

BACKGROUND

HISTORY

Since the late 18th century, the history of Bangkok has essentially been the history of Thailand. Many of the country's defining events have unfolded here, and today the language, culture and food of the city have come to represent those of the entire country. This role is unlikely, given the city's origins as little more than an obscure Chinese trading port, but today boasting a population of 10 million, it is certain that Bangkok will be shaping Thailand's history for some time to come.

FROM THE BEGINNING – AYUTHAYA & THONBURI

Before it became the capital of Thailand in 1782, the tiny settlement known as Baang Mákáwk was merely a backwater village opposite the larger Thonburi Si Mahasamut on the banks of Mae Nam Chao Phraya, not far from the Gulf of Siam.

Thonburi Si Mahasamut itself had been founded on the right bank of the Chao Phraya River by a group of wealthy Thais during the reign of King Chakkaphat (1548–68) as an important relay point for sea and riverborne trade between the Gulf of Siam and Ayuthaya, 86km upriver. Ayuthaya served as the royal capital of Siam – as Thailand was then known – from 1350 to 1767. Encircled by rivers with access to the gulf, Ayuthaya flourished as a river port courted by Dutch, Portuguese, French, English, Chinese and Japanese merchants. By the end of the 17th century the city's population had reached one million and Ayuthaya was one of the wealthiest and most powerful cities in Asia. Virtually all foreign visitors claimed it to be the most illustrious city they had ever seen, beside which London and Paris paled in comparison.

Throughout four centuries of Ayuthaya reign, European powers tried without success to colonise the kingdom of Siam. An Asian power finally subdued the capital when the Burmese sacked Ayuthaya in 1767, destroying most of its Buddhist temples and royal edifices.

Many Siamese were marched off to Pegu (Bago, Myanmar today), where they were forced to serve the Burmese court. However, the remaining Siamese regrouped under Phaya Taksin, a half-Chinese, half-Thai general who decided to move the capital further south along Chao Phraya River, closer to the Gulf of Siam. Thonburi Si Mahasamut was a logical choice.

Succumbing to mental illness, Taksin came to regard himself as the next Buddha, and his behaviour became increasingly violent and bizarre. Monks who wouldn't worship him as the Maitreya (the future Buddha) would be flogged, for example. Disapproving of his religious fantasies and fearing the king had lost his mind, his ministers deposed Taksin and then executed him in the custom reserved for royalty – by sealing him inside a velvet sack (so that no royal blood touched the ground) and beating him to death with a scented sandalwood club in 1782.

The Chakri Dynasty & the Birth of Bangkok

One of Taksin's key generals, Phraya Chakri, came to power and was crowned in 1782 as Phra Yot Fa. Fearing Thonburi to be vulnerable to Burmese attack from the west, Chakri moved the

Siamese capital across the river to Baang Mákáwk (Olive Plum riverbank), named for the trees that grew there in abundance. As the first monarch of the new Chakri royal dynasty – which continues to this day – Phraya Chakri was posthumously dubbed King Rama I.

The first task set before the planners of the new city was to create hallowed ground for royal palaces and Buddhist monasteries. Astrologers divined that construction of the new royal palace should begin on 6 May 1782, and ceremonies consecrated Rama I's transfer to a temporary new residence a month later.

Construction of permanent throne halls, residence halls and palace temples followed.

The plan of the original buildings, their position relative to the river and the royal chapel, and the royal parade and cremation grounds to the north of the palace (today's Sanam Luang) exactly copied the royal compound at Ayuthaya. Master craftsmen who had survived the sacking of Ayuthaya created the designs for several of the more magnificent temples and royal administrative buildings in the new capital.

Upon completion of the royal district in 1785, at a three-day consecration ceremony attended by tens of thousands of Siamese, the city was given a new name: 'Krungthep mahanakhon amon-ratanakosin mahintara ayuthaya mahadilok popnopparat ratchathani burirom udomratchaniwet mahasathan amonpiman avatansathi sakkathattiya witsanukamprasit'. This lexical gymnastic feat translates roughly as: 'Great City of Angels, the Repository of Divine Gems, the Great Land Unconquerable, the Grand and Prominent Realm, the Royal and Delightful Capital City full of Nine Noble Gems, the Highest Royal Dwelling and Grand Palace, the Divine Shelter and Living Place of Reincarnated Spirits'.

Foreign traders continued to call the capital Bang Makok, which eventually truncated itself to 'Bangkok', the name most commonly known to the outside world. The Thais, meanwhile, commonly use a shortened version of the name, Krung Thep (City of Angels) or, when referring to the city and burgeoning metropolitan area surrounding it, Krung Thep Mahanakhon (Metropolis of the City of Angels).

In time, Ayuthaya's control of tribute states in Laos and western Cambodia (including Angkor, ruled by the Siamese from 1432 to 1859) was transferred to Bangkok, and thousands of prisoners of war were brought to the capital to work as coolie labour. Bangkok also had ample access to free Thai labour via the *phrài lüang* (commoner/noble) system, under which all commoners were required to provide labour to the state in lieu of taxes.

Using this immense pool of labour, Rama I augmented Bangkok's natural canal-and-river system with hundreds of artificial waterways feeding into Thailand's hydraulic lifeline, the broad Mae Nam Chao Phraya. Chakri also ordered the construction of 10km of city walls and *khlawng rāwp krung* (canals around the city), to create a royal 'island' – Ko Ratanakosin – between Mae Nam Chao Phraya and the canal loop. Sections of the 4.5m-thick walls still stand in Wat Saket and the Golden Mount, and water still flows, albeit sluggishly, in the canals of the original royal district.

The break with Ayuthaya was ideological as well as temporal. As Chakri shared no bloodline with earlier royalty, he garnered loyalty by modelling himself as a Dhammaraja (dhamma king) supporting Buddhist law rather than a Devaraja (god king) linked to the divine.

Under the second and third reigns of the Chakri dynasty, more temples were built and the system of rivers, streams and natural canals surrounding the capital was augmented by the excavation of additional waterways. Waterborne traffic dominated the city, supplemented by a meagre network of footpaths, well into the middle of the 19th century.

1548–68

Thonburi Si Mahasamut, at the time little more than a Chinese trading post on the right bank of Mae Nam Chao Phraya, is founded.

1768

King Taksin the Great moves the Thai capital from Ayuthaya to Thonburi Si Mahasamut, a location he regarded as beneficial for both trade and defence.

1782

Phutthayotfa Chulalok, known today as King Rama I, re-establishes the Siamese court across the river from Thonburi, resulting in the creation of both the current Thai capital and the Chakri Dynasty.

1783

Chinese residents of the present-day Ko Ratanakosin area of Bangkok are relocated upriver along the Mae Nam Chao Phraya to today's Yaowarat district, resulting in the city's Chinatown.

1785

The majority of the construction of Ko Ratanakosin, Bangkok's royal district, including famous landmarks such as the Grand Palace and Wat Phra Kaew, is finished.

1779

After a brutal war of territorial expansion, the Emerald Buddha, Thailand's most sacred Buddha image, is brought to Bangkok from Laos, along with hundreds of Lao slaves.

ALL THE KINGS' WOMEN

Until polygamy was outlawed by Rama VI, it was expected of Thai monarchs to maintain a harem consisting of numerous 'major' and 'minor' wives, and the children of these relationships. This led to some truly 'extended' families: Rama I had 42 children by 28 mothers; Rama II, 73 children by 40 mothers; Rama III, 51 children by 37 mothers (he would eventually accumulate a total of 242 wives and consorts); Rama IV, 82 children by 35 mothers; and Rama V, 77 children by 40 mothers. In the case of Rama V, his seven 'major' wives were all half-sisters or first cousins, a conscious effort to maintain the purity of the bloodline of the Chakri Dynasty. Other consorts or 'minor' wives were often the daughters of families wishing to gain greater ties with the royal family.

In contrast to the precedence set by his predecessors, Rama VI had one wife and one child, a girl born only a few hours before his death. As a result, his brother, Prajadhipok, Rama VII, was appointed as his successor. Rama VIII also had only one wife and failed to produce any heirs. After abdicating in 1935, he did not exercise his right to appoint a successor, and once again, lines were drawn back to Rama V, and the grandson of one of his remaining 'major' wives, nine-year-old Ananda Mahidol, was chosen to be the next king.

Temple construction remained the highlight of early development in Bangkok until the reign of Rama III (1824–51), when attention turned to upgrading the port for international sea trade. The city soon became a regional centre for Chinese trading ships, slowly surpassing even the British port at Singapore.

By the mid-19th century Western naval shipping technology had eclipsed the Chinese junk fleets. Bangkok's rulers began to feel threatened as the British and French made colonial inroads into Cambodia, Laos and Burma. This prompted the suspension of a great iron chain across Mae Nam Chao Phraya to guard against the entry of unauthorised ships.

Waterways & Roadways

During the reign of the first five Chakri kings, canal building constituted the lion's share of public works projects, changing the natural geography of the city, and city planners added two lengthy canals to one of the river's largest natural curves. The canals Khlong Rop Krung (today's Khlong Banglamphu) and Khlong Ong Ang were constructed to create Ko Ratanakosin. The island quickly accumulated an impressive architectural portfolio centred on the Grand Palace, political hub of the new Siamese capital, and the adjacent royal monastery of Wat Phra Kaew.

Throughout the early history of the Chakri Dynasty, royal administrations added to the system. Khlong Mahawawat was excavated during the reign of King Rama IV to link Mae Nam Chao Phraya with Mae Nam Tha Chin, thus expanding the canal-and-river system by hundreds of kilometres. Lined with fruit orchards and stilted houses draped with fishing nets, Khlong Mahawawat remains one of the most traditional and least visited of the Bangkok canals.

Khlong Saen Saep was built to shorten travel between Mae Nam Chao Phraya and Mae Nam Bang Pakong, and today is heavily used by boat-taxi commuters moving across the city. Likewise Khlong Sunak Hon and Khlong Damoen Saduak link up the Tha Chin and Mae Klong. Khlong Prem Prachakon was dug purely to facilitate travel for Rama V between Bangkok and Ayuthaya, while Khlong Prawet Burirom shortened the distance between Samut Prakan and Chachoengsao provinces.

When King Rama IV loosened Thai trade restrictions, many Western powers signed trade agreements with the monarch. He also sponsored Siam's second printing press and instituted educational reforms, developing a school system along European lines. Although the king courted the West, he did so with caution and warned his subjects: 'Whatever they have invented or done which we should know of and do, we can imitate and learn from them, but do not wholeheartedly believe in them.' Rama IV was the first monarch to show his face to the Thai public.

In 1861 Bangkok's European diplomats and merchants delivered a petition to Rama IV requesting roadways so that they could enjoy horseback riding for physical fitness and pleasure. The royal government acquiesced, and established a handful of roads suitable for horse-drawn carriages and rickshaws. The first – and the most ambitious road project for nearly a century to come – was Th Charoen Krung (also known by its English name, New Rd), which extended 10km south from Wat Pho along the east bank of Mae Nam Chao Phraya. This swath of hand-laid cobblestone, which took nearly four years to finish, eventually accommodated a tramway as well as early automobiles.

Shortly thereafter, Rama IV ordered the construction of the much shorter Bamrung Meuang (a former elephant path) and Feuang Nakhon roads to provide access to royal temples from Charoen Krung. His successor Rama V (King Chulalongkorn; 1868–1910) added the much wider Th Ratchadamnoen Klang to provide a suitably royal promenade – modelled after the Champs Elysées and lined with ornamental gardens – between the Grand Palace and the expanding commercial centre to the east of Ko Ratanakosin.

THE AGE OF POLITICS

European Influence & the 1932 Revolution

Towards the end of the 19th century, Bangkok's city limits encompassed no more than a dozen square kilometres, with a population of about half a million. Despite its modest size, the capital successfully administered the much larger kingdom of Siam – which then extended into what today are Laos, western Cambodia and northern Malaysia. Even more impressively, Siamese rulers were able to stave off intense pressure from the Portuguese, the Dutch, the French and the English, all of whom at one time or another harboured desires to add Siam to their colonial portfolios. By the end of the century, France and England had established a strong presence in every one of Siam's neighbouring countries – the French in Laos and Cambodia, and the British in Burma and Malaya.

Facing increasing pressure from British colonies in neighbouring Burma and Malaya, Rama IV signed the 1855 Bowring Treaty with Britain. This agreement marked Siam's break from an exclusive economic involvement with China, a relationship that had dominated the previous century.

The signing of this document, and the subsequent ascension of Rama V's son, King Chulalongkorn, led to the largest period of European influence on Thailand. Wishing to head off any potential invasion plans, Rama V ceded Laos and Cambodia to the French and northern Malaya to the British between 1893 and 1910. The two European powers, for their part, were happy to use Thailand as a buffer state between their respective colonial domains.

Rama V gave Bangkok 120 new roads during his reign, inspired by street plans from Batavia (the Dutch colonial centre now known as Jakarta), Calcutta, Penang and Singapore. Germans

1821

A boatload of opium marks the visit of the first Western trader to Bangkok; the trade of this substance is eventually banned nearly 20 years later.

1851

King Mongkut, the fourth king of the Chakri Dynasty, comes to power, courts relations with the West and encourages the study of modern science in Thailand.

1855

Bangkok, now Siam's major trading centre, begins to feel pressure from colonial influences; King Rama IV signs the Bowring Treaty, which liberalises foreign trade in Thailand.

1868

At the age of 15, King Chulalongkorn, the oldest son of Rama IV, becomes the fifth king of the Chakri Dynasty upon the death of his father.

1893

After minor territory dispute, France sends the gunboats to threaten Bangkok, forcing Siam to give up most of its territory east of the Mekong River; Siam gains much of its modern boundaries.

1910

Vajiravudh becomes the sixth king of the Chakri Dynasty after the death of his older brother; he fails to produce a male heir during his reign.

were hired to design and build railways emanating from the capital, while the Dutch contributed the design of Bangkok's Hualamphong Railway Station, today considered a minor masterpiece of civic Art Deco.

In 1893 Bangkok opened its first railway line, extending 22km from Bangkok to Pak Nam, where Mae Nam Chao Phraya enters the Gulf of Thailand; at that time it cost just 1B to travel in 1st class. A 20km electric tramway opened the following year, paralleling the left bank of Mae Nam Chao Phraya. By 1904 three more rail lines out of Bangkok had been added: northeast to Khorat (306km), with a branch line to Lopburi (42km); south-southwest to Phetburi (151km); and south to Tha Chin (34km).

Italian sculptor Corrado Feroci contributed several national monuments to the city and helped found the country's first fine-arts university. Americans established Siam's first printing press along with the kingdom's first newspaper in 1864. The first Thai-language newspaper, *Darunovadha*, came along in 1874, and by 1900 Bangkok boasted three daily English-language newspapers: the *Bangkok Times*, *Siam Observer* and *Siam Free Press*.

