

Society, Culture, and the Arts of Thailand

Semester in Chiang Mai: Society and Culture of Thailand and Southeast Asia

Short Name: Thai Society, Culture & Art

Credits: 4

Contact hours: 62.5 total

Lecture Hours: 24.5

Directed Field Studies: 38 (76 hours at 2:1 ratio)

Course Description

This course closes the semester by examining Thai society and culture through the lens of the arts. It builds on the historical and political foundation established in Weeks 1–5 and the sustainability-focused fieldwork of Weeks 9–12, bringing the semester's themes of tradition, modernity, and regional diversity into direct contact with artists, craftspeople, and communities across four weeks: temple architecture and the performing arts; traditional craft and textile production, centered on an extended excursion to Karen weaving villages; media, food, and festivals; and a closing week of synthesis and final presentations.

The course is field-intensive. Students take part in hands-on workshops with local practitioners — Sa paper-making, traditional Thai dance, street art, silverwork, natural-dye weaving, and pottery — alongside a temple and museum transect in Chiang Mai and a week-long excursion to Karen villages engaged in silk weaving and natural-dye production. Seminars are woven directly into this fieldwork, including three sessions held during the Karen village excursion itself, so that the conceptual material — religious symbolism, craft and material culture, ethnobotanical knowledge, cultural identity, and globalization — is worked through in close proximity to what students are observing and making.

The goal of this course is to give students a hands-on, interdisciplinary understanding of how tradition and modernity intersect in contemporary Thai cultural expression, and to bring the semester to a close through synthesis and the presentation of each student's Independent Field Research Project. Assessment includes field study notes, essays, an Independent Field Research Project carried out individually, and a final exam.

Course Objectives

The objectives for this course are to:

- Analyze Thai temple architecture and religious art as expressions of spiritual and cultural values.
- Examine traditional and contemporary performing arts — dance, music, shadow puppetry, and film — and their role in Thai storytelling and identity, alongside contemporary art's role in reflecting cultural change.
- Investigate traditional craft and material culture, including silverwork and weaving, through direct engagement with artisans in Chiang Mai.
- Understand the ethnobotanical and traditional ecological knowledge underlying Karen natural-dye weaving, and how textile traditions carry community identity and livelihood.
- Explore the influence of social media, digital culture, and globalization on contemporary Thai cultural expression and identity.
- Analyze Thai cuisine, festivals, and food culture as expressions of regional identity, religion, and community.
- Engage directly with local artists, craftspeople, and Karen village communities to gain diverse perspectives on Thai arts and culture.
- Synthesize interdisciplinary perspectives on Thai society, culture, and the arts developed across the semester.

Methodology

The course integrates course lectures and readings with group discussions and seminars. Hands-on workshops with local artists and craftspeople, together with formal and informal field studies, are a central component of the course. Guest lecturers and workshop instructors are part of the course to share their experiences and perspectives 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	Participation in and out of the classroom, being an active member of the course, and being fully present and engaged in the field, including during the Karen village excursion and hands-on workshops.	15
Writing	Seminar Notes (10): Notes on in-class discussion, guest speakers, and key questions to follow up on in readings and essays. Field Study Notes (15): Observations from field studies and workshops, including a daily journal during the Karen village excursion. Essays (20): Two (2) essays during the course, due during the Karen village excursion week (Week 14) and on the last day of the course (Week 16). 4–5 pages handwritten in your field notebook, covering: • 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 students are 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 student will give a 5 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. <i>Organization for final presentation:</i> • What did you study/research focus? How is this related to the course topic? (1) • How did you study this, including observations and interviews? (4) • What did you learn? Findings and analysis. (8) • Further questions this raises for you. (1) • Final slide of references / interviews. (1)	20
Final Exam	Comprehensive review of course topics with an emphasis on what was learned during the field portion of the course. 5 questions. Students may use their notes but not their readers or the internet during the exam.	20
Total		100

Course Topics and Schedule

WEEK 13 — TEMPLE ARCHITECTURE, CONTEMPORARY ART, AND PERFORMING ARTS

Monday

Sa Paper Workshop (morning) — hands-on traditional Thai mulberry paper-making with a local craftsman.

Seminar: Thai Temple Architecture and Sacred Space (1:00–3:30 PM)

- Thai temple architecture: symbolism and religious significance
- Buddhist murals and religious iconography
- Temples as living cultural and artistic centers

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.
- 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.

Tuesday

Traditional Dance Class — Wankaomai Studio (morning) — hands-on introduction to classical Thai dance technique.

Seminar: Traditional and Contemporary Performing Arts (1:00–3:30 PM)

- 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.
- Saihong, P. (2008). Storytellers and Storytelling in Northeast Thailand. *Storytelling, Self, Society*, 4(1), 20–35.
- Foley, K. (2001). Hun: Thai Doll Puppetry. *Asian Theatre Journal*, 18(1), 81–86.
- Pisanthanakun, B. (Director). (2013). *Pee Mak* [Film]. Jorkwang Films; GTH. (screening reference)

Wednesday

Street Art Workshop with Artist Muay (morning) — hands-on introduction to contemporary Thai street art and mural practice.

