
Globalization and mass society, 1970s onwards

The Cold War in Asia eased after the US departure from Indochina. The USA remained Thailand's military patron, but at a much greater distance. Thailand's orientation to a liberal market economy, established in the American era, strengthened as the socialist alternative declined on a world scale. After an initial period of economic and political adjustment to the US departure, Thailand caught the tail of an Asia-wide boom led by Japan and the East Asian 'Tiger' economies. The liberalization of first trade and then finance accelerated the pace of industrialization and urbanization, and incorporated Thailand more firmly within a global economy. The close of the Cold War also transformed neighbouring countries from enemy territory into economic hinterland – as markets, and as sources of human and natural resources. In the late 1980s, China emerged from its four decades of partial eclipse, and again became a major factor in Thailand's economy and position in the world.

The pace of economic transformation quickened over the last quarter of the 20th century. The balance of economy and society shifted decisively from rural to urban, and from parochial to open and globalized. The peasantry declined steeply as an element in the national economy, more moderately as a factor in the demography, and very markedly in the national culture. The rural remnant became an increasingly marginalized and truculent part of a society whose dynamism was decidedly urban.

Bangkok continued to dominate urbanization, swelling to over 10 million people by 2000 and earning the title of 'the most primate city on earth', over 40 times the size of the next largest place (Khorat). Business prospered. The middle class grew larger and more assertive. Millions were pulled out of the villages and across the nation's borders to swell the urban working class. Changes in literacy, mobility, and media created a new sense of a mass society whose obvious variety undermined the official discourse of the nation.



Map 6: Modern Thailand.

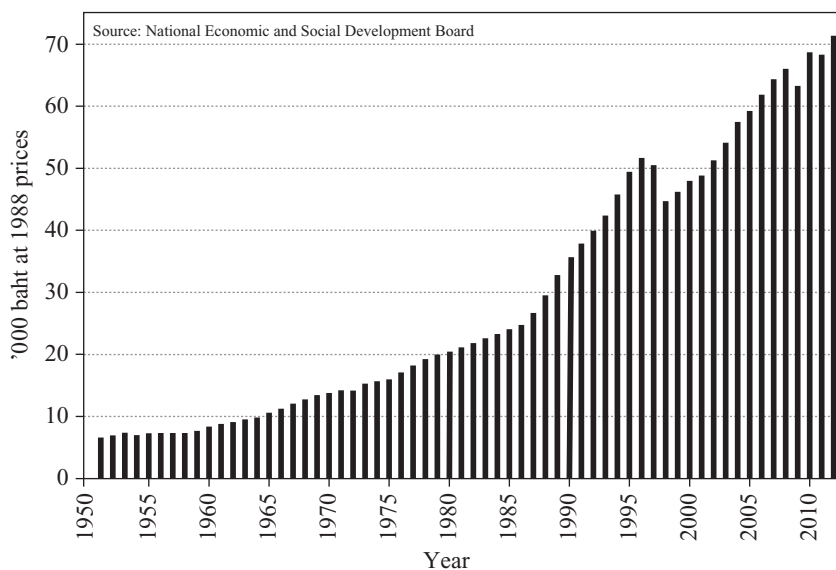


Chart 2: Real GDP per head, 1951–2012.

THE URBAN BOOM

Over the last quarter of the 20th century, Thailand experienced a rapid demographic transition. The birth rate dropped as a result of birth control campaigns, rising prosperity, and delayed child-bearing for education and careers. Annual population growth dropped from 3 per cent in the 1950s to 1 per cent in the 1990s. The bulge from the 1960s' population spurt entered the workforce in the 1970s and 1980s.

In this quarter-century, the urban economy grew faster than ever before on the foundations laid in the American period. The total size of the economy (GDP) increased fivefold and GDP per head tripled (Chart 2). Around a quarter of the working population moved out of agriculture. Bangkok grew from a city of 3 million to an urban sprawl housing over three times that number. In 1975, only two high-rise buildings poked above the shophouses. By the 1990s, a dreamer had planned to plant the world's tallest building in Bangkok's alluvial mud.

The urban boom started slowly. The political excitement of the 1973–76 era disrupted business. After October 1976, the prime minister, Thanin, hoped the return of firm rule would also mean the return of foreign investment: 'I have a vision. It is of US dollars, Deutschmarks . . . all flying into

Thailand, millions and millions of them'.¹ In fact, the dollars flew out, following the departing US military. Many US firms feared that Thailand would fulfil the domino theory. Besides, the military that again dominated government had an anti-business streak. Military ideologists argued that Thailand's unregulated and exploitative capitalism was responsible for provoking people to embrace communism (see next chapter).

Though dollars flew out, yen began to fly in. Japanese investors had come to Thailand since the late 1960s. Over the 1980s, Japanese foreign investment exceeded that from the USA by almost three times. Much of the investment was made by Japanese trading companies in tariff-jumping ventures to assemble automobiles and household goods from imported components for domestic sale. Some investment went into labour-intensive manufacturing, especially textiles, for both the local market and export. By the early 1970s, many 'modern' goods in Bangkok stores had Japanese brand names, not American ones. A satirical poem began:

First thing in morning,
Grasp White Lion toothpaste and enjoy brushing teeth;
Then make some tea with a National electric kettle
And smooth down hair with Tanjo pomade.
Put on Thaitorae Tetoron clothes,
Wear a Seiko watch when leaving home,
Listen to government news broadcasts on a Sanyo radio,
Drive a Toyota to pick up girlfriend.²

There was satire, but no protest. The students who had demonstrated against Japanese economic power in 1972 and again during the tour of the Japanese premier, Tanaka, in 1975 had been repressed. The Japanese government invested in cultural diplomacy. Most Japanese firms linked up with a joint venture partner chosen from among the big domestic conglomerates and let the partner manage local marketing, government contacts, and public relations.

Japanese joint ventures further strengthened the leading Thai conglomerates. When democratic politics re-emerged in the late 1970s, leading businesspeople joined or supported parties, and pressed to influence policy. In 1980, Boonchu Rojanastian, formerly managing director of Bangkok Bank and now deputy prime minister overseeing economic policy, proposed that government and business cooperate to create 'Thailand Inc.', an allusion to a popular book on Japan's success. Boonchu said: 'We should run the country like a business firm'.³ This effort failed. But business leaders also lobbied for policies through

associations of industry, commerce, and banking. In 1981, government agreed to form an official liaison committee between these bodies and the economic ministers. The business leaders used this route to lessen red tape and reduce the opportunities for bureaucratic restriction and gatekeeping. Business began reaching for political influence commensurate with its rising wealth.

Boonchu's scheme was for Thailand to follow Japan and the East Asian 'Tiger' economies in producing manufactured goods for export. From the mid-1970s, technocrats wrote the same strategy into the five-year plans. But as long as the old pattern of agricultural exports and limited protection of domestic manufacturing continued to deliver growth, vested interests were able to resist change. Even when the World Bank demanded 'structural adjustment' in the same direction in return for loans offered in the early 1980s, little of substance changed. Export manufacturing expanded, but very gradually.

The shift came in the early 1980s. Thailand's agricultural export growth faltered at the same time as US subsidies tailed away, and the second oil crisis of 1980–81 raised the cost of the country's single largest import. The government reacted initially with measures that delayed the impact of the oil crisis, while promoting tourism and labour export to the booming Middle East to earn more foreign exchange. But it was not enough. In 1983–84, the economy slumped. Debtors stopped paying their bankers. One bank crashed, and another bank and several finance companies had to be bailed out. The Finance Ministry ran out of money to service Thailand's foreign dues.

Reform-minded technocrats and business supporters seized the opportunity to switch Thailand towards export-oriented manufacturing. In November 1984, the baht was devalued by 14.7 per cent. The army chief went on television to demand the devaluation be reversed, but the technocrats held out and thereby gained greater influence. Leading business-people supported a change of policy. The government began to revise tariffs, tax systems, and investment promotion to support export-oriented manufacturing.

One external factor completed the change. In August 1985, the USA and Japan met to sort out the chaos in world currency markets after the oil crisis. Under the resulting Plaza Accords, Japan allowed the yen to rise against the dollar and dollar-linked currencies, such as the baht. Over the next four years, the value of baht in terms of yen halved and the value of Thailand's exports to Japan tripled. Thailand lurched into the 'Asian model' of export manufacturing.

The first to take advantage were local firms and established joint ventures. Banks and finance companies enthusiastically financed expansion. Exports increased by an average 24 per cent a year during 1984–89, led by garments, toys, bags, artificial flowers, and other labour-intensive products.

