

## *Globalisation and Fearful Futures in the Thai Cultures*

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The European Conference on Media, Communication & Film 2018  
Official Conference Proceedings

### **Abstract**

The ethno-nationalistic discourses have been dominant in Thailand, a medium-sized country in Southeast Asia during the last twenty years. First it was caused by the international financial crisis in 1997 when the sense of Thai nationalism has proudly made a comeback. Later on, it was instigated by the two military coups in 2006 and 2014 respectively. These events could be seen as a response towards the external force of globalisation, the process that is often thought of as either the domination of some powerful nation-states over another, or the wholesale commoditisation of society, in which large multinational corporations and their fluid capitals are usually the driving force. In this article, it will be argued that because of its complexity and multi-direction, the outcome of globalisation in Thailand, of which both the global and the local are dynamically at plays, has resulted in the sense of cosmopolitanism and fundamentalism, felt in various ways and differing degrees among people across Thai societies and regional communities. The world wide web of information and communication mean that one can affect and learn about life anywhere. Hence, this is the current reality and the immediate confronting issue that Thailand is faced with before the next general election, which is expected to take place in the coming years, if not months. How Thailand and the Thai citizens react to the sense of cosmopolitanism and fundamentalism, may shape and influence what the nation will be in the 21st century.

Keywords: globalisation, cosmopolitanism, fundamentalism, Thailand

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## Globalisation and Communication

In general, globalisation signifies two characteristics. Firstly, it connotes the idea of the world as a whole, the world as single place or space. Secondly, it suggests the changing concept of time-space reordering. The first of these – a consciousness of the world as a single space, is best summarised by Mike Featherstone (1995:72) who points out that globalisation “entail the sense that the world is one place, that the globe has been compressed into a locality, that others are neighbors with whom we must necessarily interact, relate and listen.” Driven by a mixture of political and economic influences, globalisation actually encompasses a much wider and more complex area, since it is transforming the very social institution in which people’s lives are played out, even in the case of those living in the poorest regions (Giddens 1998: 30-3). This transforming experience can be felt by actual physical relocation from one place to another, as it becomes much easier and much cheaper for people to travel. Or it can take the form of “mind traveling” in which people, influenced by media images and messages, imagine the world outside their immediate, face-to-face locales. Stuart Hall (1995:190) reason that:

*The relative separate areas of the globe come to intersect in a single imaginary space; when their respective histories are convened in a time-zone or time-frame dominated by the time of the West; when the sharp boundaries reinforced by space and distance are bridged by connections (travel, trade, conquest, colonization, markets, capital, and the flows of labor, good and profits) which gradually eroded the clear-cut distinction between “inside” and “outside”*

This means that different parts of the globe have become increasingly, as well as intensively, enmeshed and interconnected. It seems that every corner of the world is now “linked up,” though it is by no means entirely integrated. Neither is globalisation neutral and fair in its effects, though. Some peoples and some communities are more affected by it, while others experience less so. This implies that not everyone is now, and ever will be, taking part in the process equally, due to the uneven nature of globalisation. Nonetheless, it is safe to say that parts of globe are now “connected” as never before. Related to this notion is the second characteristic of time-space reordering. David Harvey (1989: 240) introduces the concept of “time-space compression” which “so revolutionises the objective qualities of space and time that we are forced to alter, sometimes in quite a radical way, how we represent the world ourselves.” The world, it seems, collapses “inwards” upon us because:

*As space appears to shrink to a “global village” of telecommunications and a “spaceship earth” of economic and ecological interdependencies-to use just two familiar and everyday images- and as time horizons shorten to the point where the present is all there is (the world of the schizophrenic), so we have to learn how to cope with an overwhelming sense of compression of our spatial and temporal worlds*

The human world is no longer a mere world of religious faith and cosmology. The reordering of time and space has an impact on most people’s everyday life. This

changing experience of time and space in social life that Harvey describes above, has much in common with what Anthony Giddens calls “time-space distanciation” (1990: 14). For Giddens, globalisation is considered as one of the most visible consequences of modernity, which is itself “globalising.” To be sure though, globalisation is not something that just happened overnight. Although media references to it have become common recently, the concept itself can be traced back to much earlier periods. In the premodern era, the scope for enduring global interactions – particularly transport and communications - was constrained by available technology (Held et al. 1999: 415-31). Some parts of the world remained untouched by the infrastructures of globalisation altogether. Interaction and exchange between cultures were limited to fragments of the military and political elites, and merchant adventurers and travelers. Later, access to the wealth and surplus of the New World and the stimulus of inter – imperial rivalry all contributed to the development of new power technologies and institutions within Europe. Antonio Gramsci (1971: 416-7) points out the hegemony of “Western” culture over the whole world, whereby different cultures have had an importance, in so far as they have become constituent elements of European thought and been assimilated by it in the process of hierarchical unification of world civilisation.