As Bangkok prospered, many wealthy merchant families sent their children to study in Europe. Students of humbler socioeconomic status who excelled at school had access to government scholarships for overseas study as well. In 1924 a handful of Thai students in Paris formed the Promoters of Political Change, a group that met to discuss ideas for a future Siamese government modelled on Western democracy.

After finishing their studies and returning to Bangkok, three of the 'Promoters', lawyer Pridi Banomyong and military officers Phibul Songkhram and Prayoon Phamonmontri, organised an underground 'People's Party' dedicated to the overthrow of the Siamese system of government. The People's Party found a willing accomplice in Rama VII, and a bloodless revolution in 1932 transformed Thailand from an absolute monarchy into a constitutional one. Bangkok thus found itself the nerve centre of a vast new civil service, which, coupled with its growing success as a world port, transformed the city into a mecca for Thais seeking economic opportunities.

WWII & the Struggle for Democracy

Phibul Songkhram, appointed prime minister by the People's Party in December 1938, changed the country's name from Siam to Thailand and introduced the Western solar calendar. When the Japanese invaded Southeast Asia in 1941, outflanking Allied troops in Malaya and Burma, Phibul allowed Japanese regiments access to the Gulf of Thailand. Japanese troops bombed and briefly occupied parts of Bangkok on their way to the Thai-Burmese border to fight the British in Burma and, as a result of public insecurity, the Thai economy stagnated.

Phibul resigned in 1944 under pressure from the Thai underground resistance, and after V-J Day in 1945 was exiled to Japan. Bangkok resumed its pace towards modernisation, even after Phibul returned to Thailand in 1948 and took over the leadership again via a military coup. Over the next 15 years, bridges were built over Mae Nam Chao Phraya, canals were filled in to provide space for new roads, and multistorey buildings began crowding out traditional teak structures.

Another coup installed Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat in 1957, and Phibul Songkhram once again found himself exiled to Japan, where he died in 1964. From 1964 to 1973 – the peak years of the 1962–75 Indochina War – Thai army officers Thanom Kittikachorn and Praphat Charusathien ruled Thailand and allowed the US to establish several army bases within Thai borders to support the US campaign in Indochina. During this time Bangkok gained notoriety as a 'rest and recreation' (R&R) spot for foreign troops stationed in Southeast Asia.

In October 1973 the Thai military brutally suppressed a large pro-democracy student demonstration at Thammasat University in Bangkok, but King Bhumiphol and General Krit Sivara, who sympathised with the students, refused to support further bloodshed, forcing Thanom and Praphat to leave Thailand. Oxford-educated Kukrit Pramoj took charge of a 14-party coalition government and steered a leftist agenda past the conservative parliament. Among Kukrit's lasting achievements were a national minimum wage, the repeal of anticommunist laws and the ejection of US military forces from Thailand.

The military regained control in 1976 after right-wing, paramilitary civilian groups assaulted a group of 2000 students holding a sit-in at Thammasat, killing hundreds. Many students fled Bangkok and joined the People's Liberation Army of Thailand (PLAT), an armed communist insurgency based in the hills, which had been active in Thailand since the 1930s.

Bangkok continued to seesaw between civilian and military rule for the next 15 years. Although a general amnesty in 1982 brought an end to the PLAT, and students, workers and farmers returned to their homes, a new era of political tolerance exposed the military once again to civilian fire.

In May 1992 several huge demonstrations demanding the resignation of the next in a long line of military dictators, General Suchinda Kraprayoon, rocked Bangkok and the large provincial capitals. Charismatic Bangkok governor Chamlong Srimuang, winner of the 1992 Magsaysay Award (a humanitarian service award issued in the Philippines) for his role in galvanising the public to reject Suchinda, led the protests. After confrontations between the protesters and the military near the Democracy Monument resulted in nearly 50 deaths and hundreds of injuries, King Bhumibol summoned both Suchinda and Chamlong for a rare public scolding. Suchinda resigned, having been in power for less than six weeks, and Chamlong's career was all but finished.

During the 20th century Bangkok grew from a mere 13 sq km in 1900 to an astounding metropolitan area of more than 330 sq km by the turn of the century. Today the city encompasses not only Bangkok proper, but also the former capital of Thonburi, across Mae Nam Chao Phraya to the west, along with the densely populated 'suburb' provinces, Samut Prakan to the east and Nonthaburi to the north. More than half of Thailand's urban population lives in Bangkok.

THE RECENT PAST

The People's Constitution & the Emergence of Thaksin

Bangkok started the new millennium riding a tide of events that set new ways of governing and living in the capital. The most defining moment occurred in July 1997 when – after several months of warning signs that nearly everyone in Thailand and the international community ignored – the Thai currency fell into a deflationary tailspin and the national economy screeched to a virtual halt. Bangkok, which rode at the forefront of the 1980s double-digit economic boom, suffered more than elsewhere in the country in terms of job losses and massive income erosion.

Two months after the crash, the Thai parliament voted in a new constitution that guaranteed – at least on paper – more human and civil rights than had ever been granted in Thailand previously. The so-called 'people's constitution' fostered great hope in a population left emotionally battered by the 1997 economic crisis.

1914

Official opening of Don Muang, Thailand's first international airport; the airport remained the country's main domestic and international airport until the opening of Suvarnabhumi in 2006.

1917

Founding of Bangkok's Chulalongkorn University, the country's first Western-style institute of higher education; today the university is still regarded as the most prestigious in the country.

1932

A bloodless coup transforms Siam from an absolute to a constitutional monarchy; the deposed king, Prajadhipok, continued to remain on the throne until his resignation three years later.

1935–46

Ananda Mahidol, a grandson of one of Rama V's 'major' wives, is appointed king; most of his reign is spent abroad and ends abruptly when he is found shot in his room under mysterious circumstances.

1946

Pridi Phanomyong, one of the architects of the 1932 coup, becomes Thailand's first democratically elected prime minister; after a military coup, Pridi is forced to flee Thailand, returning only briefly one more time.

1951–63

Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat wrests power from Phibul Songkhram, abolishes the constitution and embarks on one of most repressive and authoritarian regimes in Thai history.

THE KING

If you see a yellow Rolls Royce flashing by along city avenues, accompanied by a police escort, you've just caught a glimpse of Thailand's longest-reigning monarch – and the longest-reigning living monarch in the world – King Bhumibol Adulyadej. Also known in English as Rama IX (the ninth king of the Chakri dynasty), Bhumibol was born in the USA in 1927, while his father Prince Mahidol was studying medicine at Harvard University.

Fluent in English, French, German and Thai, His Majesty ascended the throne in 1946 following the death of his brother Rama VIII (King Ananda Mahidol), who reigned for only one year before dying under mysterious circumstances.

An ardent jazz composer and saxophonist when he was younger, King Bhumibol has hosted jam sessions with the likes of jazz greats Woody Herman and Benny Goodman. His compositions are often played on Thai radio.

His Majesty administers royal duties from Chitralada Palace in the city's Dusit precinct, north of Ko Ratanakosin. As protector of both nation and religion, King Bhumibol traditionally presides over several important Buddhist and Brahmanist ceremonies during the year. Among the more colourful are the seasonal robe-changing of the jade Buddha in Wat Phra Kaew and the annual Royal Ploughing Ceremony, in which ceremonial rice is sowed to insure a robust economy for the coming year, at Sanam Luang.

The king and Queen Sirikit have four children: Princess Ubol Ratana (born 1951), Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn (1952), Princess Mahachakri Sirindhorn (1955) and Princess Chulabhorn (1957).

After 60 years in power, and having recently reached his 80th birthday, the king is preparing for his succession. For the last few years the Crown Prince has performed most of the royal ceremonies the king would normally perform, such as presiding over the Royal Ploughing Ceremony (see p13), changing the attire on the Emerald Buddha (see p58) and handing out academic degrees at university commencements.

Along with nation and religion, the monarchy is very highly regarded in Thai society – negative comment about the king or any member of the royal family is a social as well as legal taboo.

Prime Minister Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, whose move to float the baht effectively triggered the economic crisis, was forced to resign. Former Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai was then re-elected, and proceeded to implement tough economic reforms suggested by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). During the next few years, Bangkok's economy began to show signs of recovery.

In January 2001, billionaire and former police colonel Thaksin Shinawatra became prime minister after winning a landslide victory in nationwide elections – the first in Thailand under the strict guidelines established in the 1997 constitution. Thaksin's new party called Thai Rak Thai (TRT; Thais Love Thailand) swept into power on a populist agenda that seemed at odds with the man's enormous wealth and influence.

The sixth-richest ruler in the world as of late 2003, Thaksin owned the country's only private TV station through his family-owned Shin Corporation, the country's largest telecommunications company. Shin Corp also owned Asia's first privately owned satellite company, Shin Satellite, and a large stake in Thai AirAsia, a subsidiary of the Malaysia-based Air Asia.

Mistakes, Missteps & Stumbling Blocks

Days before he became prime minister, Thaksin transferred his shares in Shin Corp to his siblings, chauffeur and even household servants in an apparent attempt to conceal his true assets.

Eventually the country's constitutional court cleared him of all fraud charges connected with the shares transfer in a controversial eight-to-seven vote.

Thaksin publicly stated his ambition to keep his party in office for four consecutive terms, a total of 16 years. Before he had even finished his first four-year term, however, some Thais became annoyed with the government's perceived slowness to react to problems in the countryside, leading to regular demonstrations in Bangkok.

In 2003, Thaksin announced a 'War on drugs' that he claimed would free the country of illicit drug use within 90 days. Lists of alleged drug dealers and users were compiled in every province. The police were given arrest quotas to fulfil, and could lose their jobs if they didn't follow orders. Within two months, more than 2000 Thais on the government blacklist had been killed. The Thaksin administration denied accusations by the UN, the US State Department, Amnesty International and Thailand's own human rights commission that the deaths were extra-judicial killings by Thai police.

Meanwhile, in the south, a decades-old Muslim nationalist movement began to reheat after the Thaksin administration dismantled a key intelligence operation. Sporadic attacks on police stations, schools, military installations and other government institutions resulted in a string of Thai deaths. Tensions took a turn for the worse when Thai police gunned down 112 machete-wielding Muslim militants inside an historic mosque in Pattani in April 2004. Five months later, police broke up a large demonstration in southern Thailand. After around 1300 detainees were stuffed into overcrowded trucks, 78 died of suffocation or from being crushed under the weight of other arrestees.

Several other crises in public confidence shook Bangkok and the nation that same year. Firstly, avian influenza turned up in Thailand's bird population. When it became known that the administration had been aware of the infections since November 2003, the EU and Japan banned all imports of Thai chicken. Avian flu claimed the lives of eight Thais – all of whom were infected while handling live poultry – before authorities got a handle on the crisis. By mid-2004 the epidemic had cost the Thai economy 19 billion baht.

Just as the bird flu came under control, the Interior Ministry said that in March 2004, all entertainment establishments in Thailand would be required to close at midnight. In Bangkok the government exempted three districts – Patpong, Ratchada and Royal City Avenue (RCA) – in an all-too-apparent attempt to appease the city's most powerful mafia dons. Public reaction against this decision was so strong (mafia figures who control other areas of the city reportedly announced a billion-baht price on the prime minister's head) that the government back-pedalled, allowing nightspots to stay open till 1am, regardless of zoning.

Immediately on the heels of the uproar over new closing hours came the government's announcement that the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT) and other state enterprises would be put on an accelerated schedule for privatisation. Tens of thousands of government employees demonstrated in Bangkok, and once again the government backtracked, putting privatisation plans on hold.

In the 2004 Bangkok gubernatorial race, Democrat Apirak Kosayodhin scored an upset victory over Paveena Hongsakul, an independent candidate with the unofficial support of the ruling TRT, capturing 40% of the vote. Apirak won on promises to upgrade city services and mass transit, and to make city government more transparent – a direct challenge to Thaksin's self-dubbed CEO leadership style.

1962

America's involvement in the Indochina War leads to massive economic and infrastructural expansion of Bangkok; dissatisfaction with the authoritarian Thai government leads to a period of Communist insurgency.

1973

Large-scale student protests in Bangkok lead to violent military suppression; 1971 coup leader Thanom Kittikachorn is ordered into exile by King Bhumibol; Kukrit Pramoj's civilian government takes charge.

1981

General Prem Tinsulanonda is appointed prime minister after a military coup and is largely able to stabilise Thai politics over the next eight years.

1985

Chamlong Srimuang is elected mayor of Bangkok; three years later, after forming his own largely Buddhist-based political group, the Palang Dharma Party, he is elected mayor again.

1992

Street protests led by Chamlong Srimuang against 1991 coup leader Suchinda Kraprayoon lead to violent confrontations; both Chamlong and Suchinda are publicly scolded by the king, leading to Suchinda's resignation.

1997

Thailand devalues its currency, the baht, triggering the Asian economic crisis; massive unemployment and personal debt, and a significant crash of the Thai stock market, follow.

Thaksin's Surprise Comeback & the Final Straw

During the February 2005 general elections, the Thaksin administration scored a second four-year mandate in a landslide victory with a record 19 million votes, surprising academic critics who expected the bird flu crisis, drug war deaths, early bar closing and privatisation protests to dent the party's images. Armchair observers speculated that the blame lay with the opposition's lack of a positive platform to deal with these same problems. Thaksin thus became the first Thai leader in history to be re-elected to a consecutive second term.

However, time was running short for Thaksin and party. The final straw came in January 2006, when Thaksin announced that his family had sold off its controlling interest in Shin Corp to a Singapore investment firm. Since deals made through the Stock Exchange of Thailand (SET) were exempt from capital gains tax, Thaksin's family paid no tax on the US\$1.9 billion sale, which enraged Bangkok's middle class.

Many of the PM's most highly placed supporters had also turned against him. Most prominently, media mogul and former friend, Sondhi Limthongkul organised a series of massive anti-Thaksin rallies in Bangkok, culminating in a rally at Bangkok's Royal Plaza on 4 and 5 February that drew tens of thousands of protestors.

Retired major general Chamlong Srimuang, a former Bangkok governor and one of Thaksin's earliest and strongest supporters, also turned against him and joined Sondhi in leading the protests, which strengthened throughout February. Two of Thaksin's ministers resigned from the cabinet and from the TRT, adding to the mounting pressure on the embattled premier.

Thaksin's ministers responded by dissolving the national assembly and scheduling snap elections for 2 April 2006, three years ahead of schedule. The opposition was aghast, claiming that Thaksin called the election to whitewash allegations of impropriety over the Shin Corp sale.