This local boom was soon overtaken. Japanese firms had to ‘escape the rising yen!’ (a Japanese slogan from this period). So too did firms from Taiwan, Korea, and Hong Kong, whose currencies were carried up in the yen’s wake. From 1988, foreign investment accelerated as East Asian firms moved export-oriented manufacturing to Thailand and other low-cost sites in Southeast Asia. Some of these firms (especially Taiwanese) were in labour-intensive sectors, but increasing numbers used Thailand as part of complex multi-country systems for manufacturing technology-based goods, such as integrated circuits, computer parts, electrical goods, and automobiles. By the end of the 1980s, the computer-part maker Minebea had transferred 60 per cent of its world production into Thailand and become the country’s largest private employer. In 1991, the government deregulated the automotive industry, encouraging Japanese and later US firms to increase their investments. From 1990 onwards, these technology-based goods were the fastest-growing sector of exports. Between 1993 and 1996, a new Japanese factory opened in Thailand every three days.

Tourism grew over the same era. The government first promoted tourism heavily as a counter to the early 1980s slump, and then continued as falling air-flight prices increased the potential market. Beach and island resorts were created for holiday-makers from the temperate north. Thailand’s religious aura attracted Asian visitors. The sex industry developed during the Vietnam war was repackaged for tourist demand. Annual arrivals grew from a few hundred thousand in the mid-1970s to 12 million at the turn of the millennium.

Thailand had very quickly ceased to be a fundamentally agrarian economy. In the early 1980s, agriculture still supplied almost half of exports. A decade later, the share was a little over a tenth.

DRAGON DAYS

The boom made urban Thailand – and especially Bangkok – a more dominant element in the economy, society, and culture. It converted businesspeople into a wealthier, more socially confident, and more politically influential elite. It brought a new confidence and pride in the Chinese social origins now shared across business, bureaucracy, and the professions.

Much of the profits of the boom went to the old conglomerates, which continued to diversify into new business opportunities. But financial liberalization and the sheer pace of the boom allowed others to participate. Several of the new entrepreneurs began from the provinces. The most successful of the era, Thaksin Shinawatra, came from an established business family in Chiang Mai. Thaksin rose rapidly by gaining government concessions for the new sector of telecommunications (mobile phones, satellite), and by exploiting the rising stockmarket. In five years from the late 1980s, his net worth rose to over US\$2 billion. Other new families prospered in telecommunications, property, retailing, and other sectors geared to the booming home market.

The boost in the income and the economic importance of the big-business community resulted in new social and political confidence. With almost no new immigration since 1949, virtually all Thai–Chinese families had entered a third or higher generation. The children of the leading families had taken privileged routes through the education system alongside the children of the old elite. From the 1960s, intermarriages between the great business families and more established clans became more acceptable. In the prospering 1990s, they were frequent. A son of the Chirathiwat retailing family (Central) married a royal relative. The son and heir of the Sophonpanich banking family married into one of the great bureaucratic households. Prominent figures from old aristocratic families decorated the boards of large corporations. A new business press and glossy magazines glamorized corporate success. Biographies of the founders of the conglomerates were written to celebrate their success and to inspire emulation.

Business families, both large and small, put more of their children (especially, but not only, the males) through higher education and into the bureaucracy and professions. Many recruited into the growing technocracy came from these origins. Puey Ungphakon was a pioneer example. Son of an immigrant fish wholesaler, he won scholarships to study in England and soared up the technocratic ladder to become Governor of the Bank of Thailand in 1959 at the age of 43. He founded Bank of Thailand scholarships, which enabled others to follow his path. Many children of wealthy families were schooled in the USA and returned to take leading roles in the technocracy, universities, and professions. The old division between Thai officialdom and Chinese business became blurred.

As urban enterprise became the driving force of the economy, intellectuals of Chinese origin demanded recognition of the Chinese role in the history, which the earlier nationalists (such as Wichit Wathakan) had tried to define as exclusively ‘Thai’. In 1986, the historian Nidhi Eoseewong

began a study of King Taksin by discussing *jek*, the pejorative word for Chinese or *lukjin*, and arguing that *jek* was part of the diversity that was the strength of Thai culture. Nidhi and Charnvit Kasetsiri showed that the founders of both the Ayutthaya and Bangkok dynasties probably had some Chinese ancestry, signifying the long and important Chinese role in Siamese history. Nidhi described the very large role of the Chinese in the trading economy and ‘bourgeois’ society of early Bangkok to emphasize how much the Thai nationalist historians had painted out. The poet and essayist Sujit Wongthet described himself in a 1987 book as *Jek pon Lao*, Chinese mixed with Lao, suggesting such mixing was typical of the true ‘Thai’ ancestry.

China’s reopening to the world in the 1980s, and its emergence as an economic power in the 1990s, further legitimized pride in Chinese origins. Families travelled back to visit their birthplace and resume links with relatives. The CP conglomerate became one of the largest foreign investors in China’s opening economy, and several other Thai–Chinese firms followed the example. Learning a Chinese language became popular for reasons of both ethnic pride and practical business. The Chamber of Commerce published a bilingual journal to promote Mandarin language skill. In the mid-1980s, the government lifted a ban on electoral candidates making appeals based on Chinese origins, following which many urban candidates boasted of their clan (*sae*) name and their place of origin. Chitra Konuntakiat became a media personality and best-selling author by explaining Chinese customs, ceremonies, and culture to those whose families had lost the memory over the past generations. Family histories of some of the great business families became bestsellers. The cover of a 2001 compilation entitled *Legendary Lives of the Jao Sua* displayed a golden dragon on a red background, with the subtitle, ‘from one pillow and one mat to the biggest businesses of Thailand’.⁴

At the height of the economic boom, this reclamation of origins spread to mass culture. A 1994 television drama series, *Lot Lai Mangkon* (Through the Pattern of the Dragon), traced the rise of a Chinatown street smart to the head of a great conglomerate – a pastiche of several real dynastic histories. A huge audience watched it and pundits analysed its significance. Political scientist Kasian Tejapira exclaimed: ‘What a “bourgeois revolution” in Thai entertainment culture!’⁵ A string of later television dramas dwelt on other parts of the migrants’ story, from the initial migration to the delicate topic of links with relatives in China. From *Lot Lai Mangkon*, the term ‘dragon’ was adopted as shorthand for Chinese entrepreneurial success, and its title song became an unofficial anthem:

From the Chinese land overseas
On a small boat drifting afar,
Penniless like a beggar . . .
Fights the battles of the business world . . .
Through the days and nights of struggling . . .
Dragon begins to spread its wings,
Pays back what it owes to this land.

In 1996, a singer who emphasized his Chineseness by dressing in pyjamas, sporting a pigtail, and calling himself Joey Boy was hugely successful with a rap song, 'Ka ki nang' (No Stranger). In the late 1990s, looks that would earlier have been called 'too Chinese' became the fashion for actors, singers, and even the winner of the Miss Thailand World contest. In a deconstruction of Thai identity unimaginable only a few years earlier, a leading businessman described his origins as '100 per cent Cantonese born in Thailand'.⁶

In the Phibun era, the government set out to 'assimilate' the immigrant Chinese into the 'Thai' nation. In a sense, the project was very successful. The Chinese learnt the Thai language, adopted new forms of behaviour, and identified themselves as citizens of the Thai nation. But at the same time they helped to mould a new urban culture that included speech, taste, and aesthetics from their own heritage. They also separated 'Thai' as a nationality from the old effort to conflate nationality, ethnic origins, and culture.

MAKING A MIDDLE CLASS

The tertiary education system had been designed to staff the expanding bureaucracy. In the 1960s, David Wilson noted – with some exaggeration – that the only educated Thai outside the ranks of officialdom were a few journalists, condemned to this trade because they failed the exams. With US patronage and encouragement, tertiary education began to expand. The first provincial universities appeared in the 1960s, the open Ramkhamhaeng University in the capital in the 1970s, and a swathe of new private and public colleges from the mid-1980s onwards. In the three decades following 1970, the numbers with tertiary education expanded 20 times up to 3.4 million. Most became not officials – the expansion of bureaucratic jobs slowed in the 1980s – but professionals, technicians, executives, and managers in the commercial economy.

Commercial salaries were much higher than official scales and accelerated from the mid-1980s as the economy boomed. One prime use of this new

wealth was to migrate away from the shophouse homes in the old city centre to new suburban 'villages'. In the late 1980s, this migration sparked a property boom in the paddyfields, swamps, and orchards on the city outskirts. This was a shift not only of location but also of culture – away from the tight inner-city neighbourhood to detached homes, and often away from an extended family to a nuclear one. The ads for the new housing projects played constantly on the theme of a 'new life' in the new location.