In modern globalisation (1850-1945), European power stretched into almost all of the accessible areas of the globe- the scramble for Africa, the dismemberment of China, the colonization of much of North Africa and Southeast Asia, and the opening up of Japan. The era saw very extensive as well as intensive patterns of economic globalisation. “cultural” patterns and interconnections also intensified, as new technologies of communication and transport were diffused, and the threat and consolidation of European empire across the globe forced other societies into an “unequal” cultural encounter with Europe and the United States. Global communication infrastructures were transformed both by the transportation revolution of the era and the creation of transoceanic telegraphy. With access to these networks, political, military and economic elites in the West were more closely and quickly informed about distant events in the world at large than ever before. Further, European imperialism has shaped what the world has become today through practices such as map-making and nation building (Sreberny-Mohammadi 1997). After 1945, globalisation has been marked by unprecedented intensity and extent. Whereas previous epochs were dominated by the collective or divided hegemony of Western powers, notably Britain, France, Spain, Portugal and Holland, the contemporary era can have only a single potential hegemonic power: the United States. Moreover, the contemporary era’s cultural and communicative global infrastructure is distinguished by the dominance of a single language, which is English – as a genuine global lingua franca. Whereas the vast majority of cultural interaction in previous eras were elite to elite, the majority of the contemporary interactions have been through popular cultural media and artifacts. Although the European model of state administration and industrialised production and urban living form the core of process of globalisation, this “global culture” is no longer the sole property of Europeans or Westerners (Spybey 1997). The recent development of global networks of communication and complex global systems of production and exchange “diminishes the grip of local circumstance over people’s lives” (Giddens 1990: 18). Furthermore, social relations and interaction in today’s world are not dependent upon simultaneous physical “presence” within a specific location, since communication technology has facilitated and fostered intense “relations between absent others, locationally distant from any

given situation of face-to-face interaction (ibid.)” To be sure, face-to-face communication in a specific local community is still a primary source and resource of human social relation, but the imagined world mediated by communication technology increasingly adds another dimension to people’s everyday lives.

In the field of communication, media in countries throughout the world swayed by the US media influence, "have either franchised from, or literally copied American TV formats" (Morley and Robins 1995: 223) America has, once again set the frame" for the production of television in most other countries. Those who own the American media or Western media in general are intimately involved in making sure that America and the West maintain their mastery over their former colonies or current client states. Thus, there is an increasing tendency for media generally around the world to be put into primarily "American packages (Tunstall 1977: 273). Films, radio, newspapers and magazines, advertising, and so forth have become the instruments of political and social control. They, as the argument runs, turn the audiences or the masses all over the globe into robotic and passive consumers of products and entertainment, unable to distinguish between art and trash or decide for themselves what is in their best interest. Moreover, the principal imperialists now operate out of New York or Los Angeles rather than London or Paris, which is why it seems more urgent to defend the culture of Europe, as opposed to the "Third World" as was earlier the case (Pells 1997: 266). As it has been suggested, any effort to grasp the emerging global system has to go through Washington, Wall Street, Madison Avenue, and Hollywood (McChesney 1998: 3). Global media and communication, it is argued, are in some respects the "advancing armies" of global capitalism. Oliver Boyd-Barrett (1998: 157) describes it as "the colonisation of communication space." In his reformulation of the media imperialist thesis, Boyd-Barrett (ibid.: 174) argues that far from being a dead concept, media impe much to offer as analytical tool. He, thus, stresses that:

*The systematic patterns of ownership, industrial a technical structure, and ideology practice that help to explain the extraordinarily limited opportunities access to the means of production and transmission for addressing mass audiences a scarcity of voices, a lack that is characteristic of all countries of the world.*

Media and cultural imperialism, hence, emphasise the ongoing system of domination on the global scale. Cultural imperialism is absolutely right in its emphasis on the system and the structure of inequality. But it is arguably inaccurate to portray globalisation as all predictable, and all bad. It will be argued that globalization fragments as it unifies (Robertson 1992). For this reason, it is preferable to move beyond the homogenising effect implied by the proponents of the cultural imperialism thesis, and instead acknowledge the unpredictability brought about by the globalisation process.