After Thaksin refused to sign a pledge to commit to constitutional reform, the Democrats and two other major opposition parties announced that they would boycott the 2 April election. Regardless, the results gave the TRT another resounding victory, with 66% of the popular vote. However, in the Democrat-controlled south, 38 TRT candidates failed to gain the 20% of the vote required to win an uncontested national assembly seat. This led to fears of a constitutional crisis, as the government would not have enough parliamentarians to open the national assembly.

During the campaign, TRT was accused of 'hiring' smaller parties to run in the election to ensure their victory. Thaksin initially claimed victory, but after a conference with the king, announced that he would take a break from politics. Thaksin designated himself caretaker prime minister before another round of elections was scheduled for later that year.

Then on 25 April, the king gave a speech urging the judiciary to solve the deadlock. This gave the Constitutional Court a green light to nullify the elections, ostensibly due to questionable positioning of voting booths. Elections were set again for 15 October, but postponed until late November after several election commissioners were convicted of illegally aiding Mr Thaksin in the April polls.

During this time, tensions rose between Thaksin and the palace after Thaksin claimed a 'highly influential individual' planned to overthrow him. Many suspected he was speaking about Privy Council President Prem Tinsulanonda, or even the king himself.

The Bloodless Coup

On the evening of 19 September 2006, while Thaksin was attending a UN conference in New York, the Thai military led by General Sonthi Boonyaratglin took power in a bloodless coup. Calling themselves the Council for Democratic Reform under the Constitutional Monarch, the junta cited the TRT government's alleged les-majesty, corruption, interference with state agencies and creation of social divisions as justification for the coup. The public initially overwhelmingly supported the coup, and scenes of smiling tourists and Thai families posing in front of tanks remain the defining images of the event. Thaksin quickly flew to London, where he has more or less remained in exile.

On 1 October 2006, the junta appointed Surayud Chulanont, a retired army general, as interim prime minister before elections scheduled for the following October. The choice of Surayud was seen as a strategic one by many, as he is widely respected among both military personnel and civilians. The Surayud administration enjoyed a honeymoon period until late December, when it imposed stringent capital controls and a series of bombings rocked Bangkok during New Year's Eve, killing three people.

In January 2007, an Assets Examination Committee put together by the junta found Thaksin guilty of concealing assets to avoid paying taxes. Two months later, Thaksin's wife and brother-in-law were also charged with conspiracy to evade taxes. In late May, a court established by the military government found TRT guilty of breaking election laws. The court dissolved the party and banned its executive members from public service for five years.

In July, growing dissatisfaction with the junta's slow progress towards elections reached a peak when a large group of antigovernment protesters known as the Democratic Alliance Against Dictatorship lay siege to the residence of Prem Tinsulanonda, who they accused of masterminding the coup. Several protesters and police were injured. Nine of the group's leaders were sent to jail, the largest crackdown yet by the junta, which had previously tolerated small-scale protests.

Two months later the Supreme Court issued warrants for Thaksin and his wife, citing 'misconduct of a government official and violation of a ban on state officials being party to transactions involving public interests' in reference to an allegedly unfair land purchase in 2003. Thaksin's assets, some 73 billion baht, were frozen by a graft-busting agency set up after the coup. However, despite his apparent financial troubles, in July 2007 Thaksin fulfilled a long-held dream when he purchased Manchester City Football Club.

In a nationwide referendum held on 19 August, Thais approved a military-drafted constitution. Although the document includes a number of undemocratic provisions, including one that mandates a Senate not entirely comprised of elected politicians, its passage was largely regarded as a message that the Thai people want to see elections and progress.

Under the new constitution, long-awaited elections were finally conducted on 23 December. The newly formed People Power Party, of which Thaksin has an advisory role, won a significant number of seats in parliament, but failed to win an outright majority. After forming a loose coalition with several other parties, parliament chose the veteran politician and close Thaksin ally, Samak Sundaravej as prime minister. This, and Thaksin's return to Thailand in March 2008, has ushered in what is certainly yet another period of uncertainty in Thailand politics.

1999

The BTS Skytrain, Bangkok's first expansive metro system, opens in commemoration of King Rama IX's 6th cycle (72nd) birthday; the system is currently in the process of being expanded.

2001

Thaksin Shinawatra, Thailand's richest man, is elected prime minister on a populist platform in what some have called the most open, corruption-free election in Thai history.

2004

The MRT, Bangkok's first underground public transport system is opened; an accident the next year injures 140 and causes the system to shut down for two weeks.

2006

A bloodless coup sees the Thai military take power from Thaksin while he is at a UN meeting in New York; he remains in exile in London. Official opening of Suvarnabhumi Airport.

2007

In a nationwide referendum, voters agree to approve a military-drafted constitution, Thailand's 17th, despite the constitution being regarded by many Thais and international observers as deeply flawed.

23 December 2007

A general election sees the Thaksin-allied People's Power Party gain a significant number of seats in parliament. A coalition, led by veteran politician Samak Sundaravej, is formed.

AN ELEPHANT'S MEMORY

One of the more clichéd tourist images of Bangkok is that of elaborately dressed classical Thai dancers performing at the Hindu shrine in front of the Grand Hyatt Erawan Hotel. As with many things in Thailand, there is a great deal hidden behind the serene façade.

The shrine was originally built in 1956 as something of a last-ditch effort to end a string of misfortunes that occurred during the construction of the hotel, at that time known as the Erawan Hotel. After several incidents ranging from injured construction workers to the sinking of a ship carrying marble for the hotel, a Brahmin priest was consulted. Since the hotel was to be named after the elephant escort of Indra in Hindu mythology, the priest determined that Erawan required a passenger, and suggested it be that of Lord Brahma (Phra Phrom in Thai). A statue was built, and lo and behold, the misfortunes miraculously ended.

Although the original Erawan Hotel was demolished in 1987, the shrine still exists, and today remains an important place of pilgrimage for Thais, particularly those in need of some material assistance. Those granting a wish from the statue should ideally come between 7am and 8am, or 7pm and 8pm, and should offer a specific list of items that includes candles, incense, sugar cane and bananas, all of which are almost exclusively given in multiples of seven. Particularly popular are teak elephants, the money gained through the purchase of which is donated to a charity run by the hotel. And as the tourist brochures depict, it is also possible to charter a classical Thai dance, often done as a way of giving thanks if a wish was granted.

After 40 years of largely benign existence, the Erawan shrine became a point of focus when just after midnight on 21 March 2006, 27-year-old Thanakorn Pakdeepol destroyed the gilded plaster image of Brahma with a hammer. Pakdeepol, who had a history of mental illness and depression, was almost immediately attacked and beaten to death by two Thai rubbish collectors in the vicinity.

Although the government ordered a swift restoration of the statue, the incident became a galvanising omen for the anti-Thaksin movement, which was in full swing at the time. At a political rally the following day, protest leader Sondhi Limthongkul suggested that the prime minister had masterminded the Brahma image's destruction in order to replace the deity with a 'dark force' allied to Thaksin. Rumours spreading through the capital claimed that Thaksin had hired Cambodian shamans to put spells on Pakdeepol so that he would perform the unspeakable deed. In response, Pakdeepol's father was quoted as saying that Sondhi was 'the biggest liar I have ever seen'. Thaksin, when asked to comment on Sondhi's accusations, simply replied, 'That's insane.' A new statue, built using bits of the previous one, was installed a month later, and at the time of writing, Thaksin has yet to return to Thailand.

ARTS

Despite the utterly utilitarian face of the modern city, Bangkok is among Southeast Asia's contemporary art capitals. This tradition stems back to the founding of the city in the late 18th century, when the early Chakri kings weren't satisfied to merely invite artists and artisans from previous Thai royal capitals such as Ayuthaya, Sukhothai and Chiang Mai. Whether via political coercion of neighbouring countries or seductive promises of wealth and position, Bangkok's rulers also had access to the artistic cream of Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar. Mon and Khmer peoples native to the Thai kingdom also contributed much to the visual arts scene. The great artistic traditions of India and China, the subtle renderings of Indo- and Sino-influenced art in neighbouring countries, and the colonial and postcolonial cultural influx from Europe have also played huge roles in the development of art in Bangkok. Likewise the decades surrounding the two world wars, Thailand's military dictatorships of the '50s, '60s and '70s, followed by the protest-fuelled democracy movement brought a healthy dose of politics and social conscience to the city's art scene. Today, influences from just about every corner of the globe now find free play in the capital.

VISUAL ARTS

Divine Inspiration

The wát served as a locus for the highest expressions of Thai art for roughly 800 years, from the Lanna to Ratanakosin eras. Accordingly, Bangkok's 400-plus Buddhist temples are brimming with the figuratively imaginative if thematically formulaic art of Thailand's foremost muralists. Always instructional in intent, such painted images range from the depiction of the *jataka* (sto-

ries of the Buddha's past lives) and scenes from the Indian Hindu epic *Ramayana*, to elaborate scenes detailing daily life in Thailand. Artists traditionally applied natural pigments to plastered temple walls, creating a fragile medium of which very few examples remain.

Today the study and application of mural painting remains very much alive. Modern temple projects are undertaken somewhere within the capital virtually every day of the year, often using improved techniques and paints that promise to hold fast much longer than the temple murals of old. A privileged few in Bangkok's art community receive handsome sums for painting the interior walls of well-endowed ordination halls.

In sculpture the Thai artists have long been masters, using wood, stone, ivory, clay and metal and a variety of techniques – including carving, modelling, construction and casting – to achieve their designs. Bangkok's most famous sculptural output has been bronze Buddha images, coveted the world over for their originality and grace. Nowadays, historic bronzes have all but disappeared from the art market in Thailand and are zealously protected by temples, museums or private collectors.

The Modern Era

In 1913 the Thai government opened the School of Arts and Crafts in order to train teachers of art and design as well as to codify the teaching of silversmithing, nielloware, lacquerwork, and wood carving in traditional Thai styles. It was an effort that was badly timed, as interest in Thai classicism began to weaken in the aftermath of WWI, perhaps the first event in world history to inspire rank-and-file urban Thais to ponder global issues.

The beginnings of Thailand's modern visual-arts movement are usually attributed to Italian artist Corrado Feroci, who was invited to Thailand by King Rama VI in 1924. In 1933 Feroci founded the country's first School of Fine Arts (SOFA).

Public monuments sponsored during the Phibun Songkhram government (1938–44) led the government to expand the SOFA's status in 1943 so that it became part of newly founded Silpakorn University (p192), Thailand's premier training ground for artists and art historians. Feroci continued

COBRA SWAMP

If you arrive in Bangkok by air, bear in mind that the sleek glass and steel terminal you will most likely pull into was nearly 40 years in the making. Suvarnabhumi (pronounced *sù wanná phoom*), Sanskrit for 'Golden Land', could hardly be a more apt name for Thailand's new airport, particularly for the politicians and investors involved.

Originally begun in 1973, the location chosen for Thailand's new international airport was an unremarkable marshy area with the slightly less illustrious working title of Nong Ngu Hao, Thai for 'Cobra Swamp'. Despite the seemingly disadvantageous setting, over the years the flat marshland was eagerly bought and sold by politicians and developers hoping to make a quick profit.

It wasn't until the self-styled CEO administration of Thaksin Shinawatra that work on the airport began in earnest. Thaksin harboured desires to make Bangkok a 'transportation hub' to rival Hong Kong and Singapore, and went on a spending spree, commissioning construction of the world's tallest flight control tower, as well as the world's largest terminal building.

Not surprisingly, the construction of Suvarnabhumi was rife with allegations of corruption, including the use of faulty building materials, and a substandard runway. At one point Thaksin suggested making the area around the airport into an entirely new province, an idea that appeared to have no benefit other than to enrich area landowners, primarily his friends and associates. Undoubtedly the most embarrassing scandal associated with the airport was the corruption-laden purchase of 20 CTX security scanners from a US company.

On 29 September 2005, Thaksin presided over a much-criticised 'soft' opening. The ceremony was essentially little more than a face-saving measure considering that the airport was still far from operational. Suvarnabhumi eventually began flights a year later, on 28 September 2006. In an ironic twist of fate, Thaksin, the main catalyst behind the project, was in exile in England, having been ousted in a military coup the week before, the junta citing corruption and shoddy construction of the airport among their justifications for the takeover.

Despite being the largest airport in Southeast Asia, and among the largest in the world, in March 2007 many domestic flights were relocated back to the old Don Muang Airport, officials citing overcrowding of runways and safety concerns as reasons for the move. With fantastically little foresight, a train link to the distant airport was only begun after its opening, and was not expected to be finished until early 2008. For details on arriving at Suvarnabhumi, see p252.

as dean of the university, and in gratitude for his contributions, the government gave Feroci the Thai name Silpa Bhirasri.

In 1944 Bhirasri established the National Art Exhibition, which became an important catalyst for the evolution of Thai contemporary art. The first juried art event in Thai history, the annual exhibition created new standards and formed part of a heretofore nonexistent national art agenda. In the absence of galleries in this era, the competition served as the only venue in Bangkok – in all of Thailand, for that matter – where young artists could display their work publicly. Among the most celebrated art of the period were works of realism painted by Chamras Khietkong, Piman Moolpramook, Sweang Songmangmee and Silpa Bhirasri himself.

Other artists involved in this blossoming of modern art, including Jitr Buabusaya, Fua Haripitak, Misiem Yipintsoi, Tawee Nandakhwang and Sawasdi Tantisuk, drew on European movements such as Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Expressionism and Cubism. For the first time in the Thai modern art movement, there was also a move towards the fusion of indigenous artistic sources with modern modes of expression, as seen in the paintings by Prasong Patamanuj and sculptures of Khien Yimsiri and Chit Rienpracha.

Meanwhile, while writing and lecturing against the iron rule of Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat (1957–59), Thai Marxist academic Jit Phumisak founded the Art for Life (*sinlápà phéua chíiwít*) movement, which had many parallels with the famous Mexican School in its belief that only art with social or political content was worth creating. This movement gained considerable ground during the 1973 democracy movement, when students, farmers and workers joined hands with Bangkok urbanites to resist General Thanom Kittikachorn's right-wing military dictatorship. Much of the art (and music) produced at this time carried content commenting on poverty, urban-rural inequities and political repression, and were typically boldly and quickly executed. Painters Sompote Upa-In and Chang Saetang became the most famous Art for Life exponents.