Consumption patterns shifted to models influenced by the west and Japan. The American period had allowed a glimpse of western lifestyles in Bangkok. Large numbers of Thai had travelled abroad for education. Reductions in tariffs as part of the economic liberalization in 1984, and more emphatically in 1991–92, cheapened the cost of imported goods. Western films increased in popularity. Satellites beamed in international news and cable television. Retailing changed to meet the new demand. The department stores that had become popular in the American era were superseded by palatial retail complexes, which glamorized the act of purchase.

Gender patterns in this new middle class were complex. As among the mass of working families, the women in the new white-collar working class went to work. In the expansion of tertiary education from the 1960s, female participation initially lagged slightly behind men, but then overtook it. By the 1990s, a majority of university graduates were women. In the total labour force, numbers of male and female graduates were roughly equal. Business families often channelled their daughters into learning useful technical skills (accountancy, business administration) and let them study longer, while their brothers were taken more quickly into the family business. As a result, by the 1990s, women outnumbered men in professional and technical careers. In many new business sectors, such as finance, they had a dominant role. By the late 1990s, all the deputy governors of the central bank were female, and in 2006 Tarisa Watanagase became the first female governor. Among the big Thai–Chinese business families, some women rose to prominence from a background as property owners and others simply by outshining their male siblings, creating a number of new female business role models, including Chanut Piyavong of Dusit hotels and Supalak Omphut of the Mall group.

Yet most family firms remained patriarchal. Curiously, the entertainment industry remained rather male-dominated, and the television dramas tended to repress women by portraying them as weakly subordinate, more emotional than rational, and prone to tragedy, especially as the reward for ambition. Meanwhile, political power retained a strong male bias, from

bottom to top. In 1995, only 2 per cent of village heads were female. In the bureaucracy, women were an overwhelming majority in the lower rungs and a negligible minority at the top. The female proportion of MPs never exceeded 15 per cent. As a result, the strong patriarchal bias in the legal framework changed slowly and women continued to be disadvantaged, especially in marital law. Men continued to acquire women as minor wives or through the sex industry, while demanding different standards from women.

LABOURING HARD

The policy shift in the early 1980s quickened the pace of urbanization. Urban labour demand grew. The multiple crises in agriculture (see below) encouraged more migration out of the villages. Between 1985 and 1995, the manufacturing labour force doubled to almost 5 million. At the height of the boom, in five out of six years running, a million people a year shifted from agriculture to an occupation in industry or services. Many still circulated between city and village for short or medium periods. But gradually more moved more permanently to the city. The catchment for urban migration spread beyond the central region, which had supplied most of the early migrants. From the mid-1980s, the majority came from the northeast, the poorest region. The second language of the city became the northeastern dialect of Lao.

During the 1973–76 political upsurge, workers secured a labour law that legalized unions and federations. After the 1976 coup, the Thanin government revoked the law and promised foreign investors they would have no difficulty with strikes. This policy was eased in the late 1970s, but labour was still kept under control by a battery of measures. Legislation restricted unions to labour issues and outlawed political activities. As part of anti-communist strategy, the military intervened to divide worker organizations and to co-opt labour leaders with patronage ties. The government established tripartite (labour–employer–government) bodies, which set minimum wage rates and mediated labour disputes. The labour bureaucracy practised divide and rule by selective patronage. Once Thailand set out to attract foreign firms manufacturing for export, this enforced docility of labour was advertised as one of the country's attractions.

With growing labour demand and a more democratic atmosphere in the 1980s, labour organization temporarily strengthened. In 1989–90, unions won a Social Security Law providing basic medical care and life insurance. The minimum wage was raised. State enterprise unions successfully

resisted proposals for privatization. But these victories were short-lived. After a military coup in 1991, the junta government banned all unions in public enterprises, halving union membership to below 5 per cent of total workers in manufacturing. A labour leader who opposed the ban disappeared without trace.

Government antagonism towards labour encouraged employers to evade labour laws. Textile, garment, and other labour-intensive industries were the first to grow in the boom. Some of the workers were gathered into factories, but many more worked at home or in small workshops under putting-out or subcontract arrangements. By the late 1980s, garment making was estimated to employ 800 000 in this way. Gem, shoe, toy, and many food industries used similar arrangements. In factory-based industries, such as textiles, employers hired workers as subcontractors or on short-term contracts so they could reduce their labour force easily and evade the labour laws. A 1988 survey of factories in one of Bangkok's industrial suburbs found 61 per cent of workers were hired on subcontract.

The technology firms that led industrial growth from the late 1980s needed a more trained and settled workforce. Conditions in these factories were generally better than elsewhere and the work was highly prized. Yet employment conditions were still uncertain. The processes that these firms located in Thailand were mostly assembly and other labour-intensive jobs that required keen eyesight and good manual skills. Firms preferred younger workers. Few could expect to remain employed beyond the age of 40, and in some firms beyond 30. Besides, many firms were footloose. While the computer-part maker Minebea was the country's largest single employer in the early 1990s, five years later its workforce had dwindled to a tenth. Many computer disk-drive firms moved from Singapore to Thailand in the early 1990s, making the sector one of the largest employers, and then moved on to China a decade later.

With no unemployment benefit system and usually no pension scheme either, some workers retained links to their village as their main form of social security. In the 1997 economic crisis (see below), around 2 million people, or one-in-eight of the non-agricultural workforce, were laid off within a matter of months. Many relied on the village as a temporary shelter while they sought new work. But large parts of the working class had become permanently urbanized and severed from any rural base. In the crisis, they dropped into sweatshops, vending, and petty services to survive.

With the formal union movement trussed up by legislation, patronage, and bureaucratic control, a movement of informal 'labour clubs' spread

through the working-class suburbs of the capital. They organized protests at the workplace level, provided mutual support, and allied with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and activists. After a fire at the Kader toy factory in May 1993 killed 188 and injured 500, this informal movement pressured government for better regulation of health and safety at work.

Many firms preferred women workers, not only because of their skills but also because they could be paid less. From the early 1980s, three out of every five additional recruits to the manufacturing labour force were women, and by 1995 half of the total was female. In seven of the 10 leading export industries, four-fifths of the workers were female. Beyond the factories, women supplied much of the other labour needed by the booming urban economy. They carried bricks on construction sites, staffed the department stores, sold noodles on the pavement, hawked T-shirts in the markets, and welcomed the tourists in the hotels and bars. By the mid-1990s, more women than men were leaving the villages in the migration streams. The birth rate fell sharply as women delayed marriage and childbearing. The nature of the rural family changed. Young couples often left children with their grandparents in the village while they went to the city to work. In some villages of the northeast, 'There is no one left but old people and little children'.⁷ A 1997 song, 'Home', told the story:

Oh you young kids, so much suffering, not enough to eat.
The young brides and bridegrooms have all run away to Bangkok.
Only old folks and young kids are left behind,
Waiting for them to come home and work on the land of their birth.⁸

Money in the pocket gave working women a new standing in the family and in village society. Festivals that used to mark the transitions in the agricultural calendar were transformed into occasions for young people to return from city jobs to visit the village, pay respects to their parents, make merit at the temple, display their prosperity, see their children, and maintain their long-term ties to family and community.

As the labour market tightened in the early 1990s, the borders were tacitly opened to admit labour migrants from neighbouring countries. By 1994, an estimated 400 000 had crossed the borders and were working in Thailand. Three years later, the number had grown to 1–3 million (nobody was quite sure), possibly 10 per cent of the total labour force. The vast majority of these came from Burma, in flight from its collapsed economy and repressive regime. Smaller numbers came from Cambodia, Laos, and China. They worked in the fishing industry – some fishing ports became

Burmese enclaves – on fruit plantations, as housemaids, and in sweatshops. Much of the garment industry relocated to the Burmese border region. The government established a permit system to legitimize these migrants in 1995, made a half-hearted attempt to eject them during the 1997 crisis, and reintroduced permit systems with restrictions on areas and sectors in 2000. But only a minority registered under these schemes. Most were allowed to stay under informal arrangements negotiated in each locality. They had few civil rights and no protection. They earned around 50–60 per cent of local wage rates. Those who argued with their employers risked being beaten or killed. By the early 2000s, they had become a semi-permanent labour under-class of 2–3 million people.