### **Glocalisation and Hybridity**

In the early 1990s, Roland Robertson (1995: 28) coined the term glocalisation to counteract the general tendency to assume the overriding of locality by the global. Significantly, what is called "local largely constructed on a trans- or super-local basis; glocalisation is thus "formed by telescoping global and local to make a blend."

According to Robertson the idea is modeled on Japanese domestication the agricultural principle of adapting one's farming techniques to local conditions. It is also adopted in Japanese business practice for "global localisation a global outlook adapted to local conditions. It should be pointed out that Robertson's glocalisation is not meant to replace one terminology with another, but to help crystallize the idea of globalisation more clearly. It also confirms the impossibility of separating the global from the local, and vice versa. The terms global and local are used "flexibly in relation to scale: the local is smaller than the global, which is the wider setting for the local (Massey and Jess 1995: 229). Thus, the local should be seen as a "fluid and relational space, constituted only in and through its relation to the global" (Morley and Robins 1995: 117). Furthermore, globalisation not only involves the linking of localities, it also involves the "invention" of locality, in the sense that tradition is "invented" and community is imagined" (Robertson 1995: 53). The former is well illustrated in the *Invention of Traditions*, a series of papers edited by Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger (1983), and the latter in *Imagined Communities* (Anderson 1991). Thus, glocalisation makes it possible for nation-states to "copy" ideas and practices from other societies. As a result, each nation-state may incorporate a different mix of "alien" ideas into its own existing ones.

This is what Yoshino (1992) shows in the case of Japan. He suggests that one motivation behind the thinking elites' concern with *Nihonjinron* Japanese uniqueness, in the 1970s and the 1980s was to promote better communication between the Japanese and non-Japanese through the "exploration and articulation of the peculiarities of Japanese behavior." Conscious recognition of Japanese behaviors is therefore considered to be a step towards better intercultural understanding. In other words, *Nihonjinron* discourse aims to normalise and sanction Japanese differences in the eyes of outsiders. At the same time, it allow the Japanese an opportunity, not so much to preserve, but to revise age-old tradition for present purposes. Afterwards Japanese public discourse since the 1980s has shifted from Japaneseness to *kokusaika* internationalisation. The glocalisation discourse serves to strengthen Japanese identity on the face of its incorporation o the outside world. In the process, Japanese identity relativises along with this openness. The phenomenon clearly can be seen in the Japanese advertising industry, which plays a crucial role in the contemporary merchandising of the West (Tobin 1992).

William o Barr (1994: discusses is startled by the representation of the West contemporary Japanese print The extraordinary of foreigners appearing in Japanese advertising is one of its most active features. also that, "what I experience studying such advertisements, which are not really intended for me as a part of their audience, are of myself and my culture that diverge in many ways from my own definitions there are so many Western models of self" The reason why O'Barr. is in Japanese advertisements, reasoned losing to do with the relationship of Japan and the West. Despite World War II, Japan eventually became prosperous. Domestic affluence stands on the paradoxical use of Western models and images in Japanese advertising. Western models and images are icons of abundance and success, connoting the power and might that had been demonstrated to Japan beginning in the 1970s n the war. The trend took a step further, Western models with when advertisers began to replace unknown celebrities. The first was Charles Bronson, who endorsed Mandom toiletries for men, followed in successive years long list that includes Paul Newman, Michael J. Fox, Charlie Sheen Audrey Hepburn, and so forth. This phenomenon may be

interpreted as global and up-market can thus the quality applied to the advertisements, products, these internationally known celebrities endorse. It is a glocalisation strategy implemented in the Japanese local context. And if globalisation is centered in the West and speaks English, the example of the English language is truly a case in point. Although the English language has increasingly become the true global language, it is "broken" English which is spoken and used largely by the majority of the world's population. In Japan, to continue with the example, James Stanlaw (1992: 74-5) shows how the use of English in Japan is more of an internal matter, since it bears little resemblance to the English spoken or used in other countries. As a result, Japanese English is used in Japan for Japanese purposes, and should not be expected to help much in cross-cultural communication.