A contrasting but equally important movement in Thai art later in the same decade eschewed politics and instead updated Buddhist themes and temple art. Initiated by painters Pichai

top picks

BANGKOK ART EXPERIENCES

- 100 Tonsong (p191)
- Bangkok University Art Gallery (p191)
- Jim Thompson's House (p192)
- National Museum (p60)
- Wat Suthat (p71)

TEMPLE MURALS

Because of the relative wealth of Bangkok, as well as its role as the country's artistic and cultural centre, the artists commissioned to paint the walls of the city's various temples were among the most talented around, and Bangkok's temple paintings are regarded as the finest in Thailand. Some particularly exceptional works include:

Wat Bowonniwet (Map pp68–9) Painted by an artist called In Kong during the reign of Rama II, the murals in the panels of the *ubosot* (chapel) of this temple show Thai depictions of Western life during the early 19th century.

Wat Chong Nonsi (Map pp124–5) Dating back to the late Ayuthaya period, Bangkok's earliest surviving temple paintings are faded and missing in parts, but the depictions of everyday Thai life, including bawdy illustrations of a sexual manner, are well worth visiting.

Phra Thii Nang Phutthaisawan (Buddhaisawan Chapel; Map p56) Although construction of this temple located in the National Museum began in 1795, the paintings were probably finished during the reign of Rama III (1824–51). Among other scenes, the murals depict the conception, birth and early life of the Buddha – common topics among Thai temple murals.

Wat Suthat (Map pp68–9) Almost as impressive in their vast scale as much as their quality, the murals at Wat Suthat are among the most awe-inspiring in the country. Gory depictions of Buddhist hell can be found on a pillar directly behind the Buddha statue.

Wat Suwannaram (Map pp124–5) These paintings inside a late Ayuthaya-era temple in Thonburi contain skilled and vivid depictions of battle scenes and foreigners, including Chinese and Muslim warriors.

Wat Tritosathep Mahaworawihan (Map pp68–9) Although still a work in progress, Chakrabhand Posayakrit's postmodern murals at this temple in Banglamphu have already been recognised as masterworks of Thai Buddhist art.

Nirand, Thawan Duchanee and Prateung Emjaroen, the movement combined modern Western schemata with Thai motifs, moving from painting to sculpture and then to mixed media. Artists associated with this neo-Thai, neo-Buddhist school include Surasit Saokong, Songdej Thipthong, Monchai Kaosamang, Tawatchai Somkong and the late Montien Boonma. All are frequently exhibited and collected outside Thailand.

Since the 1980s boom years secular sculpture and painting in Bangkok have enjoyed more international recognition, with Impressionism-inspired Jitr (Prakit) Buabusaya and Sriwan Janehuttakarnkit among the very few to have reached this vaunted status. On Thailand's art stage, famous names include artists of the 'Fireball' school such as Vasan Sitthiket and Manit Sriwanichpoom, who specialise in politically motivated, mixed-media art installations. These artists delight in breaking Thai social codes and means of expression. Even when their purported message is Thai nationalism and self-sufficiency, they are sometimes considered 'anti-Thai'.

In recent years the emphasis is moving away from traditional influences and political commentary and more towards contemporary art. Works such as Yuree Kensaku's cartoon-like paintings, or Porntaweesak Rimsakul's mechanised installations are gaining attention, both in Thailand and abroad.

Modern painting and sculpture are exhibited at dozens of galleries around Bangkok, from the delicately lit darlings of Thai high society to industrially decorated spaces in empty warehouses. Other venues and sources of support for modern Thai art include the rotating displays at Bangkok's luxury hotels, particularly the Grand Hyatt Erawan (p210), the Sukhothai (p215) and the Metropolitan (p215).

LITERATURE

Classical

The written word has a long history in Thailand, dating back to the 11th or 12th centuries when the first Thai script was fashioned from an older Mon alphabet. Sukhothai king Phaya Lithai is thought to have composed the first work of Thai literature in 1345. This was *Traiphum Phra Ruang*, a treatise that described the three realms of existence according to Hindu-Buddhist cosmology. According to contemporary scholars, this work and its symbolism continues to have considerable influence on Thailand's art and culture.

Of all classical Thai literature, however, the *Ramakian* is the most pervasive and influential. Its Indian precursor – the Ramayana – came to Thailand with the Khmers 900 years ago, first appearing as stone reliefs on Prasat Hin Phimai and other Angkor temples in the northeast. Eventually, Thailand developed its own version of the epic, which was first written during the reign of Rama I. This version contains 60,000 stanzas and is a quarter again longer than the Sanskrit original.

The 30,000-line *Phra Aphaimani*, composed by poet Sunthorn Phu in the late 18th century, is Thailand's most famous classical literary work. Like many of its epic predecessors around the world, it tells the story of an exiled prince who must triumph in an odyssey of love and war before returning to his kingdom.

During the Ayuthaya period, Thailand developed a classical poetic tradition based on five types of verse – *chán*, *kàap*, *khlong*, *klawn* and *rài*. Each form uses a complex set of rules to regulate metre, rhyming patterns and number of syllables. During the political upheavals of the 1970s, several Thai newspaper editors, most notably Kukrit Pramoj, composed lightly disguised political commentary in *klawn* verse. Modern Thai poets seldom use the classical forms, preferring to compose in blank verse or with song-style rhyming.

Contemporary

The first Thai-language novel appeared only about 70 years ago, in direct imitation of Western models. Thus far, no more than 10 have been translated into English.

The first Thai novel of substance, *The Circus of Life* (Thai 1929; English 1994) by

top picks

NOVELS

- *A Woman of Bangkok*, Jack Reynolds (1956)
- *Bangkok 8*, John Burdett (2003)
- *Four Reigns*, Kukrit Pramoj (Si Phaendin; 1953, translated 1981)
- *Jasmine Nights*, SP Somtow (1995)
- *Sightseeing*, Rattawut Lapcharoensap (2004)

BANGKOK FICTION

First-time visitors to virtually any of Bangkok's English-language bookstores will notice an abundance of novels with titles such as *The Butterfly Trap*, *Confessions of a Bangkok Private Eye*, *Even Thai Girls Cry*, *Fast Eddie's Lucky 7 A Go Go*, *Lady of Pattaya*, *The Go Go Dancer Who Stole My Viagra*, *My Name Lon You Like Me?*, *The Pole Dancer*, and *Thai Touch*. Welcome to the Bangkok school of fiction, a genre, as the titles suggest, defined by its obsession with crime, exoticism, and Thai women.

The birth of this genre can be traced back to Jack Reynolds' 1956 novel, *A Woman of Bangkok*. Although long out of print, the book is still an acknowledged influence for many Bangkok-based writers, and Reynolds' formula of Western-man-meets-beautiful-but-dangerous-Thai-woman – occasionally spiced up with a dose of crime – is a staple of the modern genre.

Standouts include John Burdett's *Bangkok 8* (2003), a page-turner in which a half-Thai, half-*faràng* (Westerner) police detective investigates the python-and-cobras murder of a US Marine in Bangkok. Along the way we're treated to vivid portraits of Bangkok's gritty nightlife scene and insights into Thai Buddhism. A film version of the novel is in the early stages of production, and its sequels, *Bangkok Tattoo* and *Bangkok Haunts*, have sold well in the US.

Christopher G Moore, a Canadian who has lived in Bangkok for the last two decades, has authored 19 mostly Bangkok-based crime novels to positive praise both in Thailand and abroad. His description of Bangkok's sleazy Therae Coffee House (called 'Zeno' in *A Killing Smile*) is the closest literature comes to evoking the perpetual male adolescence to which such places cater.

Private Dancer, by popular English thriller author Stephen Leather, is another classic example of Bangkok fiction, despite having only been available via download until recently. One of the book's main characters, Big Ron, is based on the real-life owner of Jool's Bar & Restaurant (p176), a Nana-area nightlife staple.

Jake Needham's 1999 thriller *The Big Mango* provides tongue-in-cheek references to the Bangkok bargirl scene and later became the first expat novel to be translated into Thai.

Arkartdamkeung Rapheephat, follows a young, upper class Thai as he travels to London, Paris, the USA and China in the 1920s. The novel's existentialist tone created quite a stir in Thailand when it was released and became an instant bestseller. The fact that the author, himself a Thai prince, took his own life at the age of 26 only added to the mystique surrounding this work.

The late Kukrit Pramoj, former ambassador and Thai prime minister, novelised Bangkok court life from the late 19th century through to the 1940s in *Four Reigns* (Thai 1953; English 1981), the longest novel ever published in Thai. *The Story of Jan Dara* (Thai 1966; English 1994), by journalist and short-story writer Utsana Phleungtham, traces the sexual obsessions of a Thai aristocrat as they are passed to his son. In 2001, director/producer Nonzee Nimibutr turned the remarkable novel into a rather melodramatic film (see p35). Praphatsorn Seiwikun's rapid-paced *Time in a Bottle* (Thai 1984; English 1996) turned the dilemmas of a fictional middle-class Bangkok family into a bestseller.

Many Thai authors, including the notable Khamphoon Boonthawi (*Luk Isan*) and Chart Kobjitt (*Time*), have been honoured with the SEA Write Award, an annual prize presented to fiction writers from countries in the Association of South East Asian Nations (Asean). A one-stop collection of fiction thus awarded can be found in *The SEA Write Anthology of Thai Short Stories and Poems* (1996).

When it comes to novels written in English, Thai wunderkind SP Somtow has written and published more titles than any other Thai writer. Born in Bangkok, educated at Eton and Cambridge, and now a commuter between two 'cities of angels' – Los Angeles and Bangkok – Somtow's prodigious output includes a string of well-reviewed science fiction/fantasy/horror stories, including *Moon Dance*, *Darker Angels* and *The Vampire's Beautiful Daughter*. The Somtow novel most evocative of Thailand and Thai culture is *Jasmine Nights* (1995), which also happens to be one of his most accessible reads. Following a 12-year-old Thai boy's friendship with an African-American boy in Bangkok in the 1960s, this semiautobiographical work blends Thai, Greek and African myths, American Civil War lore and a dollop of magic realism into a seamless whole.

All Soul's Day (1997), by Bill Morris is a sharp, well-researched historical novel set in Bangkok circa 1963. The story, which involves vintage Buicks and the pre-Second Indochina War American military build-up, would do Graham Greene proud.

Thai-American Rattawut Lapcharoensap's *Sightseeing* (2004), a collection of short stories set in present-day Thailand, has been widely lauded for its deft portrayal of the intersection between Thai and foreign cultures, both tourist and expat.

MUSIC

Classical Thai

Classical central-Thai music (*phleng thai doem*) features a dazzling array of textures and subtleties, hair-raising tempos and pastoral melodies. The classical orchestra or *pii-phâat* can include as few as five players or more than 20. Leading the band is *pii*, a straight-lined woodwind instrument with a reed mouthpiece and an oboe-like tone; you'll hear it most at *muay thai* (Thai boxing) matches. The four-stringed *phin*, plucked like a guitar, lends subtle counterpoint, while *rânâat êhk*, a bamboo-keyed percussion instrument resembling the xylophone, carries the main melodies. The slender *saw*, a bowed instrument with a coconut-shell soundbox, provides soaring embellishments, as does the *khlùi* or wooden Thai flute.

One of the more noticeable *piiphâat* instruments, *khâwng wong yài*, consists of tuned gongs arranged in a semicircle and played in simple rhythmic lines to provide the music's underlying fabric. Several types of drums, some played with the hands, some with sticks, carry the beat, often through several tempo changes in a single song. The most important type of drum is the *tâphon* (or *thon*), a double-headed hand-drum that sets the tempo for the entire ensemble. Prior to a performance, the players offer incense and flowers to *tâphon*, considered to be the conductor of the music's spiritual content.

The *pii-phâat* ensemble was originally developed to accompany classical dance-drama and shadow theatre but is also commonly heard in straightforward concert performances. Classical Thai music may sound strange to Western visitors due to the use of the standard Thai scale, which divides the octave into seven full-tone intervals with no semitones. Thai scales were first transcribed by the Thai-German composer Peter Feit (whose Thai name was Phra Chen Duriyanga), who also composed Thailand's national anthem in 1932.

Thai Pop & Rock

Popular Thai music has borrowed much from Western music, particularly in instrumentation, but retains a distinct flavour of its own. The bestselling of all modern musical genres in Thailand remains *lûuk thûng*. Literally 'children of the fields', *lûuk thûng* dates back to the 1940s, is analogous to country and western in the USA, and is a genre that tends to appeal most to working-class Thais. Subject matter almost always cleaves to tales of lost love, tragic early death and the dire circumstances of farmers who work day in and day out and, at the end of the year, still owe money to the bank.

Lûuk thûng song structures tend to be formulaic as well. There are two basic styles, the original Suphanburi style, with lyrics in standard Thai, and an Ubon style sung in Isan (northeastern) dialect. Thailand's most famous *lûuk thûng* singer, Pumpuang Duangjan, rated a royally sponsored cremation when she died in 1992, and a major shrine at Suphanburi's Wat Thapkradan, which receives a steady stream of worshippers.

Chai Muang Sing and Siriporn Amphaipong have been the most beloved *lûuk thûng* superstars for several years, with lesser lights coming and going. Other more recent stars include God Chakraband (a former soap opera star whose nickname is taken from *The Godfather*, and who is known as the Prince of Lûuk Thûng), and Mike Piromporn, whose working class ballads have proved enormously popular. One of the more surprising acts of recent years is Jonas-Kristy, a blonde-haired, blue-eyed Swede and his Dutch-English partner, who have been among the hottest-selling *lûuk thûng* acts in the country.

Another genre more firmly rooted in northeastern Thailand, and nearly as popular in Bangkok, is *mâw lam*. Based on the songs played on the Lao-Isan *khaen*, a wind instrument devised of a double row of bamboo-like reeds fitted into a hardwood soundbox, *mâw lam* features a simple but insistent bass beat and plaintive vocal melodies. If *lûuk thûng* is Thailand's country and western, then *mâw lam* is its blues. Jintara Poonlap and Pornsak Songsaeng continue to reign as queen and king of *mâw lam*. Tune into Bangkok radio station Luk Thung FM (FM 95.0) for large doses of *lûuk thûng* and *mâw lam*.

The 1970s ushered in a new style inspired by the politically conscious folk rock of the US and Europe, which the Thais dubbed *phleng phêua chiiwít* (literally ‘music for life’) after Marxist Jit Phumisak’s earlier Art for Life movement. Closely identified with the Thai band Caravan – which still performs regularly – the introduction of this style was the most significant musical shift in Thailand since *lúuk thúng* arose in the 1940s.

Phleng phêua chiiwít has political and environmental topics rather than the usual love themes. During the authoritarian dictatorships of the ’70s many of Caravan’s songs were banned. Following the massacre of student demonstrators in 1976, some members of the band fled to the hills to take up with armed communist groups. Another proponent of this style, Carabao, took *phleng phêua chiiwít*, fused it with *lúuk thúng*, rock and heavy metal to become one of the biggest bands Thailand has seen (see the boxed text, [below](#)).