The first deaths from HIV/AIDS in Thailand were recorded in the mid-1980s in the gay community. In the late 1980s, the infection rate increased rapidly by transmission through the large sex industry, especially in the north, making Thailand one of the centres of the epidemic. By the mid-1990s, 2 per cent of the sexually active population was reckoned to be HIV-positive, and AIDS had become the single largest cause of death. The government launched containment policies from 1990 and the sex industry cooperated for survival. By the mid-1990s, the rate of new infections had begun to decline and Thailand had become a model for community-based approaches to the problem. But infection continued to spread beyond the sex industry, especially by transmission from philandering men to their wives and among sexually active youth. By the early years of the new century, 600 000 were infected.

RURAL DECLINE

In the 1970s, analysts predicted that Thailand's peasant society would be transformed into a society of commercial farmers and landless labourers by population pressure and the power of the market, especially in advanced areas, such as the central region. But around 1980, the emphasis of the economy shifted away from agriculture. Industry overtook agriculture in contribution to GDP in 1984, and to exports in 1985. By 2000, agriculture supplied only 10 per cent of GDP and 7 per cent of exports. Once the economy was no longer driven by agriculture, the government's attention and private investment were redirected elsewhere. The CP agribusiness conglomerate turned to telecommunications. Sugar firms bought into hotels. Rice millers built Bangkok shopping malls.

The land crisis never materialized because people were drawn away to the city. In the central region alone, the rural labour force dropped from

3.5 million to 2.5 million over the boom decade (1985–95). To compensate for the drain of labour, farmers invested in tractors, automated harvesters, chemicals, and other aids. Growing urban demand and easy access to markets enabled the remaining farmers to move into higher-value cropping patterns. Some grew three crops of rice a year. Some abandoned paddy and planted fruit and vegetables for Bangkokians to eat. Some grew crops such as babycorn to be canned for export. In the 1990s, many farmers turned their rice paddies into seawater ponds for tiger-prawns, reaping in two years profits equivalent to a lifetime of paddy-farming, though with high risks from disease and salination of the land. For the first time in 150 years, the area planted to paddy in the Chao Phraya delta shrank.

In other areas with good natural conditions and good access to booming urban markets, the same pattern was repeated. In the Chiang Mai valley, farmers turned paddy land into lychee and longan orchards for export to China. In the coastal rice-bowls down the east coast of the peninsula, more farmers took to fish and prawn farming. On the lower Mun and Chi rivers in the northeast, the saline land proved perfect for growing the jasmine rice preferred by urban consumers and overseas markets. In all these areas, smallholder family farming survived, but became much more commercialized. The younger generation of the family left for education and urban work, but with better roads and bus services, and with the relocation of industry closer to the labour supply, many could commute on a daily or weekly basis. The higher-value crops and urban incomes brought more money into the community, creating opportunities for new local businesses, such as shops, auto repair, beauty parlours, and karaoke restaurants. In these advanced rural areas, villages acquired a suburban air.

Beyond these areas favoured by nature and urban access, conditions were more difficult. Farmers faced two problems. First, from the mid-1970s agricultural prices declined on a worldwide scale. If measured in terms of sacks of rice, the cost of a two-stroke motorcycle, one of the rural family's first durable purchases, increased three to five times over the next 30 years. In more remote and less fertile upland areas, it was difficult to counter this trend of falling prices by diversifying away from crops such as rice, maize, and cassava whose prices were falling.

Many farmers subsided gradually deeper into debt. Between 1987 and 2000, total debt to BAAC, the government's agricultural bank, grew 10 times (from 25 to 256 billion baht). The government tried to counter the price fall by crop diversification schemes, but with poor results. Some schemes failed because of harsh local conditions. Some failed because of incompetence – imported cattle breeding stock that proved to be infertile

were famously dubbed 'plastic cows'. Some failed because government agencies recommended the same scheme to everybody, creating a market glut.

Some farmers reacted to the unreliability of the market by trying to withdraw from it. Local communities invented credit clubs, rice banks, buffalo banks, and environmental groups to reduce their dependence on the outside. A Chachoengsao village headman, Wibun Khemchaloem, abandoned the rice monoculture, which had sunk him in debt, and devised a small mixed farm, which was virtually self-sufficient. He became one of several public advocates for this strategy. In 1994, the king presented a model version of a similar mixed farm, along with a 'new theory' based on the Buddhist principles of sufficiency (*pho yu pho kin*) and self-reliance (*phueang ton eng*).

This strategy was inspirational, but difficult. Many other households survived by compromising between subsistence and market. They clung onto their land and village base, still grew their own rice in spite of market logic, hunted and gathered for foods and other needs, and took part in non-market forms of local exchange. At the same time, they sent out more of their youth to earn cash from the urban economy. By the mid-1990s, almost two-thirds of farm households' total cash income was earned away from the farm (four-fifths in the northeast), including 43 per cent from wage work. The cash was used for everyday consumption, for investment in sustaining the increasingly unprofitable farm, and for education, which might release the next generation from farming.

The second problem was that the booming urban economy became a competitor for the resources of land, water, and forests on which many smallholder farmers depended.

Around Bangkok, housing estates and factories sprawled across the Rangsit tract, which had pioneered the rice frontier a century earlier. To the east, some of the pioneer areas of the 1950s upland expansion were buried under the Eastern Seaboard's industrial estates. In the north, resort projects sprouted on valley slopes. Land was also lost to new highways, to golf courses (over 100 were built in the boom decade), to quarries for construction materials, and especially to dams and power stations feeding the growing urban demand for power. The total cultivated area shrank by 2 per cent over the 1990s.

After the defeat of the CPT, the Forestry Department began to reassert control over the depleted forests, half of which had disappeared in 30 years. It agreed with a suggestion from some agribusinesses to grant areas of degraded forest on long-term leases at minimal rents for 'reforestation' as

commercial plantations. Many businesses took this opportunity to plant large areas with trees for the pulp and paper industry, particularly eucalyptus. Adjacent villages objected because they lost usage of the forest and because eucalyptus trees drained the local watertable. Activists discovered that politically connected firms used these provisions to take control of areas of pristine forest. Villagers in parts of the northeast attacked bulldozers clearing the land for eucalyptus, destroyed seedling nurseries, and burnt Forestry Department property.

In early 1989, a landslide on an eroded hillside in the south carried away two villages. The incident triggered the government to revoke all logging concessions and declare the forests closed. In fact, illegal logging continued. Particularly along the Burmese border, timber was felled and then transported in and out of Burma (sometimes only in the paperwork) so that it could be claimed as legal import. In many other areas, resorts continued to be built on cleared forest land. Between 1989 and 1995, another 7 million rai of forest disappeared. Villagers living in the forest adapted the idea of 'ordaining' trees by wrapping them with a yellow robe, as in the ordination of monks, to prevent them being felled. In 1995, villages across the north cooperated to ordain 50 million trees to mark the king's jubilee.

Dams built for irrigation and hydropower generation also deprived villagers of land, forests, and fishing rights. The first dams had been built on the upper reaches of the Chao Phraya where they flooded deep valleys in mostly unoccupied forests. But such prime sites were rapidly exhausted. By the mid-1980s, most future plans would dam rivers used by local villagers for fishing and flood areas that already had a large settled population. Villagers affected by such schemes began to protest.

Water became another focus of competition, especially in the Chao Phraya delta. Because of expanding cultivation in the north, less and less water reached the dams storing water at the head of the delta. Meanwhile, Bangkok's usage of that water increased: from 0.5 million to 7.5 million cubic metres per day between 1978 and 2000. During 1993–94, the El Niño climatic effect lessened annual rainfall, resulting in a sharp drop in water storage in the dams. The Irrigation Department issued a ban on second-crop cultivation in the Chao Phraya delta. Many farmers refused to comply and fought officials trying to control the watergates. Officials began to talk about a 'water crisis' and the need to tax and regulate irrigation, especially to safeguard water supplies for the capital.

Coastal waters were another focus of competition. From the 1960s, the marine fish catch increased from 0.4 million to 3 million tons a year because

of new large-scale technology and the promotion of seafood exports. Stocks began to decline steeply in the early 1990s. Small-scale fishermen were supposedly protected by a 3-kilometre exclusion zone for trawls and push-nets, but the law was poorly enforced. In the early 1990s, coastal communities petitioned authorities to enforce the law and occasionally blockaded fishing harbours in protest.

The rapid exploitation of natural resources, begun as the foundation of 'development' in the American era, had transformed Thailand from a resource-abundant into a resource-scarce country within a single generation. While poverty diminished steadily over the long boom, the division between rich and poor grew steadily worse over four decades. Primarily this was a division between urban and rural, and especially between the capital and the periphery – in particular, the northern hills, the southern border provinces, and the resource-poor northeast.