Jane Stokes (1999: 152-3) discusses how the advertisement of McDonald's in Britain eschews the sense of Americanness in order not to add negative value to their commodity-sign. The image of McDonald's, thus is associated with an informal intimate family situation within an identifiable English middle-class and all hint of Americanness is erased. Moreover, the also localised, for instance, in Thailand there is local flavoured Mac and rice. In Italy a customer could have insalata caprese rather than French, salmon burger could be ordered instead of Big Mac in Norway. In Brazil, the restaurant promoted special meals with titles such "McCarnaval" and "Lanche Carioca" (Lull 1995: 57). This glocalisation allowed for more flexibility responding to local tastes and local conditions. Further, McDonald's burgers can become a connotation of freedom in the case of British Asians in Southall because they represent a food, which you don't have to have" (Gillespie 1999). As Gillespie elaborates as young people define themselves as individual bodies and cons they generally define themselves in opposition to their parents," and that,

*"the relatively humdrum, material corollary of their utopian ad talk, ...the visit with friends to McDonald's in Hounslow is an entirely real "escape into a new social and communicative space, in which young people can redefine their culture."*

John Tomlinson (1999: 125) also observes that the "traditional" British diet of roast beef dinner, fish and chips, and jam roly-poly, until the 1950s-60s have formed a fairly uniform style for the mass of the population, but today though not disappeared, it exists as a consumption choice of "eating British" as opposed to eating Italian, Chinese, Thai or Indian. Related to this is another concept called hybridization (Pieterse 1994; 57), which recognizes the interplay between cultures, while acknowledging the power relations in the process;

*Relations of power and hegemony are inscribed and reproduced within hybridity for wherever we look closely enough we find the traces of asymmetry in culture, place descent Hence hybridity raises the question of the terms of the mixture, the conditions of mixing and mélange. At the same time it's important to note the ways in which hegemony is not merely reproduced but refigured in the process by hybridization*

Pieterse's hybridisation enables us to understand how national identities can be selectively formed out of the "global-local" interplay. In one example, Marie Gillespie

(1995: 46) points out that "Bhangra" music hybrid form of entertainment has become very popular and now commonly performed at weddings, and parties among South Asian families across Britain. It is a form and style that British Asian youth can claim as their own. And it allows for an "assimilation of the values of urban British youth culture in combination with a continued attachment to the values shared with parents and rooted in the subcontinent. That identities, both individual and collective, are transformed by the force of globalisation is clearly beyond doubt. What is apparent, at least in Thailand, is that the "modern techniques of cultural production enable virtual reality of Thai culture past and present to be fashioned, then visited and exported" (Reynolds 1998: 120)

### **Thailand and the Fearful Futures?**

In the case of Thailand, over time the creative use of media and cultural resources by the country's political elites and professionals has resulted in "the construction of a modern national identity partly by relying on the power of cultural representations" (Kennedy 2001: 24). Thus, global influences are selected, accommodated and indigenized, and so turned into locally accessible and relevant resources by active, sometimes competing, national agents. Take the Grand Palace in the heart of Bangkok, for example, it used to be the administrative and religious center of the kingdom as well as the residence of the kings until the 1920s. On closer inspection, the palace has taken a number of representative elements from the outside world. As Joy Hendry (2000: 19-20) observes,

*the palace has within it a long cloister with 178 panels depicting a Thai version of the Indian epic poem, the Ramayana, commissioned by King Rama I, a series of Chinese stone carvings brought from China during the reign of King Rama III, and a miniature replica of the famous Khmer temple of Angkor Wat, commissioned by King Rama IV and completed during the reign of Rama V, who also built the Phra Thinang Chakri Maha Prasat, an imposing throne hall built by an Englishman in a neo-French Renaissance style, but with a roof of typical Thai-style golden spire*

Thus, power relations and hegemony allow one to retain a preferred identity and discard another, in accordance with particular historic circumstances. The example of Thailand's Grand Palace shows that over time, the country has taken influences from the outside world, which were more often than not perceived as "the global" in that particular period. The process of "hybridisation" then takes place, which requires a certain degree of local adaptation to the new foreign elements. At different points in time, the symbolic essence of India/China/Cambodia/ and Europe have been represented as part of how Thai identity was formed in the Grand Palace, signifying the sources and resources of hegemonic relations of cultural power between not limit merely to the state and its official programs; popular culture also takes part in it vigorously as demonstrated by Kasian Tejapira (2001: 150-70). The result is the negotiation and fragmentation of Thainess as an object of desire, which is often done through cultural consumption of symbolic sign and commodity. Thus, Thainess is alongside Englishness and so on, another choice among a variety of national and ethnic signifiers.