In recent years, Thailand has also developed a thriving teen-pop industry – sometimes referred to as T-Pop – centred on artists who have been chosen for their good looks, and then matched with syrupy song arrangements. Labels GMM Grammy and RS Productions are the heavyweights of this genre, and their rivalry has resulted in a flood of copycat acts. For example, after RS released Parn, an artist meant to appeal to 30-something female listeners, Grammy countered with the nearly identical Beau Sunita. Likewise with Grammy’s Golf-Mike and RS’s Dan-Beam – two nearly indistinguishable boy bands.

One pop artist seemingly able to subvert genres altogether, not to mention being one of the most popular Thai stars of the last two decades, is Thongchai ‘Bird’ McIntyre. Born to a half-Scottish father in a musical family, *Phii Bóed* (big-brother Bird), as he is affectionately known, is one of the country’s few genuine musical superstars. Many of Bird’s songs have become modern Thai pop classics, and in recent years he has expanded his repertoire, working with the likes of *máw lam* legend, Jintara Poonlap.

In an effort to bring in more listeners, many of the big labels have also formed smaller imprints. The most influential of these was Bakery Music, a subsidiary of Sony BMG, and a platform for several quasi-alternative, lite-rock and easy listening acts such as Bo, Groove Riders, PRU and Boyd. Many of these artists later went on to form Love Is, currently the ‘in’ independent label.

In the rock arena, late ’90s crowd pleaser Loso (from ‘low society’) reinvented Carabao’s Thai folk melodies and rhythms with indie guitar rock. Grammy responded with a rash of similar Thai headbangers designed to fill stadiums and outsell the indies (independent labels), and popular post-Loso rock acts include Big Ass, Potato and Bodyslam.

Yet another movement in modern Thai music has been the fusion of international jazz with Thai classical and folk styles. Fong Nam, a Thai orchestra led by US composer Bruce Gaston,

MADE IN THAILAND

You’ve undoubtedly seen his lanky frame on billboards, enthusiastically sporting his band’s forked-finger salute to promote their eponymous energy drink. You may also have caught him on TV, singing a rallying anthem to sell Chang Beer. And you’ve probably even heard taxi drivers make passing references to his hit song, ‘Made in Thailand’. All these sightings probably have you thinking, who is this guy?

The guy is Yuengyong Ophakun, better known as Aed Carabao, lead singer of Carabao, a Thai band many consider to be the Rolling Stones of Asia.

The name Carabao comes from the Tagalog word for buffalo, and implies diligence and patience (ironically contrasting with the Thai word for buffalo, which is synonymous with stupidity or dim-wittedness). Not unlike the Ramones, the founding members of Carabao, Aed and Khiao (Kirati Promsakha Na Sakon Nakhorn), adopted the word as a surrogate surname after forming the band as students in the Philippines in the early 1980s. Their style of music was inspired by the Thai protest music of the era known as *phleng phêua chiiwít*, Filipino music, as well as a healthy dose of Western-style rock and roll. Since their first album, *Chut Khii Mao* (‘Drunkard’s Album’), and in the 24 that have followed, Carabao’s lyrics have remained political and occasionally controversial. *Ganchaa* (marijuana), a song from their second album, was promptly banned from Thai radio – the first of many. In 2001 Carabao dedicated an album in support of Shan rebels in Burma, a source of consternation for the Thai government. When not generating controversy they are almost constantly performing, and have also played in most Southeast Asian countries, as well as Europe and the US.

Through the years, the band has inspired countless copycat acts, but it’s unlikely that few acts of any genre will ever equal the influence and popularity of the brothers Carabao.

performs a blend of Western and Thai classical motifs, which has become a favourite for movie soundtracks, TV commercials and tourism promotions. Fong Nam plays regularly at Tawan Daeng German Brewhouse (p182). Another leading exponent of this genre is the composer and instrumentalist Tewan Sapsanyakorn (also known as Tong Tewan), who plays soprano and alto sax, violin and *khluai* with equal virtuosity. Other groups fusing international jazz and indigenous Thai music include Kangsadarn and Boy Thai; the latter adds Brazilian samba and reggae to the mix.

Thai Alt/Indie/Hip-Hop

In the 1990s an alternative pop scene – known as *klawng sehrii* or ‘free drum’ in Thailand, also *phleng tái đin*, ‘underground music’ – grew in Bangkok. Modern Dog, a Britpop-inspired band of four Chulalongkorn University graduates, is generally credited with bringing independent Thai music into the mainstream, and their success prompted an explosion of similar bands and indie recording labels. Other major alternative acts in Thailand include the rock outfit Day Tripper, punk metal band Ebola, and the electronica/underground group Futon, which is made up of British and Thai band members. Truly independent labels to look for include Small Room, Panda Records and Spicy Disc.

The indie stuff is almost always reserved for concert performances or one-off club appearances. One spot with regular weekend concerts is the outdoor stage at Centrepoint, Siam Sq. The biggest indie event of the year is Fat Radio – organised, Heineken-sponsored Fat Festival, a three-day outdoor music festival held annually in November. For the latest indie Thai, tune into Fat Radio on 104.5 FM (www.thisisclick.com/1045).

Hip-hop is huge in Thailand in terms of radio play and CD sales, but few Thai groups are proficient in performing this genre. Hip-hop/ska artist Joey Boy not only paved the way for others, but released lyrics that the Department of Culture banned. One song, for example, included the Thai euphemism for male masturbation, *chák wáo* (fly a kite). Another hip-hop act that has gained attention is Thaitanium, an all-Thai group that does all its recording in New York and distributes its music independently in Thailand.

CINEMA

Birth of an Industry

Bangkok Film launched Thailand’s film industry with the first Thai-directed silent movie, *Chok Sorng Chan*, in 1927. Silent films proved to be more popular than talkies right into the 1960s, and as late as 1969 Thai studios were still producing them from 16mm stock. Perhaps partially influenced by India’s famed masala (curry mix) movies – which enjoyed a strong following in post-WWII Bangkok – film companies blended romance, comedy, melodrama and adventure to give Thai audiences a little bit of everything.

The first Thai director to film in the 35mm format was Ratana Pestonji, whose films such as *Rong Raem Narok* (*Country Hotel*: 1957) still influence modern Thai filmmakers. The arrival of 35mm movies in Thailand sparked a proliferation of modern cinema halls and a surge in movie making, and Thai films attracted more cinema-goers than *náng faràng* (movies from Europe and America). Many today consider the ’60s to be a golden age of Thai cinema. More than half of the approximately 75 films produced annually during this period starred the much-admired onscreen duo Mit Chaibanchara and Petchara Chaowaraj.

Despite the founding of a government committee in 1970 to promote Thai cinema, Thai film production in the ’70s and early ’80s was mostly limited to inexpensive action or romance

top picks

THAI CDS

Most of these CDs are available from Tower Records in the Emporium ([Map pp118–19](#)) and at Central World Plaza ([Map pp98–9](#)). You can also order online at www.nongtaphrachan.com or www.ethaicd.com.

- *Lust for Live* (Bakery Music) Collection of live alt-rock performances by Modern Dog, Chou Chou, Yokee Playboy, P.O.P. and Rudklao Amraticha.
- *Made in Thailand* (Carabao) Carabao’s classic and internationally popular album.
- *Maw Lam Sa-On 1 - 12* (Jintara Poonlap) Good introduction to *máw lam*.
- *The Best of Loso* (Loso) Thai anthems of teen angst.
- *Best* (Pumpuang Duangjan) Compilation of the late *lúuk thúng* diva’s most famous tunes.

HALF CHILD

Leaf through any Thai fashion magazine and you'll come across at least two or three *lùuk khрэung* faces. Turn on the TV to watch Thai soap operas, commercials or music videos and you're even more likely to see the offspring of *faràng*/Thai couplings.

Literally 'half child', the *lùuk khрэung* wasn't always a mainstay of Thai media. In the 1970s and '80s most *lùuk khрэung* were the children of male American servicemen stationed at one of the seven US military bases scattered around Thailand during the Indochina War. Their mothers may have been Thai women associated only briefly with their fathers; some were *mia chào* ('rental wives' – a euphemism for prostitute). The resulting Amerasian children of these alliances were typically looked down upon by other Thais.

That perception began to change following Thailand's economic boom in the '80s and '90s, when *lùuk khрэung* who were schooled abroad or educated at bilingual international schools in Thailand became adults. A new wave of *lùuk khрэung* who were the children of expats with more permanent ties to Thailand was also born during this time, in circumstances deemed more 'respectable' within Thai society.

Coupled with the fading public memory of the Indochina War births, the stigma formerly attached to *lùuk khрэung* almost overnight became positive rather than negative. Fluency in English and whiter skin tones – apparently a Thai preference long before Europeans arrived in Thailand – lend *lùuk khрэung* a significant advantage as media figures. Today a high proportion of models, actors, VJs, beauty queens and pop music stars are *lùuk khрэung*.

Among the most well known *lùuk khрэung* in Thailand are Tata Young (music), Paula Taylor (music/film/VJ), Sonya Couling (modelling), Nat Myria (music), Peter Corp Dyrendal (music), Ananda Everingham (TV/film), Sunny Suwanmethanon (film), and of course 'Bird' McIntyre (music/film).

The *lùuk khрэung* phenomenon has become so topical in Thailand nowadays that a 2006 TV soap opera, *Lady Mahachon*, revolved around a *lùuk khрэung* pop star (played by real-life *lùuk khрэung* pop star Paula Taylor) looking for her American father (Erich Fleshman, a bilingual American actor), whom she hadn't seen since early childhood.

stories. An exception could be found in the films of Prince Chatrichalerm Yukol, in particular *Theptida Rongram* (The Angel: 1974) and *Thongpoon Khokpo Rasadorn Temkan* (The Citizen: 1977), which introduced substantial doses of dark realism to the Thai film scene. In the same genre was *Luk Isan* (Child of the North-East; 1983) which, based on a Thai novel of the same name, follows the ups and downs of a farming family living in drought-ridden Isan. *Luk Isan* became one of the first popular films to offer urban Thais an understanding of the hardships endured by many northeasterners.

Modern Thai Film

The Thai movie industry almost died during the '80s and '90s, swamped by Hollywood extravaganzas and the boom era's taste for anything imported. From a 1970s peak of about 200 releases per year, the Thai output shrank to an average of only 10 films a year by 1997. The Southeast Asian economic crisis that year threatened to further bludgeon the ailing industry, but the lack of funding coupled with foreign competition brought about a new emphasis on quality rather than quantity. The current era boasts a new generation of seriously good Thai directors, several of whom studied film abroad during Thailand's '80s and early '90s boom period.

Recent efforts have been so encouraging that Thai and foreign critics alike speak of a current Thai 'new wave'. Avoiding the soap operatics of the past, the current crop of directors favour gritty realism, artistic innovation and a strengthened Thai identity. Pen-Ek Ratanaruang's *Fun Bar Karaoke* is a 1997 satire of Bangkok life in which the main characters are an ageing Thai playboy and his daughter; the film received critical acclaim for its true-to-life depiction of modern urban living blended with sage humour. It was the first feature-length outing by a young Thai who is fast becoming one of the kingdom's most internationally noted directors. The film played well to international audiences but achieved only limited box-office success at home. Similarly, Nonzee Nimibutr's *2499 Antaphan Krong Meuang* (Dang Bireley's Young Gangsters) was hailed abroad – winning first prize at the 1997 Brussels International Film Festival – but was only modestly successful in Thailand.

A harbinger for the Thai film industry was Nonzee Nimibutr's 1998 release of *Nang Nak*, an exquisite retelling of the Mae Nak Phrakhanong legend, in which the spirit of a woman who died during childbirth haunts the home of her husband. This story has had no fewer than 20 previous cinematic renderings. *Nang Nak* not only features excellent acting and period detailing,

but manages to transform Nak into a sympathetic character rather than a horrific ghost. The film earned awards for best director, best art director and best sound at the 1999 Asia-Pacific Film Festival.

In 1999 director Pen-Ek Ratanaruang came out with his second feature, a finely crafted thriller set in Bangkok called *Ruang Talok 69* (sixty-nine). Like his first film, it was a critical success that saw relatively little screen time in Thailand.

The 2000 film *Satree Lex* (Iron Ladies) humorously dramatises the real-life exploits of a Lampang volleyball team made up almost entirely of transvestites and transsexuals. At home, this Yongyoot Thongkongtoon-directed film became one of Thai cinema's biggest-grossing films to date, and was the first Thai film ever to reach the art-house cinemas of Europe and the US on general release.

Fah Talai Jone (2000), directed by Wisit Sasanatieng, presents a campy and colourful parody of quasi-cowboy Thai melodramas of the '50s and '60s. The film received an honourable mention at Cannes (where it was quickly dubbed a 'cult hit') and took an award at the Vancouver Film Festival. When Miramax distributed the film in the USA, it was called *Tears of the Black Tiger*.

The next Thai film to garner international attention was 2001's *Suriyothai*, an historic epic directed by Prince Chatrichalerm Yukol. Almost 3½ years and US\$20 million in the making, the three-hour film lavishly narrates a well-known episode in Thai history in which an Ayuthaya queen sacrifices herself at the 1548 Battle of Hanthawaddy to save her king's life. *Suriyothai* went on to become the highest-grossing film in Thai history, earning more than 600 million baht, but flopped overseas and was widely criticised for being ponderous and overly long.

In 2001 Nonzee Nimibutr returned with *Jan Dara*, a cinematic rendition of Utsana Pleungtham's controversially erotic 1966 novel of the same name. Filmed almost entirely on sound stages save for outdoor scenes shot in Luang Prabang, Laos, the film was critically compared with Vietnam's famous *Scent of Green Papaya*.

For evidence that Thailand's role in world cinema will continue to expand, you don't need to look any further than Pen-Ek's *Mon Rak Transistor*. This acclaimed film broke ground by seizing a thoroughly Thai theme – the tragicomic odyssey of a young villager who tries to crack the big-time *lùuk thung* music scene in Bangkok – and upgrading production values to international standards. The 2001 release was honoured with a special Directors' Fortnight showing at Cannes 2002, and went on to earn Best Asian Film at the Seattle International Film Festival '02 and the Audience Award at the Vienna International Film Festival '02.

One of Thai cinema's finest moments arrived when Cannes 2002 chose *Sud Sanaeha* (Blissfully Yours) for the coveted Un Certain Regard (Of Special Consideration) screening, an event that showcases notable work by new directors. Directed by 31-year-old Apichatpong Weerasethakul, the film dramatises a budding romance between a Thai woman and an illegal Burmese immigrant, and went on to win a prize in the category.