RURAL RESISTANCE

The first NGOs were established in the late 1960s. Their progenitors were Dr Puey Ungphakon, the outstanding technocrat with an interest in social justice, and Sulak Sivaraksa, the activist-journalist and advocate of this-worldly Buddhism. In the 1976 terror, both were forced to flee overseas, permanently in the case of Puey. From the late 1970s, several of the 1973–76 veterans took up NGO work as an alternative route to social change, avoiding the political polarization and violence of 1976. In the early 1980s, a movement of 'development' monks began to apply the teaching of this-worldly Buddhism that monks should work for social improvement.

In the mid-1980s, several activists in this fledgling NGO movement began to argue that the top-down development policy adopted since the 1960s had failed to improve the lives of the majority of people; rather, it had brought great social and emotional disruption. Top-down development demanded that villagers change to a more modern, scientific, and market-rational way of operation. By contrast, the activists argued that development should be rooted in villagers' own knowledge, and should try to strengthen local culture and preserve village-style social relationships, since these were inherently more humane and more in line with Buddhist values than those of urban capitalist society. Seri Phongphit, a former Catholic priest and university lecturer, said: 'Let [the people] be themselves; let them be subject to their development; give them back their power, their decision, their education, their health, their government, their

values, their self-respect, [their] confidence'.⁹ This approach was dubbed the 'community culture movement' and became a guiding principle for many NGOs.

In the mid-1980s, the environmental movement provided another source of support. In 1982, the government proposed to build the Nam Choan dam, which would flood 223 square kilometres of one of the largest remaining forest tracts in mainland Southeast Asia. The protest brought together local villagers threatened with displacement, activists from nearby towns, Thai NGOs, journalists, academics, monks, singers, and international environmental groups. The protest forced the government to delay the project and finally cancel it in 1988. This experience founded several new NGOs, which provided a bridge between local protests, middle-class sympathizers, and the international environmental movement.

In the early 1980s during the anti-communist campaign, army patrols and vigilante networks intimidated the countryside into silence. The few who resisted this regime were quietly 'dealt with'. But over the decade, the pressure gradually lifted. A new cadre of rural leaders emerged. Some, like the Karen leader Joni Odochao, had worked with NGOs. Some were villagers who had climbed the education pyramid and returned home to become local teachers. Some had gained urban experience as migrant workers. The northeastern leader, Bamrung Kayota, had been a migrant worker and labour leader in Bangkok in the 1973–76 era.

In the early 1990s, several protests gelled into new organizations. Northeastern groups protested against failed government schemes of agricultural innovation, which had left them with large debts. Other groups protested against a massive army scheme (*Kho Jo Ko*) to move 6 million 'squatters' out of 1253 'forest' areas. These two protests then joined forces to oppose a government scheme to form an Agricultural Council that would offer agribusinesses, but not small farmers, an influence over policy making. From these events came the foundation of the Small-scale Farmers of the Northeast. In parallel, protests against evictions of forest dwellers in the northern hills led to the creation of the Northern Farmers Network.

Out of these events also came a new strategy of protest. To oppose the *Kho Jo Ko* forest clearances, farmers marched towards Bangkok along the Mitraphap highway, the first of the US-financed roads built into the region three decades earlier (Figure 21). The government dispatched ministers by helicopter to negotiate an agreement by the roadside before the march descended the escarpment onto the central plain. *Kho Jo Ko* was abandoned.



Figure 21: Farmers walk into politics. March along the Mitrachap highway in protest at the *Kho Jo Ko* land resettlement scheme in June 1992.

Over the next three years, the northeastern groups repeated this strategy to press a slate of issues that included agrarian debt, falling crop prices, access to forests, compensation for old dam projects, and cancellation of new ones. The Northern Farmers Network led a similar march through the Chiang Mai valley on issues of land and citizens' rights for hill peoples. In December 1995, a new umbrella organization was formed. The Assembly of the Poor was a loose network of local protests with no leader and only a skeletal organization of NGO 'advisers'. Its name was a deliberately accusatory polemic aimed at a prospering city. The Assembly gathered together northeastern farmers, northern hill-dwellers demanding nationality and land rights, southern fishing communities threatened by big trawlers' depletion of fish stocks, and a few urban labouring groups. In 1996, it brought thousands of protesters into the city and negotiated an agreement with the prime minister, which lapsed when the government fell shortly after. In 1997, the Assembly brought more than 20 000 for a sustained 99-day protest and negotiation with the government, which ended with an unprecedented raft of concessions, including compensation of 4.7 billion baht for villagers displaced by dams, recognition that settlers

could remain in 'forests', and review of several pending dam schemes. But the government fell at the end of the year and its successor revoked most of the concessions.

The Assembly of the Poor was the high-profile peak of a swelling movement of rural protest. The 1997 economic crisis further stoked dissent. In 1998, crop prices fell and input prices rose as the value of the baht depreciated; remittances from the city dwindled; and many migrants were thrown back on the support of the rural household, at least temporarily between job searches. In early 1998, several rural organizations demanded relief for rural debt. Over the next two years, many farmer groups blocked roads or marched to the city to demand government intervention to support crop prices. The Assembly of the Poor demanded restoration of the dam compensation payments and opening of the sluice gates on the Pak Mun dam, a small hydro project that had devastated the ecology and fisheries of the lower Mun River. The aggrieved fishing communities camped semi-permanently outside Government House. In the north, where the government had persisted with attempts to clear the forests by defining more areas as national parks, hill villagers protested against (often violent) attempts at eviction.

Local groups became bolder in protest at large infrastructure projects that the government planned with no local consultation and perfunctory environmental assessments. Protesters failed to halt the building of the Yadana pipeline bringing natural gas from Burma through the western forests, but blocked (at least temporarily) plans for two coal-fired power stations on the east coast of the peninsula. After the World Commission on Dams condemned the Pak Mun dam, the electricity authority abandoned other planned hydro projects. A proposed gas pipeline across the southern tip of Thailand into Malaysia provoked three violent clashes between protesters and police. In several places, villages resisted the siting of waste disposal schemes.

In sum, as the urban economy increasingly attracted investment and government attention, the likelihood of a full-blown capitalist transformation of agriculture receded. The countryside remained an economy of smallholder farms, though more tied to the market than ever before. The countryside's contribution to the economy drastically fell, but the numbers living in the villages declined more slowly – to just under half the total population at the turn of the millennium. This semi-peasant society was too varied, too fragmented, and too weighted by history to translate its numbers into equivalent power in a parliamentary democracy designed and dominated by urban interests. But from the early 1990s, rural groups

were able to exploit new political spaces in media, in academic and policy debate, and on the national highways and city pavements. As one leader said: 'The power of the soldier is in his gun. The power of the businessman is in his money . . . From our experience, the power of the poor is in our feet'.¹⁰

The peasant had ceased to be the 'backbone of the nation', either as a producer of the national wealth, or as an imagined passive supporter of the political order. Against this background of growing protest, the state's policy towards the countryside gradually changed. In the late 1980s, the state stopped taxing agriculture and started providing subsidies. Schemes for crop pledging and price guarantees were initially short term and often geographically restricted, but gradually became more widespread and regular. By 2006, a quarter of the rice crop was subsidised. The spread of these schemes was a direct result of elective government. Political parties proffered these schemes because they were popular and because they produced a tangible achievement by reducing numbers below the poverty line.

Government also increased its spending on roads that linked villages to the market, on irrigation schemes, on extension work, and on community development. Aside from their impact in boosting incomes, these schemes employed more and more people from the villages, either full- or part-time. Government also encouraged the spread of contract farming for fruit, vegetables, flowers, soyabean, and jasmine rice. Some farmers and some academics opposed contract farming projects as exploitative, but generally farmers welcomed them as they reduced risk, brought in capital, and overcame the problem of accessing markets. Starting with a World Bank project in the 1980s, government gradually extended secure land titles to over 20 million hectares, covering most agricultural land outside areas designated as forests or national parks.

These changes did not transform rural society but helped to sustain the pattern of small-scale family farming. Households continued to supplement agricultural earning by tapping the rising wealth of the urban economy through migration. In one remote village in the northeast surveyed in the 2000s, households had younger members working in 16 of Thailand's provinces as well as Laos, Malaysia, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Japan and the Netherlands. Moreover, the remittance flows and government spending were gradually giving the local economy a more urban character. Villagers had opened a beauty salon, barber shop, rental car business, tractor hire business, rice mill, car repair shop, grocery and small restaurant. Several were working for government agencies.