In some ways, the new global context recreates "sense of place and community" in very positive ways, giving rise to an energetic cosmopolitanism in certain localities in others, local fragmentation may inspire a nostalgic, introverted and parochial sense of local attachment and identity" (Morley and Robins 1995: 118). Cosmopolitanism is first of all an orientation, a willingness to engage with "the Other" (Hannerz 1996: 103). The cosmopolitan is someone who has a keen grasp of a globalised world as one, in which there are "many" and "no" others at the same time (Tomlinson 1999: 194). The two parts should not be seen as antagonistic, but as mutually tempering and thus disposing us towards an ongoing dialog both within ourselves and distanced cultural others" (ibid.: 195). Thus, the cosmopolitan might be aware of the legitimate pluralism of cultures, and possess an openness to cultural difference. They are those who actively seek immersion in other cultures, making themselves feel at home wherever they happen to be located. In so doing, as Paul Kennedy (2001: 19) suggests, they can, not only construct locality by "activating communication technologies and the media but also by utilising global social networks tied primarily to family and ethnic affiliations." As result, "community" has become independent of specific locations. Moreover, John Tomlinson (1999) urges cosmopolitans to act as "ethical glocalists," who embrace a sense of distant others as symbolically significant others. In this way, worldwide mutual benefits can be possibly hoped for. On the other side, those who feel threatened as a result of global local tensions are "fundamentalists" who, according to Giddens (1999: 48-9)

*call for a return to basic scriptures or texts, supposed to be read in a literal manner, and they propose that the doctrines derived from such a reading be applied to social, economic or political life. Fundamentalism gives new vitality and importance to the guardians tradition. Only they have access to the "exact meaning of the texts... Fundamentalism, therefore, has nothing to do with the context of beliefs, religious or otherwise. What matters is how the truth of beliefs is defended or asserted.*

Hence, there is an argument that the world is splitting up into smaller units and ethnic identities. Other trends in the media such as cheap videotape cameras, underground news agencies and newspapers, and the increasing ease of media piracy, will encourage localism, separatism, talking back to, and switching off from authority, the center, the national and foreign media (Tunstall 1977: 273-4). Elsewhere, Benedict Anderson (1992: 13) talks about the long-distance nationalist Irish in America, Ukrainians in Toronto, Tamils in Melbourne, Jamaicans in London, Croats in Sydney, Jews in New York, Vietnamese in Los Angeles, and Turks in Berlin who find it tempting to play identity politics by participating in the conflicts of their imagined Heimat now only fax-time away."

Whether short or long distance nationalism, globalization makes possible for both to be reimagined and reconstructed. Communication media provide a way to sustain cultural continuity spatial dislocation, "a way of renewing and maintaining tradition in new and diverse contexts through the appropriation of mediated symbolic forms (Thompson 1995: 203). Thus, "those we consider as other or alien new barbarians' will be increasingly in our and midst" (Morley Robins 1995: 25). The downside of an increased familiarity with the other, be it in face-to-face relations or through images or the representation of the other's world-view or ideology, is that it may lead to a



"disturbing sense of engulfment and immersion" (Featherstone 1995: 91). Stuart Hall (1992: 293-311) provides examples ranging from nationalism in Eastern Europe and the rise of fundamentalism in the Middle East where "purified" identities are being constructed and closure" tradition being restored, to the revival of little-Englandism in England where Shakespeare's sceptered isle is constantly produced and reproduced. The fundamentalist worldview has at its core "agency and action; the two key components of this are the belief that fundamentalists are chosen' by God, and that there is a clear threat to the foundations of their worldview" (Scott 2001: 82). Consequently, these two elements mobilise communities against specific targets for specific reasons: they always know who they are fighting against and for what they are fighting. This struggle is given divine agency through their belief in being "chosen": theirs is always a holy war.