Another favourite on the 2002 festival circuit, and a blockbuster in Thailand as well, was Jira Malikul's film *15 Kham Deuan 11* (Mekhong Full Moon Party). The storyline juxtaposes folk beliefs about mysterious 'dragon lights' emanating from the Mekong River with the scepticism of Bangkok scientists and news media, and also with Thai Buddhism. As with *Mon Rak Transistor*, the film affectionately evokes everyday Thai culture for the whole world to enjoy. It's also the first Thai feature film where most of the script is written in the Isan dialect, necessitating Thai subtitles.

The year 2003 saw *Faen Chan* (My Girl), a nostalgic but well-directed-and-acted drama/comedy about childhood friends who become re-acquainted as adults when one of them is about to marry. Directed by a team of six young Thais, the film was hugely successful in Thailand and garnered attention abroad as well.

A further watershed occurred when the 2004 Cannes Film Festival awarded Apichatpong's dream-like *Sud Pralad* (Tropical Malady) the Jury Prize. None of the young

top picks

THAI FILMS

- *Mon Rak Transistor*, Pen-Ek Ratanaruang (2001)
- *Faen Chan* (My Girl), Komkrit Treewimol et al (2003)
- *Nang Nak*, Nonzee Nimibutr (1998)
- *Ong Bak*, Prachya Pinkaew (2004)
- *Sud Pralad* (Tropical Malady), Apichatpong Weerasethakul (2004)

director's films has generated much interest in Thailand, however, where they are seen as too Western in tone. Much more well received, box office-wise, both in Thailand and abroad, was Prachya Pinkaew's *Ong Bak* (2004), widely hailed around the world as one of the finest 'old-school' martial arts films of all time. The film also set the stage for action star Tony Jaa (Thai name: Panom Yeerum), currently Thailand's hottest big-screen export.

Apichatpong's most recent release, *Syndromes and a Century* (2006), gained somewhat more attention when the director was ordered by the Thai censorship board to cut four seemingly innocuous scenes. This led Apichatpong to cancel the local release of the film in protest, and sparked a subsequent campaign by industry people, critics and audience to demand that the government do away with the country's antiquated 1930 Film Act and introduce a rating system.

In 2007 Prince Chatrichalerm Yukol followed up 2001's massively popular *Suriyothai* with a duo of historical dramas, *The Legend of King Naresuan*, parts I and II. The epics are a semi-sequel to *Suriyothai*, and tell the story of the 16th century Thai king who was taken hostage by the Burmese after Ayuthaya was sacked, and who later reclaimed the kingdom's independence. A third part, starring Tony Jaa, is due for release in late 2008.

Today Thailand plays host to two large film festivals, the Bangkok International Film Festival (BKIFF), and the World Film Festival of Bangkok, further evidence that the country lies at the epicentre of a growing film industry.

THEATRE & DANCE

Traditional Thai theatre consists of five dramatic forms. *Khôn* is a formal, masked dance-drama depicting scenes from the *Ramakian* (the Thai version of India's Ramayana), and originally performed only for the royal court. *Lákhawn* is a general term that covers several types of dance-drama (usually for nonroyal occasions), including *mánohraa*, the southern Thai version based on a 2000-year-old Indian story, and Western theatre. *Líkeh* (likay) is a partly improvised, often bawdy folk play featuring dancing, comedy, melodrama and music. *Lákhawn lék* or *hùn lúang* is puppet theatre, and *lákhawn phúut* is modern spoken theatre.

Khôn

In all *khôn* performances, four types of characters are represented – male humans, female humans, monkeys and demons. Monkey and demon figures are always masked with the elaborate head coverings often seen in tourist promo material. Behind the masks and make-up, all actors are male. Traditional *khôn* is very expensive to produce – Ravana's retinue alone (Ravana is the *Ramakian*'s principal villain) consists of more than 100 demons, each with a distinctive mask.

Perhaps because it was once limited to royal venues and hence never gained a popular following, the *khôn* or *Ramakian* dance-drama tradition nearly died out in Thailand. Bangkok's National Theatre (p188) was once the only place where *khôn* was regularly performed for the public; the renovated Chalermkrung Royal Theatre (p188) now hosts occasional *khôn* performances, enhanced by laser graphics and hi-tech audio.

Scenes performed in traditional *khôn* (and *lákhawn* performances – see the following section) come from the 'epic journey' tale of the Ramayana, with parallels in the Greek Odyssey and the myth of Jason and the Argonauts.

Lákhawn

The more formal *lákhawn nai* (inner *lákhawn*, which means that it is performed inside the palace) was originally performed for lower nobility by all-female ensembles. Today it's a dying art, even more so than royal *khôn*. In addition to scenes from the *Ramakian*, *lákhawn nai* performances may include traditional Thai folk tales; whatever the story, text is always sung. *Lákhawn nâwk* (outer *lákhawn*, performed outside the palace) deals exclusively with folk tales and features a mix of sung and spoken text, sometimes with improvisation. Male and female performers are permitted. Like *khôn* and *lákhawn nai*, performances are increasingly rare.

Much more common these days is the less refined *lákhawn chaatrii*, a fast-paced, costumed dance-drama usually performed at upcountry temple festivals. *Chaatrii* stories are often influenced by the older *mánohraa* theatre of southern Thailand.

A variation on *chaatrii* that has evolved specifically for shrine worship, *lákhawn kâe bon*, involves an ensemble of about 20, including musicians. At an important shrine such as Bangkok's Lak Meuang, four *kâe bon* troupes may alternate, each for a week at a time, as each performance lasts from 9am to 3pm and there is usually a long list of worshippers waiting to hire them.

Líkeh

In outlying working-class neighbourhoods of Bangkok you may be lucky enough to come across the gaudy, raucous *líkeh*. This theatrical art form is thought to have descended from drama-rituals brought to southern Thailand by Arab and Malay traders. The first native public performance in central Thailand came about when a group of Thai Muslims staged *líkeh* for Rama V in Bangkok during the funeral commemoration of Queen Sunantha. *Líkeh* grew very popular under Rama VI, peaked in the early 20th century and has been fading slowly since the 1960s.

Most often performed at Buddhist festivals by troupes of travelling performers, *líkeh* is a colourful mixture of folk and classical music, outrageous costumes, melodrama, slapstick comedy, sexual innuendo and commentary on Thai politics and society. *Faràng* – even those who speak fluent Thai – are often left behind by the highly idiomatic language and gestures. Most *líkeh* performances begin with the *âwk khâek*, a prelude in which an actor dressed in Malay costume takes the stage to pay homage to the troupe's teacher and to narrate a brief summary of the play to the audience. For true *líkeh* aficionados, the visit of a renowned troupe is a bigger occasion than the release of an international blockbuster at the local cinema.

Lákhawn Lék

Lákhawn lék (little theatre; also known as *hùn lúang*, or royal puppets), like *khôn*, was once reserved for court performances. Metre-high marionettes made of *khòì* paper and wire, wearing elaborate costumes modelled on those of the *khôn*, were used to convey similar themes, music and dance movements.

Two to three puppet masters were required to manipulate each *hùn lúang* – including arms, legs, hands, even fingers and eyes – by means of wires attached to long poles. Stories were drawn from Thai folk tales, particularly *Phra Aphaimani* (a classical Thai literary work), and occasionally from the *Ramakian*. *Hùn lúang* is no longer performed, as the performance techniques and puppet-making skills have been lost. The *hùn lúang* puppets themselves are highly collectable; the Bangkok National Museum has only one example in its collection. Surviving examples of a smaller, 30cm court version called *hùn lék* (little puppets) are occasionally used in live performances; only one puppeteer is required for each marionette in *hùn lék*.

Another form of Thai puppet theatre, *hùn kràbàwk* (cylinder puppets), is based on popular Hainanese puppet shows. It uses 30cm hand puppets carved from wood and viewed only from the waist up. *Hùn kràbàwk* marionettes are still crafted and used in performances today, most notably at the Traditional Thai Puppet Theatre (see p189).

Lákhawn Phúut

Lákhawn phúut – 'speaking theatre', or live contemporary theatre as known in the West – is enjoyed by a small elite audience in Bangkok. Virtually the entire scene, such as it is, centres on two venues, Patravadi Theatre (p188) and Bangkok Playhouse (p188).

ARCHITECTURE

TEMPLES, FORTS & SHOPHOUSES

When Bangkok became the capital of the kingdom of Siam in 1782, the first task set before designers of the new city was to create hallowed ground for royal palaces and Buddhist monasteries. Indian astrologers and high-ranking Buddhist monks conferred to select and consecrate the most auspicious riverside locations, marking them off with small carved stone pillars. Siam's most talented architects and artisans then weighed in, creating majestic and ornate edifices designed to astound all who ventured into the new capital.

The temples and palaces along the riverbanks of Mae Nam Chao Phraya transformed humble Bang Makok into the glitter and glory of Ko Ratanakosin (Ratanakosin Island), and their scale and intricacy continue to make a lasting impression on new arrivals. Whether approaching by river or by road, from a distance your eye is instantly caught by the sunlight refracting off the multitude of gilded spires peeking over the huge walls of Wat Phra Kaew (p55), the Temple of the Emerald Buddha. Inside the brick-and-stucco walls, you can easily lose yourself amid the million-sq-metre grounds, which bring together more than 100 buildings and about two centuries of royal history and architectural experimentation.

Early Bangkok was both a citadel and a city of temples and palaces. Today the massive white-washed walls of Phra Sumen (p74), punctured by tiny windows and topped with neat crenulations, still loom over the northern end of trendy Th Phra Athit, facing Mae Nam Chao Phraya. On the other side of the battlements, Khlong Banglamphu (Banglamphu Canal) cuts away from the river at a sharp angle, creating the northern tip of Ko Ratanakosin, a man-made 'island' out of the left bank of the river. Erected in 1783 and named for the mythical Mt Meru (Phra Sumen in Thai) of Hindu-Buddhist cosmology, the octagonal brick-and-stucco bunker was one of 14 city fortresses built along Khlong Banglamphu. Of the 4m-high, 3m-thick ramparts that once lined the entire canal, only Phra Sumen and Mahakan have been preserved to show what 18th-century Bangkok was really about – keeping foreign armies at bay.

Open trade with the Portuguese, Dutch, English, French and Chinese made the fortifications obsolete by the mid-19th century, and most of the original city wall was demolished to make way for sealed roadways. By 1900 these roadways were lined with two-storey Sino-Gothic shophouses inspired by King Rama V's visits to Singapore and Penang.

Bangkok's oldest residential and business district fans out along the Chao Phraya River between Phra Pin Klao bridge and Hualamphong station. Largely inhabited by the descendants of Chinese residents who moved out of Ko Ratanakosin to make way for royal temples and palaces in the early 19th century, Thais refer to the neighbourhood as Yaowarat (for the major avenue bisecting the neighbourhood) or by the English term 'Chinatown'. One of the most atmospheric streets in this area is Th Plaeng Naam, where several Chinese shophouses, some nearly a century old, can be found.

In the 19th century, Chinese architecture began exerting a strong influence on the city. In Talat Noi (Little Market), a riverside neighbourhood just south of the older Yaowarat, Chinese entrepreneur Chao Sua Son founded a market where larger riverboats could offload wholesale goods to city merchants. Chao Sua Son's house still stands (Map p84), a rare example of traditional Chinese architecture in Thailand.

Talat Noi serves as a cultural and geographic bridge between the almost exclusively Chinese ambience of Yaowarat to the immediate north and the almost exclusively Western – historically speaking, if not in present-day Bangkok – district of European trading houses and embassies to the immediate south. A portion of Talat Noi was given over to Portuguese residents of Bangkok, who in 1787 built the Holy Rosary Church (Map p84), the capital's oldest place of Christian worship. Originally assembled of wood, after an 1890 fire it was replaced with brick and stucco in the Neo-Gothic stucco style. Today the interior is graced by Romanesque stained-glass windows, gilded ceilings and a very old, life-sized Jesus effigy carried in the streets during Easter processions.

South of Talat Noi at least two or more miles of the Chao Phraya riverside was once given over to such international mercantile enterprises as the East Asiatic Co, Chartered Bank, British Dispensary, Bombay Burmah Trading Co, Banque de l'Indochine, Messrs Howarth Erskine, as well as the Portuguese, French, Russian, British, American, German and Italian embassies. For the era, the well-financed architecture for this area – known then, as today, as Bang Rak – was Bangkok's most flamboyant, a mixture of grand neo-classical fronts, shuttered Victorian windows and Beaux Arts ornamentation. Some of these old buildings have survived to the present. All have been obscured by more modern structures along Charoen Krung Rd, and hence the best way to appreciate them as a group is from the river itself, by boat.

This began mixing traditional Thai with European forms in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as exemplified by Bangkok's Vimanmek Teak Mansion (p80), the Author's Wing of the Oriental Hotel (p212), the Chakri Mahaprasat (p57) next to Wat Phra Kaew, and any number of older residences and shophouses in Bangkok. This style is usually referred to as 'old Bangkok' or 'Ratanakosin'. The Old Siam Plaza shopping centre (p159), adjacent to Bangkok's Sala Chalerkrung (p188), is an attempt to revive the old Bangkok school.

ARCHITECTURAL ETHICS

Thailand has made numerous admirable efforts to preserve historic religious architecture, from venerable old stupas to ancient temple compounds. The Department of Fine Arts in fact enforces various legislation that makes it a crime to destroy or modify such monuments, and even structures found on private lands are protected.

On the other hand, Thailand has less to be proud of in terms of preserving secular civil architecture such as old government offices and shophouses. Only a few of Bangkok's Ratanakosin and Asian Deco buildings have been preserved, along with a handful of private mansions and shophouses, but typically only because the owners of these buildings took the initiative to do so. Thailand has little legislation in place to protect historic buildings or neighbourhoods, and distinctive early Bangkok architecture is disappearing fast, often to be replaced by plain cement, steel and glass structures of little historic or artistic value. For an illustrated list of buildings in Thailand that have received government protection, seek out the coffee-table book *174 Architectural Heritage in Thailand* (Saowalak Phongsatha Posayanon/Siam Architect Society, 2004).

Many other countries around the world have regulations that allow the registration of historic homes and whole neighbourhoods can be designated as national monuments. In neighbouring Laos, Unesco has helped to preserve the charming Lao-French architecture of Luang Prabang by designating the city as a World Heritage Site.

While Bangkok has gone so far in the direction of modern development that it will never recover much of the charm of its 18th- to early 20th-century architecture, if the city or nation doesn't take steps soon to preserve historic secular architecture, there will nothing left but an internationally homogenous hodge-podge of styles.