Seminar: Contemporary Art and Cultural Change in Thai Society (1:00–3:30 PM)

- The role of contemporary art in reflecting Thai cultural shifts
- Craft, textile, and material culture as national and personal expression

Readings:

- Mabry, M. C., & Mabry, B. D. (1981). The role of the arts in developing countries: Thailand, a case study. *Ekistics*, 48(288), 247–250.
- 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.

Thursday

Field Study: Chiang Mai Temple and Museum Transect — three Buddhist temples; Chiang Mai Art Museum; MAIAM Contemporary Art Museum.

Friday

Free day. Evening: Thapae East (optional).

WEEK 14 — TRADITIONAL CRAFTS, TEXTILES, AND KAREN VILLAGE EXCURSION

Field-intensive week; three seminars are woven into the field schedule.

Monday

Field Day: Traditional Crafts Around Chiang Mai — Sanpatong village visit; Wat Srisuphan silverwork workshop; Sang Ka Dee weaving workshop.

Seminar: Thai Traditional Craft and Material Culture (1:00–3:30 PM)

- Silverwork, weaving, and craft as living tradition and livelihood
- Craft, textile, and the "authority of the past" in Thai material culture

Readings:

- 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.

Tuesday

Field Study: Thai Silk Village.

Wednesday

Field Study: Tong Fai Village.

Seminar: Natural Dye Weaving and Ethnobotany in Karen Communities (1:00–3:30 PM)

- Traditional ecological knowledge of plant-based dyes among Karen weavers
- Weaving as embodied knowledge, transmitted through community and family

Readings:

- Kaewsangsai, S., Panyadee, P., Panya, A., Pandith, H., Wangpakapattanawong, P., Balslev, H., & Inta, A. (2025). Ethnobotany, Cytotoxicity and Color Stability of Karen Natural Colorants. *Plants*, 14(9), 1348.

Thursday

Field Study: Mae Ming Village — natural dye and weaving.

Friday

Field Study: Mae Jam District.

Seminar: Karen Textile Traditions, Identity, and Livelihood (1:00–3:30 PM)

- Karen textiles as cultural expression, ecological knowledge, and adaptation
- Weaving, community identity, and safeguarding intangible heritage

Readings:

- Woven wisdom and information management: safeguarding Karen textile heritage in Northern Thailand. *Journal of Documentation* (2026).

Students maintain a daily field observation journal throughout the excursion.

Essay #1 Due (by end of week)

WEEK 15 — MEDIA, FOOD, FESTIVALS, AND CONTEMPORARY THAI CULTURE

Monday

Seminar: Media, Digital Culture, and Globalization in Thailand (1:00–3:30 PM)

- 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.
- Arissara P. Srisai. (2025). The Role of Social Media in Political Mobilization Among Youth in Thailand: Case Study of the 2020 Thai Protests. *Journal of Research in Social Science and Humanities*, 4(1), 34–37.
- Chainan, P. (2020). Online Political Parody in Thailand: Political Communication under the Computer Crime Act (No. 2) 2017. In *Rights and Security in India, Myanmar, and Thailand*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Beeson, M. (2003). Sovereignty under Siege: Globalisation and the State in Southeast Asia. *Third World Quarterly*, 24(2), 357–374.

Tuesday

Field Visit: Pottery Lecture and Baan Muang Kung (morning).

Seminar: Food, Festivals, and Cultural Celebrations in Thailand (1:00–3:30 PM)

- 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.
- chi, janine. (2014). Consuming Rice, Branding the Nation. *Contexts*, 13(3), 50–55.
- 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.
- 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.

Wednesday

Independent Field Exploration: Food and Market Observation — self-directed observation of local markets and food culture, guided by field journal prompts.

Thursday

Field Study: Community Food and Market Observation (continued).

Evening: Dinner and Lanna Folk Performance at Huan Soontaree.

Friday

Free day.

IFRP Progress Update Due

WEEK 16 — SYNTHESIS AND FINAL PRESENTATIONS**Monday****Seminar: Thailand in the 21st Century — Synthesis and Reflection (1:00–3:30 PM)**

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

Readings:

- Glassman, J. (2010). *Bounding the Mekong: The Asian Development Bank, China, and Thailand*. University of Hawaii Press.
- Rigg, J. (2019). *More than Rural: Textures of Thailand's Agrarian Transformation*. University of Hawaii Press.
- Ayal, E. B. (1961). Some Crucial Issues in Thailand's Economic Development. *Pacific Affairs*, 34(2), 157–164.
- Pravit Ruyabhorn, & Dhira Phantumvanit. (1988). Coastal and Marine Resources of Thailand: Emerging Issues Facing an Industrializing Country. *Ambio*, 17(3), 229–232.

Tuesday

ARTANYWAY Studio Workshop (full day) — independent creative studio session synthesizing craft and art techniques encountered throughout the block.

Wednesday

Independent Study / IFRP Preparation.

Thursday

Final Exam.

Essay #2 Due (last day of course).

Friday

Independent Field Research Project Final 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.

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 assignments in the course. For each day late, 5% of the assignment's grade will be deducted. For 1–3 days late, the student will receive less feedback and comments than submissions 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.