Indeed, both cosmopolitanism and fundamentalism can be said to be "the children" of globalisation: one is tolerant and open to dialogue, while the other is the opposite. Cosmopolitanism allows for the expansion of many individual horizons of hope and fantasy, and the growth of a wide range of progressive transnational alliances;" while fundamentalism may result in unfortunate riots, refugee-flows, and both state and nonstate-supported torture and ethnocide" (Appadurai 1990: 307-8). It has been suggested that contemporary Islamic movements are "products of economic, political, and cultural globalisation, not simply local reactions and that new identities and movements arise, not just in response to, but "on the basis of the new scale of social organisation and cultural transmission" (Calhoun 1997: 92-3). As Calhoun comments on the message of Ayatollah Khomeini which spread widely through the world by tape recordings and found receptive audiences in South Asian Muslim enclaves in Britain as well as in Islamic countries from Sudan to Pakistan:

*It addressed Muslims as individuals wherever they might be, and as members of the great community of Islamic faith, but not primarily as members of intermediate ethnicities or local polities. The ideology of Islamic fundamentalism is not liberal but in many variants it is universalizing. It is an international, indeed global, way of conceptualizing the local.*

As globalisation continues, communities around the world will react to it and endeavor to develop strategies of either negotiation or resistance. In the case of rejection as Julie Scott (2000: 95) fundamentalism is here to stay and "will continue to be a potential resource for such resistance." Since globalisation begins to be felt more strongly, fundamentalism is likely to manifest itself in a shift toward even more radical and militant measures, as Scott also shows in the case of American Protestant fundamentalists in the rural America's mid- west. On another occasion, terrorism has resulted in many global tragedies since the 9/11. That can also be said to be a product of globalisation, in the ways in which terrorist act were planned, organised and coordinated. Its enormous impact was felt worldwide, showing how much the world has become truly globalised today. It is therefore clear which of the children of globalisation one, tolerant, open and constructive/the other, impatient, close and destructive is more desirable, in order for the world to be a better place.

## **Conclusion**

Contrary to the general belief that the process of globalisation entails the homogenising effect, the outcome looks to be a set of unpredictable cultural flows rather than the simple worldwide expansion of Western modernity. Globalisation is therefore not a domination of the global over the local. It does not, and will not, eliminate the localised character of accommodation, but rather creates a new kind of symbolic affiliation with the contemporary world.

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Thailand - is a country of exotic oriental culture, into which elements of the Indian, Chinese, Khmer and Western civilizations fit well. Buddhism and traditions. The daily and social life of Thais is inextricably linked with Buddhism. In every Thai house, in the place of honor, you will see the image of the Buddha. Ancient manuscripts clearly defined how the image of the Buddha should be depicted. Masters were obliged to embody 32 main and 80 auxiliary features of the saint in their works. Meaning of holidays. The traditional musical culture of Thailand is similar to Chinese, but has its own stylistic features in different regions of the country. Hear classical Thai music at local festivals, at the National Theater or in restaurants designed for tourists. National Thai instruments. There are many interesting elements of Thai culture that can be easy to miss from the outside. Here are some things you might not have known already. Thai culture has many idiosyncrasies, big and small. Here are some examples. Family matters. Family almost always comes first in Thailand, with a much greater emphasis placed on the extended family than it typically is in western countries. If you're shocked by the number of siblings a Thai person has, it's highly likely many of those are cousins - there's no word in Thai for cousin and people refer to cousins as their brothers and sisters. It's normal for extended families to live close to each other, with many Thais maintaining strong links with their home villages even if they move away for work. The Thai-Lao and Lanna Tai, who together account for about 40 percent of the population, were not assimilated into the national culture until the twentieth century. There have been Chinese in Thailand for centuries. In the nineteenth century, their numbers more than doubled until they constituted about 10 percent of the population. Along with Westerners, the Chinese merchant class dominated the economy in the nineteenth century, especially with the exportation of rice. In the early twentieth century, the Chinese established their own educational institutions, resulting in antipathy toward them. The culture of Thailand has evolved greatly over time, from its relative isolation during the Sukhothai era, to its more contemporary Ayutthaya era, which absorbed influences from all over Asia. Limited Indian, Chinese, Burmese, Khmer and other Southeast Asian influences are still evident in traditional Thai culture. Buddhism, Animism and Westernization also play a significant role in shaping the modern culture. Introduction to Thailand Culture. With picture perfect tropical islands, fascinating ethnic communities and a rich architectural history, Thailand is undoubtedly one of Asia's most popular destinations. Bangkok is its pulsing heart, where skyscrapers sprawl along the banks of the Chao Phraya River, juxtaposed against the grandeur of Wat Phra Kaew and the Grand Palace. Although Thailand has undergone numerous coups during the post-war years, they have evolved as a stable democracy and one of the driving economic forces in Southeast Asia, as well as one of its most popular tourist destinations. Thai Culture. Religion. Theravada Buddhism is the main religion in Thailand and remains a strong element in Thai culture.