Disembark at the Mae Nam Chao Phraya pier of Tha Tien (Map p56), weave your way through the vendor carts selling grilled squid and rice noodles, and you'll find yourself standing between two rows of shophouses of the sort once found along all the streets near the river. Inside, the ground floors display multi-hued tiles of French, Italian or Dutch design, while upper floors are planked with polished teak. Similar shophouses can be found along Th Tanao in Banglamphu.

In the early 20th century, architects left the Victorian era behind, blended European Art Deco with functionalist restraint and created Thai Art Deco. Built just before WWI, an early and outstanding example of this style is Hualamphong Railway Station (p83). The station's vaulted iron roof and neoclassical portico are a testament to state-of-the-art engineering, while the patterned, two-toned skylights exemplify Dutch modernism.

Fully realised examples of Thai Deco from the 1920s and '30s can be found along Chinatown's main streets, particularly Th Yaowarat. Whimsical Deco-style sculptures – the Eiffel Tower, a lion, an elephant, a Moorish dome – surmount vertical towers over doorways. Atop one commercial building on Th Songwat perches a rusting model of a WWII Japanese Zero warplane. Placed there by the Japanese during their brief occupation of Bangkok in 1941, it coordinates perfectly with the surrounding Thai Deco elements. Other examples are the Sala Chalerkrung (p188), the Royal Hotel (p206) and Ratchadamnoen Boxing Stadium (p199).

OFFICE TOWERS, HOTELS & SHOPPING CENTRES

During most of the post-WWII era, the trend in modern Thai architecture – inspired by the German Bauhaus movement – was towards a boring International Style functionalism, and the average building looked like a giant egg carton turned on its side. The Thai aesthetic, so vibrant in pre-war eras, almost disappeared in this characterless style of architecture.

The city has been moving skywards almost as quickly as it has expanded outwards. When the Dusit Thani Hotel (p213) opened in 1970 it was the capital's tallest building, and even by the end of that decade fewer than 25 buildings stood taller than six floors. By the year 2000, nearly 1000 buildings could claim that distinction, with at least 20 of them towering higher than 45 floors.

On Th Sathon Tai is the Bank of Asia headquarters (p113), known locally as the 'Robot Building'. Thai architect Sumet Jumsai combined nut-and-bolt motifs at various elevations with a pair of lightning rods on the roof (arranged to resemble sci-fi robot-like antennae) and two metallic-lidded 'eyes' staring out from the upper façade. Another equally whimsical example can be seen in the Elephant Building (Map pp124–5) on Th Phaholyothin in northern Bangkok. Taking influence from Thailand's national symbol, every aspect of the building, from its external shape down to the door handles, is reminiscent of a pachyderm. Both of these buildings represent the

top picks

BANGKOK BUILDINGS

- **Bangkok Bank** (Map p84; cnr Soi Wanit 1 & Th Mangkon, Chinatown)
- **Chalermkrung Royal Theatre** (Map p84; 66 Th Charoen Krung, Chinatown)
- **Chao Sua Son's House** (Map p84; Talat Noi, Chinatown)
- **Thai Wah II** (Map p112; Th Sathon Tai, Sathon)
- **Sukhothai Hotel** (Map p112; Th Sathon Tai, Sathon)

Pure verticality is now giving way to tiered skyscrapers in accordance with the city's setback regulations for allowing light into city streets. The tiered Bangkok City Tower (Map pp108–9) stacks marble, glass and granite around recessed entryways and window lines to create a stunning Mesopotamia-meets-Madison Ave effect. Everything 'neo' is in, including neo-Thai. The Four Seasons (p209), Sukhothai (p215) and Grand Hyatt Erawan (p210) are all examples of hotels that make extensive use of Thai classical motifs in layout and ornamentation.

ENVIRONMENT & PLANNING

THE LAND

Located halfway along Thailand's 1860km north-south axis, Bangkok lies approximately 14° north of the equator, putting it on a latitudinal level with Madras, Manila, Guatemala and Khartoum. The rivers and tributaries of northern and central Thailand drain into Mae Nam Chao Phraya, which in turn discharges into the Gulf of Thailand, a large cul-de-sac of the South China Sea. Bangkok is partly surrounded by a huge, wet, flat and extremely fertile area known as 'the rice bowl of Asia' – more rice is grown here than in any other area of comparable size in all of Asia. Thailand has, in fact, been the world's top exporter of rice for at least the last 30 years.

Metropolitan Bangkok covers 1569 sq km, and may contain as many as 15 million people, making it one of the largest and most densely populated cities in the world. Built on swampland in the midst of one of Southeast Asia's most significant river deltas, the city is only 2m above sea level and sinking 5cm to 10cm a year, which means with rising sea levels it won't be long until the city lies below sea level. Hundreds of kilometres of natural and artificial canals crisscross the region, although many have been filled to create land for new roads and buildings. These canals, or *khlong*, were once Thailand's hydraulic lifeline, but are now seriously degraded by pollution and neglect.

GREEN BANGKOK

So extensive are the developments around Bangkok that you'd hardly realise the city is built on one of the world's great river deltas. Even the vast network of canals that once earned Bangkok the nickname 'Venice of the east' are largely lost, and few people remember the vast natural resources and fisheries now submerged by a sea of buildings and pollution. With the world's fastest-growing economy in the 1990s, Thailand in general, and Bangkok in particular, sacrificed environmental concerns in the face of massive profiteering. Bangkok boasts 1000 registered skyscrapers, with hundreds more planned in the ongoing construction boom, leaving little room for unprofitable concepts like city parks, green spaces, or healthy ecosystems.

All of the city's canals, as well as the lower reaches of Mae Nam Chao Phraya itself, are considered highly polluted, although plenty of Bangkok residents make daily use of these wa-

last examples of architectural modernism in Bangkok, a trend that had all but concluded by the mid-1980s.

Almost every monumental project constructed in Bangkok now falls squarely in the postmodernist camp, combining rationalism with decorative elements from the past. Proclaiming its monumental verticality like a colossal exclamation point, the 60-storey Thai Wah II building (Map p112), also on Th Sathon Tai, combines rectangles and squares to create a geometric mosaic updating Egyptian Deco. At 305m, the cloud-stabbing Baiyoke Tower II (p104) is currently the second-tallest structure in Southeast Asia after Kuala Lumpur's towering Petronas Twin Towers. Stylistically it shows the inspiration of American post-Deco.

terways for bathing, laundry, recreation and even drinking water (after treating it, of course). The worst water quality is found in the black-water canals on the Bangkok side of the river. On average, bacterial contamination of the city's waterways exceeds permissible limits by 75 to 400 times, and contact exposes you to the life-threatening infections that torment the lives of river residents.

The city has undertaken efforts to clean up the canals over the last couple of decades, but with one million cubic metres of liquid waste pouring into the waters each day, there is limited hope for measurable success. It is estimated that 98% of the region's households dump sewage directly into the rivers and canals and this isn't likely to change anytime soon. Efforts to 'clean' the canals includes planting water hyacinths and pumping polluted waters out of canals and pouring it into the river where it flows away into the ocean (out of sight, out of mind).

Roughly 50% of Bangkok's water supply is drawn directly from groundwater siphoned out of significantly depleted aquifers, leaving this water-laden city facing an impending water shortage. Since 1950 the government has constructed about 3000 dams in the Chao Phraya Basin, diverting water for flood control and irrigation, but leaving the lower reaches of the river increasingly contaminated by salt water that surges upstream as fresh water flows diminish.

On a more positive note, Bangkok's notoriously toxic air quality has improved dramatically over the past 15 years. With blue skies now the norm, Bangkok has emerged as a role model for other pollution-choked cities in Asia, and placed it on par with air quality found in North America. This is particularly impressive given that traffic has increased 40% in the past decade.

This isn't to say that the city doesn't suffer air quality issues found in other major cities. In 1999, Bangkok introduced the Skytrain, an elevated light-rail system that runs above the city's vehicle-clogged avenues. This public transit system provides welcome relief from the interminable traffic jams and takes cars off the road, but ironically air pollution gets trapped under the train's elevated concrete platforms and creates some of the worst air quality problems in the city.

Bangkok is constructing five new or extended light-rail lines, in a spoke-and-wheel configuration around the city, to persuade more Bangkokians to leave their cars and motorcycles at home. Also in the works are plans for a network of dedicated bus lanes on highways as a way of encouraging more people to use public transport. On a more practical level, every motorcycle sold in Thailand is now required to have a clean-burning four-stroke engine. This is a complete reversal from 10 years ago when all motorcycles were polluting two-stroke models. Air quality in Bangkok is expected to continue improving as old motorcycles and derelict buses are decommissioned and replaced with newer models that adhere to strict European emission standards.

In addition to several large city parks filled with trees and other vegetation, Bangkok relies on immense green areas to the west of the city as a means of detoxifying the air. One of the greatest threats to the environment is continued development, not only in the city centre, but also in outlying areas and neighbouring provinces. Realising the importance of maintaining green 'lungs' for the city, the Thai government attempts to maintain strict control on development in these areas. It has had less success controlling development in the inner city, and almost no success controlling vehicle circulation, one of the most obvious problem areas.

The public rubbish collection system in Bangkok works fairly smoothly, with the city managing to dispose of around 90% of all solid waste produced, an average of 9000 tonnes per day. The piles of street rubbish commonly seen in some South and Southeast Asian capitals are noticeably fewer in Bangkok. Where the rubbish goes is another question altogether. Although some serious attempts to separate and recycle paper, glass and plastic are under way, an estimated 80% of all solid waste ends up at sanitary landfill sites outside Bangkok.

URBAN PLANNING & DEVELOPMENT

When Bangkok became the new royal capital in 1782, the city was originally laid out in a traditional Buddhist mandala (*monthon* in Thai) plan, inspired by earlier capitals at Ayuthaya, Sukhothai and Chiang Mai. The Lak Meuang (City Pillar), palaces and royal monasteries stood at the centre, while Khlong Rop Krung was dug around the immediate perimeters to create an island called Ko Ratanakosin. Those nobles and merchants of value to the royal court were encouraged to settle just outside Ko Ratanakosin, and other canals were dug to circumscribe this next layer out from the centre. This rough plan of inner and outer rings – land alternating

with water – was a conscious attempt to pay homage to sacred Mt Meru (Phra Sumen in Thai) of Hindu-Buddhist mythology.

Early Bangkok was as much a citadel as a city. Today the massive whitewashed walls of Phra Sumen Fort still loom over one end of trendy Th Phra Athit, thrusting out towards Mae Nam Chao Phraya. This brick-and-stucco bunker was one of 14 city *pom* (fortresses) built along Khlong Banglamphu, which forms a bow-shaped arc carving an ‘island’ out of Mae Nam Chao Phraya’s left bank.

On the other side of the battlements, Khlong Banglamphu cuts away from the river at a sharp angle, creating the northern tip of Ko Ratanakosin, the royal island that once was the whole of Bangkok. Although often neglected by residents and visitors alike, here stands one of the capital’s pivotal points in understanding the city’s original plan.

In the other direction, the 7km-long canal curves gently inland towards another wall-and-bunker cluster, Mahakan Fort, marking the southern reach of Ko Ratanakosin. Of the 4m-high, 3m-thick ramparts that once lined the entire canal, only Phra Sumen and Mahakan have been preserved to remind us what 18th-century Bangkok really was about – keeping foreign armies at bay.

Beginning in the early 19th century, Thai kings relinquished the mandala concept and began refashioning the city following European and American models, a process that has continued to this day. Open trade with the Portuguese, Dutch, English, French and Chinese had made the fortifications obsolete by the mid-19th century, and most of the original wall was demolished to make way for sealed roadways. By 1900 these roadways were lined with two-storey, brick-and-stucco Sino-Gothic shophouses inspired by Rama V’s visits to Singapore and Penang.

Following WWII, when the Japanese briefly occupied parts of the city, Thai engineers built bridges over Mae Nam Chao Phraya and began filling in canals to provide space for new roads and shophouses. Although many residents continued to occupy stilted houses along the *khlong* and to move about their neighbourhoods by boat, a future of cars and asphalt was inevitable. In the 1960s and ’70s the capital’s area doubled in size, yet scant attention was paid to managing growth. Well into the 1980s, as adjacent provinces began filling with factories, housing estates, shopping malls, amusement parks and golf courses, urban planning was virtually nonexistent.

Bangkok’s first official city plan was issued in 1992, and nowadays the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) employs engineers and urban-planning experts to tackle growth and make plans for the future. So far most planning remains confined to paper – noble ideas without supporting actions, or with actions thwarted by infighting and profiteering. In theory city authorities have the power to regulate construction by zones, and to monitor land use, but in practice most new developments follow capital, with little thought given to such issues as parking, drainage, or social and environmental impact. For the most part city planners seem preoccupied with the immediate exigencies of maintaining basic city services.

CULTURE & IDENTITY

Whether native or newcomer, virtually every Bangkokian you meet has a story. Although the majority no doubt find themselves in Bangkok owing to the simple fact that they were born in the city, a healthy percentage of the population hails from other parts of Thailand and from around the world. Some have followed the promise of work, while others have simply sought out one of the world’s most vibrant social climates.

Climb into one of the capital’s ubiquitous yellow-and-green taxis and the music issuing from your driver’s radio or cassette player will often suggest where he’s (virtually all Bangkok taxi drivers are male) from. If it’s *mǎw lam*, with the churning sound of Thai-Lao bamboo panpipes (*khaen*) pounding out zydeco-like chord figures over a strong, simple rhythm, then chances are he moved to Bangkok from one of Thailand’s distant northeastern provinces, such as Roi Et or Sakon Nakhon. Switch to *lǎuk thǔng*, a unique hybrid of Thai, Indian and Latin musical influences popular with rural audiences, and the driver almost certainly comes from a province closer to Bangkok, perhaps Suphanburi or Saraburi. And if it’s syrupy Thai pop or an older, crooning Bangkok style called *lǎuk krung*, then you’ve most likely hitched a ride with a city native.

Only a little more than half of the city’s inhabitants are in fact true Bangkok Thais, that is, those born of Thai parentage who speak Bangkok Thai as their first language. Although Thais

are found in all walks of life, they are the backbone of the city’s blue-collar workforce, construction, automotive repair and river transport.

Although Chinese Thais live in every quarter of the sprawling city, their presence is most noticeable in a densely populated core of multistorey shophouses along Th Charoen Krung and Th Yaowarat near Mae Nam Chao Phraya, a precinct known as Yaowarat, Sampeng or ‘Chinatown’. Chinese in these areas tend to be engaged in all manner of commerce, from wholesale trade in auto parts to the manufacture of high-end kitchen utensils. In other parts of the city they dominate higher education, international trade, banking and white-collar employment in general. Both immigrant and Thailand-born Chinese residents probably enjoy better relations with the majority population here than in any other country in Southeast Asia.

