history in the twilight of the century-old official 'Thai' national model," *South East Asia Research*, 20, 3, pp 419–000, 2012
- McKinnon, Katharine, "(Im)Mobilization and hegemony: 'hill tribe' subjects and the 'Thai' state," *Social & Cultural Geography*, Vol. 6, No. 1, February 2005

Thursday–Saturday

Mok Faa Expedition Retreat

WEEK 4 — ELEPHANTS, CONSERVATION, AND PRESENTATIONS/EXAMS

Monday

Maejo University (all day)

- Sustainability and agro-tourism

Tuesday

Elephants: 1:00–3:30

- Conservation

- Environment
- Tourism
- Culture

READING:

- Ploysri Porananond, "The Monarch, the Elephant, and Tourism in Chiang Mai, Thailand," in *Tourism and Monarchy in Southeast Asia*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016
- Ingrid Suter, "In Defense of Elephant Tourism," August 9, 2020, The Elephant Collaborative
- Hilary Cadigan, "The Human Cost of Elephant Tourism," in *The Atlantic*, May 19, 2016

IFRP Meeting

Wednesday

Field Study: Patara Elephant Conservation Center

READING:

- Bansiddhi P, Brown JL, Khonmee J, Norkaew T, Nganvongpanit K, Punyapornwithaya V, et al. "Management factors affecting adrenal glucocorticoid activity of tourist camp elephants in Thailand and implications for elephant welfare," *PLoS ONE* 14(10): e0221537, October 1, 2019, 1-18

Thursday

Exam / Presentations

- IFRP Presentation
- Final Exam

FIELD STUDY NOTES DUE

ESSAY #2 DUE

Course Policies

Attendance Policy

Students are expected to arrive on time and attend their internship every day from Monday to Friday. If you are ill or have another valid reason for being absent, you must inform both your MSID Coordinator and your supervisor as soon as possible by phone or other agreed-upon communication method.

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.

Extensions Policy

Students may request an extension for an assignment. The request must be communicated by email to the lead instructor and MSID coordinator, more than 1 day before the assignment is due. Extension requests on the due date, without a legitimate reason, will not be considered for review.

Late Submission Policy

A submission is labeled late when it has been submitted past the due date established in the course syllabus. This policy affects all the assignments in the course. For each day late – 5% of the assignment's grade. In addition, for 1 to 3 days late, the student will receive less feedback and comments than submissions that were on time. For 4+ days late, the student will not receive comments or feedback.

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. Do not use AI to write your assignments.

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.