Compared to their parents, a rural family in the early 21st century had three times as much income. Aspirations rose along with income. Families embraced education because it offered a chance for their children to escape from agriculture. Whereas their parents' horizons had been largely limited to the village and locality, the new generation travelled to work in Bangkok and overseas, and accessed the outside world daily through television and increasingly through the internet. People were able to see with their own eyes the great inequalities in Thailand, not only the massive gap in incomes between village and city, but also the very different quantity and quality of public services, and the big differences in status, dignity, and respect at different levels of society. In the early 21st century, resentment of inequality crept into political discourse. A demonstrator in 2010 explained, 'What we mean by democracy is fairness . . . We want fairness in three ways: legal, political, and educational.'¹¹ This concern did not arise because inequality was rising (in fact it had begun to fall, slowly) but because more people were aware of it, and resented it.

Whereas for their parents, government had been something remote and probably malevolent, for the new generation the situation had become more complex. In the rural economy, government now loomed large as a patron, employer, and banker. As a consequence, people had growing expectations about government's duty to provide them with help, and were increasingly drawn into the politics of negotiating with government at every level from locality to nation.

This combination of rising incomes, rising aspirations, growing resentment of inequalities, and rising expectations of government would transform Thai politics in the early 21st century.

THE COMING OF MASS SOCIETY: PRINT

Over the last quarter of the 20th century, a mass society emerged. More people were more deeply involved in a national economy. Communications shrank social space. The spread of mass media created a mirror in which the society was reflected and became more conscious of itself.

In 1975, nine-tenths of the working population had at least primary education, but only 6 per cent or just over a million people had gained secondary or higher education, which was largely designed to train officials. Nothing more was deemed appropriate for a predominantly peasant society.

But the industrial boom from 1985 created a demand for people with enough basic skills for factory work. The government responded by increasing education's share of the national budget from a sixth to a quarter, adding

secondary classes to more rural schools, and providing free tuition, lunches, and uniforms to reduce the cost. Over the last quarter of the 20th century, the numbers with secondary or higher education multiplied almost 10 times to 10 million.

This expansion created a readership for writing of all kinds. By the 1990s, even a small upcountry town had at least one shop with newspapers and magazines out the front, and a stock of several thousand pocketbooks in the back. Because publishing costs were low, these books and magazines were cheap and widely bought.

In novels and short stories, the social realism of the 1970s continued into the 1980s with a bleaker atmosphere, such as the novels of Chart Kobjitti, including *Kham Phiphaksa* (The Judgement, 1981). More popular were the melodramas aimed at the rapidly growing middlebrow readership by writers such as Tomayanti and Krisna Asokesin. In their own way, these popular family dramas and historical romances acted as a mirror for the broadening urban middle class to form an identity. In the 1990s, new writers like Prabda Yoon wrote for a young readership, which had grown up in the era of globalization.

Much larger was the explosion in magazine publishing. Here the most popular genre was 'real life' magazines, including sensationalist titles such as *Chiwit Tong Su* (Life's Struggle), which featured tales of crime, love, mystery, and personal tragedy; and a feel-good type exemplified by *Khu Sang Khu Som* (Perfect Couples), which featured tales of success, happiness, and the overcoming of hardship.

Newspaper publishing surged in the 1970s. Some 177 licences were issued for dailies in 1974 alone. Some, including *The Nation* in English and *Prachathipatai* (Democracy) in Thai, were breakaways from established titles and dedicated to a more aggressive and committed style of journalism. Censorship was reimposed in 1976 but eased after a year. *Matichon* was founded as a 'quality' Thai daily in 1977. In 1980, it inaugurated a weekly of news analysis that grew into a compendium of political commentary, short stories, and entertainment, which was widely copied. During the post-1985 boom, Sondhi Limthongkun launched *Phujatkan* (Manager) as a business daily that combined economic news with politics, and was again copied by several other press houses. In 1991, the press successfully campaigned to revoke Thanin's Decree 42, which gave government the power to suspend publication or revoke the licences of newspapers. When the generals took power by coup in 1991 and tried to impose censorship by threat, several papers defied them. By the 1990s, dailies reached almost two-thirds of urban adults, with around half reading the popular *Thai Rath*

and 6–7 per cent reading the upmarket *Matichon*. A few provincial centres, such as Chiang Mai, had local papers, usually weekly. But essentially the press was national, issued from Bangkok, and reaching most of urban Thailand and a fifth of people in the countryside.

All other forms of publishing were overshadowed by the genre of self-help or *hao thu* (how to) manuals on all subjects but especially business success, health, and social conduct. They provided a new urban society with the guidance that neither formal education nor parents could. Many of the most popular were built around literary works, especially Chinese texts, such as the *Art of War*, the exploits of the judge *Paobunjin*, and *Sam kok* or the Three Kingdoms.

In their various ways, the daily press, 'real life' magazines, melodramatic novels, and *hao thu* manuals shared the experience, fears, and aspirations of the broadening urban middle class.

THE COMING OF MASS SOCIETY: MOBILITY AND MEDIA

In 1959, the anthropologist Michael Moerman had taken two and a half days by pony to reach his study village in Phayao province. A return trip in 1987 took 90 minutes by road. Four things transformed the Thai village's relations with the outside world: paved roads, tour buses, television sets, and two-stroke Japanese motorcycles (Figure 22).

The USA stimulated the construction of provincial highways in the 1950s and 1960s to reach its air bases. The Thai army began to build feeder roads in the 1970s to have better access to the areas commanded by jungle guerrillas, and the Accelerated Rural Development programme used US aid funds to pave village roads. Local politicians with construction businesses kept up the momentum through the 1980s and 1990s. By around 1990, every village except some in the highlands was accessible by a paved road, and every provincial and most district centres were connected to the capital by an overnight bus.

Japanese firms began assembling motorcycles in Thailand after the Second World War and gradually converted to local production. By the mid-1970s, sales ran around 50 000 a year. As the economy accelerated and as migrant remittances to the villages increased, motorcycle sales rose steeply, reaching 2 million a year before the 1997 crisis. Most of these were sold in the rural areas, where by the mid-1990s over three-fifths of all households owned one. With their cheap price and ability to go where there are no roads, they revolutionized rural transport – ferrying farmers to their fields,



Figure 22: Mass mobilization. Two-stroke motorcycles helped to connect rural Thailand to the market and the nation.

housewives to the sub-district markets, children to school, and everyone to temple festivals.

By 1980, a television could be found in almost every urban household, but in only a third of households in the countryside. Over the next decade, the Japanese government gave aid for rural electrification to promote demand for consumer durables, and the television stations extended their coverage nationwide. Once the remittances from migrant labour increased in the late 1980s, a television set became the first purchase choice. By the mid-1990s, over 90 per cent of rural households had one.

While the government abandoned the fight to control print media, it was acutely aware of the power and rural reach of electronic media, especially television. Up to the 1990s, all four television stations and all 400-plus radio stations were operated or licensed by the armed forces or government agencies. The content was closely controlled. The radio news was a succession of press releases by official agencies. The television news began with the royal family and tracked down the military and political hierarchy. Prime time was reserved for locally made drama serials. Special programmes were broadcast about the monarchy, armed forces, the standard version of history, and official views of national development.

Gradually, this situation eased, albeit partially, but enough to allow these media to become more of a mirror in which the society could project itself. Around 1990, television channels moved the royal news to its own segment and abandoned the strictly hierarchical format. More programming was subcontracted out, allowing companies such as Watchdog and the Nation Group to introduce more independent political commentary and debate. Locally made drama serials grew in quality and popularity, often adapting popular melodramatic novels, and serving as a mirror for the formation of the new middle class. Every night around half of urban adults sat down to watch, and newspapers serialized the scripts for those who missed episodes. Though scattered across genres of love story, family drama, ghost story, and action drama, few scripts wavered from a focus on the new middle class. Favourite themes were the individual achieving success against adversity; the family achieving new prosperity without losing its moral compass; and the struggles against old habits of nepotism, violence, and corruption. The dramas were also a showcase for sharing tastes in dress, fashions in home design, forms of speech, and models of social behaviour.

As the rural audience widened and prospered somewhat in the 1990s, the programming tilted towards them. The television drama '*Nai hoi thamin*' (The Hardy Drover) was the first to present villagers as more than comic relief and to feature urban actors struggling to approximate northeastern rural accents. More time was devoted to gameshows, often hosted by comedy troupes recruited from the lowbrow nightclubs (*kafe*) catering to rural migrants. Radio DJs quietly overthrew official linguistic unity by playing and introducing songs in local dialects.