One in 10 Thai citizens lives and works in Bangkok. Roughly 60% of the country’s wealth is concentrated here, and per-capita income runs well above the average for the rest of the country – second only to Phuket, an island province in the south. The legal minimum daily wage in Bangkok and the adjacent provinces of Samut Prakan, Samut Sakhon, Pathum Thani, Nonthaburi and Nakhon Pathom amounted to 184B (US\$4.85) in 2006, roughly 40B higher than in the rest of Thailand.

A typical civil servant in an entry-level government job earns around 7500B a month, but with promotions and extra job training may earn up to 15,000B. In the private sector an office worker starts at about the same level but will receive pay rises more quickly than those in government positions. Of course Bangkok thrives on private enterprise, from Talat Noi junk auto-parts shops eking out a profit of less than 500B a day, to huge multinational corporations whose upper-level employees drive the latest BMW sedans.

Bangkok women typically control the family finances, and are more likely than men to inherit real estate. Women constitute close to half of the city’s workforce, outranking many world capitals. In fields such as economics, academia and health services, women hold a majority of the professional positions – 80% of all Thai dentists, for example, are female.

All of Bangkok’s diverse cultures pay respect to the Thai king. The monarchy is considered one of the most important stabilising influences in modern Thai political and cultural life, and on Coronation Day and the King’s Birthday the city is festooned with strings of lights and portraits of the king.

Another cultural constant is Theravada Buddhism, the world’s oldest and most traditional Buddhist sect. Around 90% of Bangkokians are Buddhists, who believe that individuals work out their own paths to *nibbana* (nirvana) through a combination of good works, meditation and study of the *dhamma* or Buddhist philosophy. The social and administrative centre for Thai Buddhism is the wát or monastery, a walled compound containing several buildings constructed

THE CHINESE INFLUENCE

In many ways Bangkok is a Chinese, as much as a Thai, city. The presence of the Chinese in Bangkok dates back to before the founding of the city, when Thonburi Si Mahasamut was little more than a Chinese trading outpost on the Chao Phraya River. In the 1780s, during the construction of the new capital under Rama I, Hokkien, Teochiew and Hakka Chinese were hired as coolies and labourers. The Chinese already living in the area were relocated to the districts of Yaowarat and Sampeng, today known as Bangkok’s Chinatown.

During the reign of King Rama I many Chinese began to move up in status and wealth. They controlled many of Bangkok’s shops and businesses, and because of increased trading ties with China, were responsible for an immense expansion in Thailand’s market economy. Visiting Europeans during the 1820s were astonished by the number of Chinese trading ships in the Chao Phraya River, and some assumed that the Chinese formed the majority of Bangkok’s population.

The newfound wealth of certain Chinese trading families created one of Thailand’s first elite classes that was not directly related to royalty. Known as *jào sǎa*, these ‘merchant lords’ eventually obtained additional status by accepting official posts and royal titles, as well as offering their daughters to the royal family. At one point, King Rama V took a Chinese consort. Today it is believed that more than half of the people in Bangkok can claim some Chinese ancestry. The current Thai king is also believed to have partial Chinese ancestry.

During the reign of King Rama III, the Thai capital began to absorb many elements of Chinese food, design, fashion and literature. This growing ubiquity of Chinese culture, coupled with the tendency of the Chinese men to marry Thai women and assimilate into Thai culture had, by the beginning of the 20th century, resulted in relatively little difference between the Chinese and their Siamese counterparts.

in the traditional Thai style with steep, swooping roof lines and colourful interior murals; the most important structures contain solemn Buddha statues cast in bronze. The sheer number of wats scattered around the city – more than 300 – serves as a constant reminder that Buddhism retains a certain dominance even in increasingly secular Bangkok.

Walk the streets of Bangkok early in the morning and you'll catch the flash of shaved heads bobbing above bright ochre robes, as monks all over the city engage in *binthabàat*, the daily house-to-house alms food-gathering. Thai men are expected to shave their heads and don monastic robes temporarily at least once in their lives. Some enter the monkhood twice, first as 10-vow novices in their preteen years and again as fully ordained, 227-vow monks sometime after the age of 20. Monks depend on the faithful for their daily meals, permitted only before noon and collected in large, black-lacquered bowls from lay devotees.

Green-hued onion domes looming over rooftops belong to mosques and mark the immediate neighbourhood as Muslim, while brightly painted and ornately carved cement spires indicate a Hindu temple. Wander down congested Th Chakraphet in the Phahurat district to find Sri Gurusingh Sabha, a Sikh temple where visitors are very welcome. A handful of steepled Christian churches, including a few historic ones, have taken root over the centuries and can be found near the banks of Mae Nam Chao Phraya. In Chinatown large, round doorways topped with heavily inscribed Chinese characters and flanked by red paper lanterns mark the location of *sàan jào*, Chinese temples dedicated to the worship of Buddhist, Taoist and Confucian deities.

Thai royal ceremony remains almost exclusively the domain of one of the most ancient religious traditions still functioning in the kingdom, Brahmanism. White-robed, topknotted priests of Indian descent keep alive an arcane collection of rituals that, it is generally believed, must be performed at regular intervals to sustain the three pillars of Thai nationhood: sovereignty, religion and the monarchy. Such rituals are performed regularly at a complex of shrines near Wat Suthat in the centre of the city. Devasathan (Abode of Gods) contains shrines to Shiva and Ganesha and thus hosts priestly ceremonies in the Shaiva tradition, while the smaller Sathan Phra Narai (Abode of Vishnu) is reserved for Vaishnava ritual.

Animism predates the arrival of all other religions in Bangkok, and it still plays an important role in the everyday life of most city residents. Believing that *phrá phuum* or guardian spirits inhabit rivers, canals, trees and other natural features, and that these spirits must be placated whenever humans trespass upon or make use of these features, the Thais build spirit shrines to house the displaced spirits. These doll house-like structures perch on wood or cement pillars next to their homes and receive daily offerings of rice, fruit, flowers and water. Peek inside the smaller, more modest spirit homes and you'll typically see a collection of ceramic or plastic figurines representing the property's guardian spirits.

Larger and more elaborate spirit shrines stand alongside hotels and office buildings, and may contain elaborate bronze images of Brahma or Shiva. At virtually all times of the day and night, you'll see Thais kneeling before such shrines to offer stacks of flowers, incense and candles, and to pray for favours from these Indian 'spirit kings'.

The Thais may bestow Thai royal spirits with similar guardian qualities. The spirit of King Rama V, who ruled over Siam from 1868 to 1910 and who is particularly venerated for having successfully resisted colonialism, is thought to remain active and powerful in Bangkok today. Every Tuesday evening thousands of Bangkokians throng a bronze equestrian statue of Rama V standing opposite Abhisek Dusit Throne Hall, offering candles, pink roses, incense and liquor to the royal demigod.

GOVERNMENT & POLITICS

The Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) administers the capital, which is segmented into 50 districts covering 1569 sq km. Since 1985 metropolitan Bangkok has boasted the country's only elected governors (provincial governors are appointed), and perhaps the most charismatic of these was former army major general, Chamlong Srimuang.

A devout Buddhist, Chamlong is also a self-confessed celibate and a strict vegetarian. In 1985, Chamlong ran for governor as an independent, supported by an organisation calling itself Ruam Phalang (United Force), made up mostly of volunteers from the Santi Asoke Buddhist sect, of which he is a member. Despite facing a much more politically experienced and well-funded competitor, Chamlong won the election by a large margin.

As Governor of Bangkok, Chamlong had a large impact on making the city a more liveable place. He persuaded city street sweepers to sweep streets for the entire day, rather than just during the morning, and encouraged roadside hawkers, technically illegal, to stop selling their wares on Wednesdays. His anti-poverty projects included paving footpaths in squatter communities and establishing thrift stores for the poor. He even established a chain of vegetarian restaurants throughout the city.

In 1988, Chamlong established the Palang Dharma (Moral Force) Party (PDP), a largely Buddhist-based political entity, to contest nationwide parliamentary elections. The party went on to lose these, but Chamlong was able to hold on as Governor of Bangkok. Two years later, Chamlong was again voted governor, and his PDP won 49 out of 55 seats in the election for Bangkok City Council. It was during this term of office that Chamlong became the key opponent and protest leader of the 1991 military government led by army chief Suchinda Kraprayoon. Resigning as governor, Suchinda led massive protests, underwent a hunger strike and was even fired upon by the military before being publicly scolded along with Suchinda by the king on national television.

Many thought that Chamlong's political career was over after the incidents of 1991. However, in 2006 Chamlong once again gained the political spotlight in Bangkok when he became a key leader of the People's Alliance for Democracy, a coalition of protesters against the government of Thaksin Shinawatra. Although to Chamlong's chagrin it was the military that eventually took his former protégée out of office, he was instrumental in leading protests in downtown Bangkok that quite possibly led to Thaksin's demise.

In 2004, Bangkok gubernatorial candidate Apirak Kosayothin won a hotly contested race against a candidate backed by the ruling party, Thai Rak Thai. His victory was widely seen as a major loss of face for then Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, leader of Thai Rak Thai. Governor Apirak named the reduction of corruption and traffic congestion as his main objectives, and has already embarked on plans to expand the BTS, the city's mass-transit system. However, some of his policies, including 'smart' taxi and bus stops, flopped, and his proposed Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) project has seen little progress.

In March 2008 Apirak voluntarily stepped down as governor so as not to influence an investigation into a fire truck procurement scandal that allegedly involved him and prime minister Samak Sundaravej.

MEDIA

Bangkok – and Thailand's – first printed periodical was the *Bangkok Recorder*, a monthly newspaper founded in 1844 by American missionary Dr Dan Beach Bradley. Today Thailand has 38 newspapers, four political weekly magazines, four political monthly magazines, two Chinese newspapers, one newspaper for Muslims, and two English-language newspapers: the *Bangkok Post* and *The Nation*.

In 1955 Thailand became the first country in Southeast Asia to broadcast television programmes. Today there are six free channels and a variety of subscription channels. Thailand also has 523 radio stations, most of which are run by the Public Relations Department, which supervises Radio Thailand, the central government station responsible for broadcasting local and daily news.

The country's previous constitution ensured freedom of the press, although the Royal Police Department reserved the power to suspend publishing licences for national security reasons. Editors generally exercise self-censorship in certain realms, especially with regard to the monarchy.

Thai press freedom reached its high-water mark in the mid-1990s, while Chuan Leekpai's Democrat Party was in power. Following the ascension of Thaksin Shinawatra's Thai Rak Thai Party in 2001, Thailand's domestic media found itself increasingly subject to interference by political and financial interests. The country's international reputation for press freedom took a serious dent in 2002 when two Western journalists were nearly expelled for reporting on a public address presented by the Thai king on his birthday, a portion of which was highly critical of PM Thaksin. In 2004 Veera Prateepchaikul, editor in chief of the *Bangkok Post*, lost his job due to direct pressure from board members with ties to Thaksin and Thai Rak Thai. Allegedly the latter were upset with *Post* criticism of the way in which the PM handled the 2003–04 bird flu crisis.

DRESSED TO THE NINES

Don't be fooled by the fashion aesthetics promoted by the tourist brochures and hotel lobbies. Within Bangkok's city limits, modern, not traditional, costumes rule the streetside runways that would make Milan feel underdressed. European labels are hotly pursued by fashionistas, but local labels are turning heads both here and abroad.

Local fashion houses, like Fly Now, Senada Theory and Greyhound, are frequent attendees to London and Paris fashion weeks. Fly Now started as a ladies boutique in 1983 and has expanded across the city with wearable art. Greyhound raced onto the scene in 1980 as a men's wear line and has since expanded to suit the fairer sex. The various lines are urban hip and amorphyically Asian. The addition of a café in the Emporium shopping mall helped define Greyhound's lifestyle image with the global elite. Of the maturing new-wave designers, Senada Theory flirts most closely with ethnic chic, but succeeds in producing couture.

Established designers have stores in Gaysorn and the Emporium, while younger ready-to-wear designers open little boutiques in Siam Sq or Chatuchak Market. Even Th Khao San is beginning to show more home-grown design. The government is keen to promote Bangkok's garment industry and the city now hosts two fashion weeks: Bangkok Fashion Week in August and Elle Fashion Week in November. More ambitious plans have yet to materialise and critics point out that Thailand still lacks skilled craftspeople and high-end fabrics. But for now the raw enthusiasm makes stunning window dressing.

Observers agree that by 2005 Thai press freedom had reached its lowest ebb since the 1970s era of Thai military dictatorship. However, as popular opinion turned against Thaksin in late 2005 and early 2006, virtually all media (save for military-run TV channel 11) shook off the cloak of self-censorship and joined the public clamour that eventually resulted in Thaksin's deposition from power.

FASHION

Unsurprisingly, Bangkok is Thailand's fashion hub, and in fact in all of Southeast Asia only Singapore is a serious rival. Bangkokians not only dabble in the latest American, European and Japanese designer trends, but they have an up-and-coming couture all their own. Shops run by modern Thai designers are particularly easy to find at the Emporium, Gaysorn Plaza, Siam Paragon and Siam Center shopping centres, and in the small lanes of Siam Sq. Siam Sq focuses on inexpensive 'underground' Thai fashions favoured by university students and young office workers, while Emporium and Siam Center are much more upmarket. Local labels to look for include anr, Good Mixer, Fly Now, Greyhound, Jaspal and Senada Theory. Chatuchak Weekend Market is another place to seek out Bangkok designs at bargain prices.

Take a stroll through Siam Sq or Central World Plaza, especially on a weekend, and the explosion of styles and colours can't fail to impress. On weekends the middle *soi* (lane) of Siam Sq – an area known as Centrepoint – is filled with young Thais wearing the most outrageous clothing experiments they can create. It may not be on par with Tokyo's famous Harajuku district, but in a few years who knows what it may become?

Fashion shows grace the lobbies of various shopping centres around the city practically every weekend of the year. Since 1999 one of the biggest annual events has been Bangkok Fashion Week, a string of fashion shows in various venues around the city, including the new Fashion Dome, an air dome constructed over the middle of the lake at Benjakitti Park, adjacent to the Queen Sirikit National Convention Center. The Bangkok International Fashion Fair, held in September, is mostly a trade event but weekend days are usually open to the public.

The Thai government's clumsily named Office of the Bangkok Fashion City promotes fashion events and aims to turn Bangkok into a world-class – rather than simply regional – fashion centre by 2012. The office, however, has clashed more than once with Thailand's culture minister, who regularly chastises the organisers of Bangkok Fashion Week for the skimpiness of some of the outfits displayed on the catwalks. Coupled with the conservative night-time entertainment venue closing times, such Puritanism leads many in Bangkok's fashion community to question whether the city can attain world-class status with such government interference.

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