Popular music formed another social mirror. The 'songs for life' band Caravan returned from the jungle in the early 1980s. A new band, Carabao, managed to popularize the genre while retaining some of its political content. In 1984, Carabao's 'Made in Thailand' became one of the first national hit songs by poking fun at the enthusiasm for foreign goods and brand names. The central region style of *luk thung* became popular in concert tours from the 1960s onwards by reflecting the sorrows and aspirations of the rural migrant. It then gained a national audience through audiotapes and radio.

In the 1990s, *luk thung* penetrated television, and singers became national stars, wafting off to Tokyo and Los Angeles to entertain the Thai diaspora. The northeastern style of *mo lam* was also updated and popularized, and the Khmer border region's *kantreum*. In the 1990s, companies like Grammy began to organize these stars, as well as domesticated versions of western and Japanese pop, and to cultivate a national 'star

culture' by exploiting the synergies between music, television dramas, and product advertising.

The new public space made room for a new pantheon of heroes and heroines, distinguished by the ordinariness of their social backgrounds. Luang Por Koon was an ascetic monk from rural Khorat who produced amulets that became popular among soldiers as protective talismans, and later spread to a wider market as charms for riches and good fortune. Revenues from amulet sales and pilgrim donations rose to several hundred million baht a year, invested in schools and other welfare. Public figures, royalty, and especially politicians paid visits to Luang Por Koon, who made a point of using forms of personal address now considered old-fashioned, low-class, and impolite. Phumphuang Duangjan was an uneducated child labourer who became nationally famous as a country singer. After her early death in 1991, Princess Sirindhorn attended the funeral, the prime minister gave a eulogy, and her local *wat* was converted into a shrine to her memory. Khaosai Galaxy knocked out 16 of his 19 opponents as an international boxing champion, and then became an actor and television personality. Another boxer, Somluck Kamsing, won Thailand's first Olympic gold medal at the 1996 Olympics and became an instant national hero. Weightlifter Paveena Thongsuk became the first Thai woman to win gold eight years later. In 2013, Ratchanok Intanon became the world badminton champion. Beginning in the mid-1990s, television hosted a new style of earthy comedy with players recruited from a local music-hall type tradition, especially Mum Jokmok.

Khaosai, Somluck, Paveena, Ratchanok, and Mum all came from the rural northeast. Religion, song, sport, and comedy broadened the class range of the social mirror and breached old psychological barriers inherited from the *sakdina* era.

CELEBRATING DIVERSITY

This expansion of new public spaces in print and electronic media formed a mirror in which a rapidly changing society could reflect and share tastes, social conduct, aspirations, and even political ideas. It was very much a single national mirror. Almost all of the media emanated from Bangkok and primarily reflected city society. Hence, it had a powerful influence in establishing an aspirational standard for the rest of the country. But it was also a mirror that increasingly reflected the diversity of the society.

One area where this was evident was in religion. Popular practice of Buddhism in terms of temporary ordination and attendance at the local *wat* was in decline. But other, new forms flourished, aided by the advances in media and communications. Pilgrimage tours by charter bus became popular, swelling the patronage of temples associated with famous monks, both living and dead. Several living monks acquired a national audience through radio talks, audiotapes, or simply prominence in the national news. The differences in their style and message allowed the audience a choice. Phra Phayom Kalyano advocated a modern and rational approach to urban life. Luangta Mahabua had a reputation for ascetic practice and resulting supernatural power. Luang Por Koon offered a talent for miracles coupled with a distinctly northeastern, levelling earthiness. Such monks attracted huge followings and channelled large donation incomes to projects of charity and construction.

Popular religious practice had never been as controlled as the authorities might want, but now many new forms flourished in response to social change. People removed from their communities needed more individual forms of practice. Many sought ways to manage life's new uncertainties, which were no longer about the weather or epidemic disease but about business risks, marriage prospects, exam results, and social standing. Amulets became even more popular as protection against misfortune. Several magazines appeared to publicize their provenance, powers, and prices. Spirit mediums were consulted for advice on business and personal matters. Retreats and insight meditation became fashionable among the more sophisticated. Help on anything from business decisions to lottery selections was sought from Brahma images in spirit houses; shrines to the Chinese goddess of compassion, Kuan Im; a host of monks with auspicious names, such as Luang Pho Ngoen (Reverend Father Money); and even the spirit of the deceased country singer Phumphueng. The equestrian statue of King Rama V in Bangkok became the centre of a votive cult, which began among middle-class Bangkokians concerned about economic and political stability but then broadened its social and geographical base to become a stop on upcountry bus tours to the capital. Buddhist *wat* that had some historical association with the Chinese in Thailand (such as Wat Phananchong in Ayutthaya) attracted the patronage of the urban wealthy, and began to acquire some of the functions and the atmosphere of a Chinese shrine.

Some monks attracted sect-like followings. Phra Pothirak offered a lay, urbanized version of the forest monk practice of asceticism. After the

followers of his Santi Asoke movement increased and also became entwined in politics, Pothirak was forced to disrobe in 1989, and his followers mostly retreated to self-reliant rural communities. Dhammakai began from one monk's popularization of a form of insight meditation, but was then marketed to students and young professionals as a route to both worldly and spiritual success. It built by far the largest religious centre of the modern era on the outskirts of the capital and attracted over a hundred thousand to its major events. In 1998, after followers claimed to witness a miraculous apparition in the sky, its leader was accused of using high-pressure marketing and misusing the movement's massive assets.

Although attempts to reform the Sangha organization emerged again after 2000, they seemed scarcely relevant. Conventional practices had been superseded by a 'religious market place' or, to reverse the pairing and emphasize the importance of supernatural aids for worldly success, 'a mystification, spiritualization, and enchantment of the market and capitalist enterprise'.¹²

This sense of variety was also celebrated in new versions of Thai history that emerged more in the public media of magazines and pocketbooks than in academe. The school gathered around the *Sinlapa Watthanatham* (Art and Culture) magazine by-passed both the monarchical continuity and the idea of a 'Thai race' that had structured the official versions of Thai history. Instead, it adopted the modern geographical space of the nation-state and then described the variety of ethnic, social, and cultural influences that crowded its past. Sujit Wongthet, the magazine's editor, argued that the 'Thais were always here', meaning that the major 'ancestors' of the modern nation were the ancient settlers identified by new archaeology, especially in the northeast, not the Tai who migrated from the north in the standard version of Thai history. Srisak Vallibhotama, who provided much of the research background, traced Thai history as a story of widening trade networks that produced ever greater ethnic complexity, which in turn demanded broader and more sophisticated political systems – with almost no role for the kings and warriors who dominated the standard interpretation. Dhida Saraya further displaced the ethnic definition of the nation by arguing that Thai was a 'civilization' characterized by its long Theravada Buddhist tradition.

The social mirror also displayed the great variety subsumed within the ethnic descriptor 'Thai'. In the protest campaigns that emerged in the 1980s, groups often drew on local identity as a source of support. The Karen in the northern hills, for example, claimed the right to remain resident

in forests on grounds that they possessed special knowledge of plants and forest conservation. In the early 1990s, academics in regional universities published cultural encyclopaedias of the south and the northeast, which highlighted the very different local traditions in areas that had only been attached firmly to the Thai capital since the 19th century. Intellectuals such as Srisak highlighted the *lak lai* (diverse) origins of the people enclosed within the Thai borders by immigration and by people-raiding. Tourism encouraged the rediscovery or reinvention of local identities. A new generation of ethno-historical research began from the premise that pure Tai culture could only be found in Tai communities *outside* Thailand.

Government continued to promote 'Thai culture' through a National Culture Commission and campaigns such as the Thai Culture Promotion Year in 1994. These bodies admitted that Thai culture had been formed from many influences, but still argued that there was a coherent and unified synthesis. This consisted, on the one hand, of the high culture of Buddhism, classical arts, and courtly behaviour; and, on the other, the folk arts and close social relations of the village community.

This official royal-and-rural definition of Thai culture had increasingly less relevance to the lives and environment of the growing number of urban people, particularly those in the capital. From the American period onwards, the language of urban consumer culture (especially brand names) was English. The liberalization of markets in the 1980s, and the global revolution in communications, increased the inflow of foreign commercial products and cultural artefacts. Personal relations in everyday life, both in the open spaces of the skytrain or mega-mall and in the smaller world of the business company, diverged from the legendary closeness of the village community or the noble-bureaucratic ideals of politeness defined as proper Thai behaviour. Urban society increasingly evolved its own conventions, which owed little to these supposedly 'Thai' codes of behaviour. Youth sought entertainment from Hollywood, Japanese pop, and European football. Traditional cultural performances were increasingly museumized or reinvented for sale to tourists.

In practice, the social mirror had helped to overthrow the conceit of a single, unified, and regimented 'Thai culture' or 'Thai nation'. What remained was something more casual and more subject to personal interpretation. Some conservatives continued to imagine 'Thai-ness' as the polite manners of the old hierarchical society. Neo-traditionalists sought it in the face-to-face traditions of a vanishing rural society. Advertisers appealing to the mass audience for beer and energy drinks identified Thai-ness

with the martial spirit of Thai boxing and violent episodes from Siam's legendary history.

INTERNAL BORDERS

The nation retained some subtle internal borders. From the American era of 'development' onwards, Thailand's rulers and the urban middle class increasingly thought of Thailand as a modern nation, enmeshed with the advanced states of the world. Those unable or unwilling to keep up with modernity risked having their membership of the nation challenged. Urban was clearly more modern than rural. Most villagers appeared to embrace development and thus qualified as citizens of the nation, though perhaps of second-class status. Those who resisted centralized development to protect a local way of life or culture were regularly accused of being anti-national and 'un-Thai'. Most at risk were those who chose to live in remote places, especially in the hills. In the 1950s, the nationality law was amended to bring an element of discretion into the rule that anyone born within the borders qualified for Thai nationality. Ostensibly this amendment was to handle children of the refugee communities that became a constant presence over the next half-century of war and economic imbalance in the region. This discretion was used to deny full nationality to the children of hill peoples. Some were given secondary documents. Others slipped through the bureaucratic processes that conferred nationality. All suffered considerable disadvantages as a result. This lack of nationality in turn justified social prejudice and governmental aggression. The massive decline in forest cover – brought about mostly by the army, government agencies, professional loggers, and lowland settlers – was squarely blamed on hill peoples' shifting cultivation and opium growing. This 'crime' in turn justified denial of land and civic rights.

Another internal border marked off the Malay Muslim population in the provinces of the far south. Despite the official policy of religious tolerance, the state remained suspicious and resentful of a community that refused to assimilate in language or religious practice. Few people from the region became teachers, bureaucrats, or soldiers. Half-hearted development funding turned the area into one of the poorest parts of the country. Lack of real tolerance for Islam or the local language in education meant that communities created their own *pondok* schools, and youth went to South Asia or the Middle East for further education. Many went to work in Malaysia, and some used the courts in Kelantan to decide issues under Islamic law. These external links reinforced the state's prejudice against this

area. They also drew people from the area into contact with the changing currents of the Islamic world, especially the trend towards orthodoxy in dress and religious practice.

The secessionist movement in the far south had faded away since the 1970s. A group of local politicians of Malay Muslim origin, including a son of Haji Sulong, had exploited the possibilities of electoral democracy with some success. One of them became interior minister in 2001. Democracy, economic growth, and discreet policing by the army seemed to have overcome extremism.

But by the early 2000s, Thai authorities were apprehensive that the secessionist movements in East Timor and Aceh, and the growth of Islamist extremism on an international scale, could provoke a resurgence in the far south. In 2002, the army structure for overseeing the far south was dismantled, and the police were given control. Acting on intelligence reports of rising activism, the police tried to nip the movement in the bud by covert arrests and killings. Their efforts were counter-productive. On 4 January 2004, an armoury in Narathiwat was raided and some 400 automatic rifles stolen. Over the next four years, around 3000 people were killed in the three provinces, mostly by shooting or small-scale bombing. The largest group of victims included soldiers and other state employees, mostly Buddhist, but others were Muslims, possibly collaborators.

Despite the predictions of terrorism experts that the violence would escalate and spread through assistance from Al Qaeda and other international networks, the incidents remained small scale and confined to the three provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat, or nearby Songkhla town. The larger incidents also emphasized local symbolism. On 28 April 2004, 107 were killed, mostly inside the Krue-se mosque at Pattani. The date was the anniversary of a 1948 uprising that began the modern phase of the movement. The mosque is a reminder of Pattani's past as an independent kingdom. The participants had converged on the mosque after a series of local bombings and killings, and had appeared to invite martyrdom. In October 2004, 78 people died from suffocation in army trucks after being arrested at a demonstration in Tak Bai, Narathiwat.

Interpreting the movement was difficult as there was no manifesto and no demands. Crushing it was difficult as it had a highly disaggregated cell structure and no identifiable leadership. Latent sympathy, disgust at the authorities' handling of the Tak Bai and Krue-se incidents, and plain fear conspired to ensure the security forces gained little cooperation from the local community. The political meaning of the movement was complicated by the special circumstances of a remote border region. Rebel groups, units

of the security forces, and local politicians competed for the profits of smuggling rice, oil, drugs, liquor, and people. The almost daily trail of killing became a running sore that was not susceptible to simple diagnosis, alleviation, or cure.

CONSERVATIVE DOUBTS AND FEARS

The sweeping changes of the 1990s provoked reactions among those who felt it had been too much and too fast. The economy had been greatly opened up to outside forces. International capital had assumed a dominant role. Bangkok had become an international city. Particularly in the aftermath of the 1997 crisis, businesspeople founded associations to press for a more defensive economic policy. Some activists tried to launch a 'new nationalist' movement to draw these groups together. Others imagined a deeper loss of cultural identity under the impact of globalization. One ad portrayed Thais being taught the famous Thai smile by a foreigner. In the face of rapid urbanization, some lamented the loss of community values assumed to be intrinsic to an idealized rural society.

More specifically, some lamented how the rapid production of new wealth was revising the social order, and how the application of that wealth was changing the political order. Remedies were sought. The 1997 Constitution established new 'independent bodies' intended to curb political corruption and vote-buying. Transparency International established a branch in Bangkok in the late 1990s. Police corruption was exposed by academic studies and television documentaries. Some senior officials, working through the Civil Service Commission, pressed for stricter rules and codes of conduct in public service. Concern extended to private morality too, especially the changing standards of dress and sexual behaviour among the young under the influence of urbanization and globalization. Fashionable new ways of speaking Thai, with many imported words, flattened tones, and weaker consonants, excited fears about the deterioration of a pillar of the national identity. Scandals involving monks excited similar fears over Buddhism.

These attitudes were especially strong among the higher ranks of the bureaucracy, still weighted with people of 'old family', who feared their social standing and official position carried less and less weight. But such views also found support among an urban middle class of petty bureaucrats, white-collar workers, and small businesspeople who pictured themselves as good citizens in a society that increasingly valued money more than principle.

Most of the time, these movements and attitudes were scattered. Briefly in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Chamlong Srimuang provided a focal point by adopting an ascetic image as a force against corruption (see next chapter). But after the 1992 crisis, Chamlong was sidelined. Many looked to the palace to provide leadership. In his annual birthday speeches and other pronouncements, the king regularly spoke against corruption and repeatedly emphasized the need for 'good people' to run the country. Many of these movements attempted to appropriate the idea of 'Thainess' as support for conservative projects. In response to this pressure, a Ministry of Culture was created in 2002. Its first task was to draw up a masterplan defining its role. This plan began by defining 'Thai-ness' with the vocabulary of diversity, but rapidly moved into a more aggressive mode, hoping to impose proper 'Thai' standards of speech, dress, and personal behaviour.

CONCLUSION

Over one generation during the last quarter of the 20th century, Thailand's society changed with unprecedented speed. Building on the foundations of urban capitalism laid in the American era, big-business families grew not only in wealth but also in social prominence. A new white-collar middle class embraced western-influenced consumer tastes and concepts of individualism. Capitalism drew into the city a much larger working class.

The borders of the nation were punctured by increasing flows. Total trade grew from 40 per cent of GDP in the early 1970s to 120 per cent at the millennium. Total capital flows grew from less than 1 per cent of GDP in the early 1970s to over 10 times that figure in the 1990s. Tourist arrivals swelled from a few thousand to 12 million a year. Labour flowed in from Burma and other neighbouring countries, and out from Thailand to Japan, Taiwan, and the Middle East. Information, images, and ideas arrived via satellite, television transmission, film, and the internet. The economy became more exposed to global forces, and the society to global tastes and ideas.

Equally important as globalization was the coming of mass society. Until the 1960s there were few channels through which ideas and images could be shared around. Communities were still relatively enclosed. The government was the dominant national network. From the 1970s, that changed rapidly. Paved roads, tour buses, and cheap motorcycles shrank the nation's space. National mass media created a social mirror in which the

society could begin to see itself. In this mirror, the imagined unity of the nation was fragmented. The reflection revealed the variety of the society's ethnic make-up, the complexity of its history, the diversity of religious practice, and the scale of social divisions.

The boom conferred by globalization and the emergence of a national society provided the background for challenges to the paternalist traditions of the nation's politics.