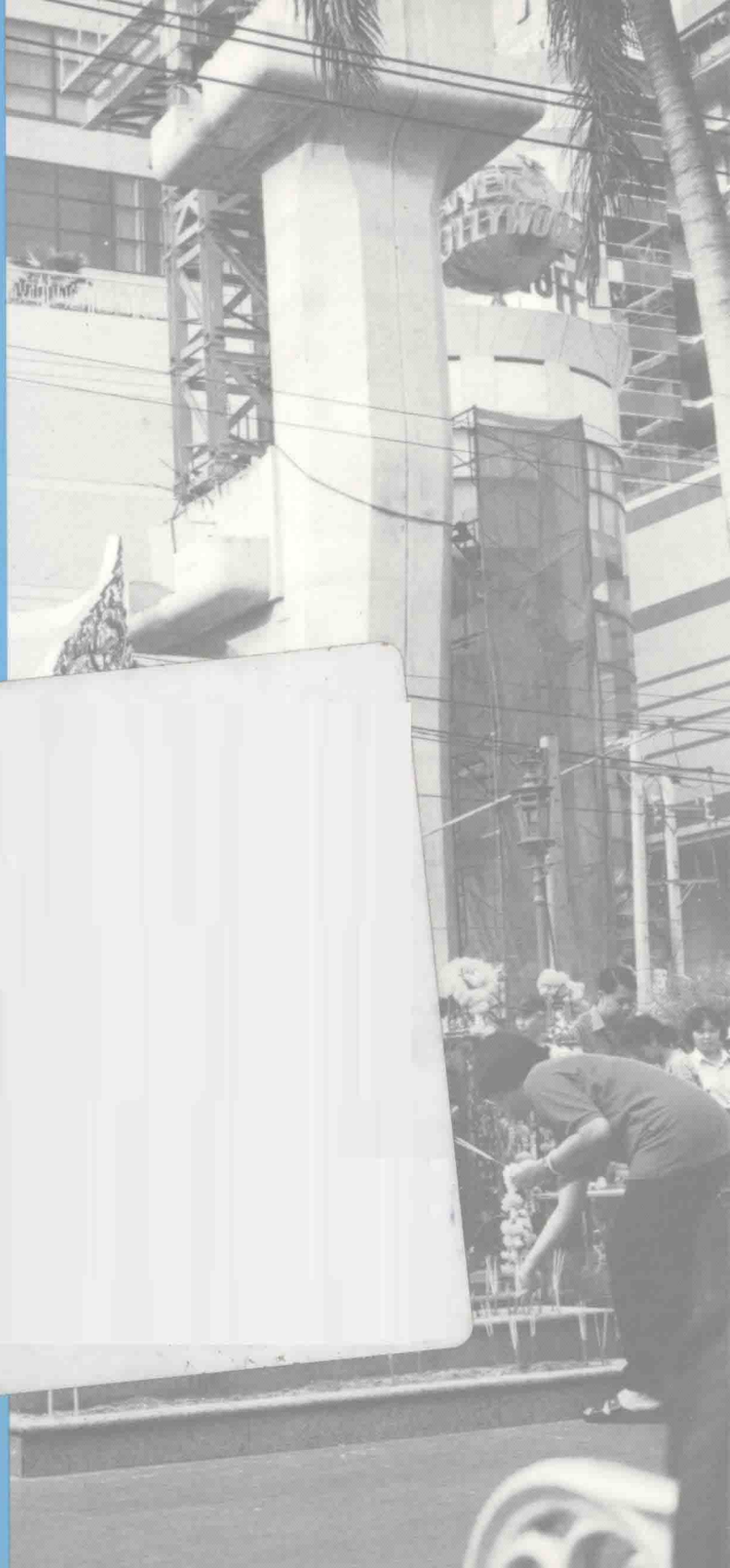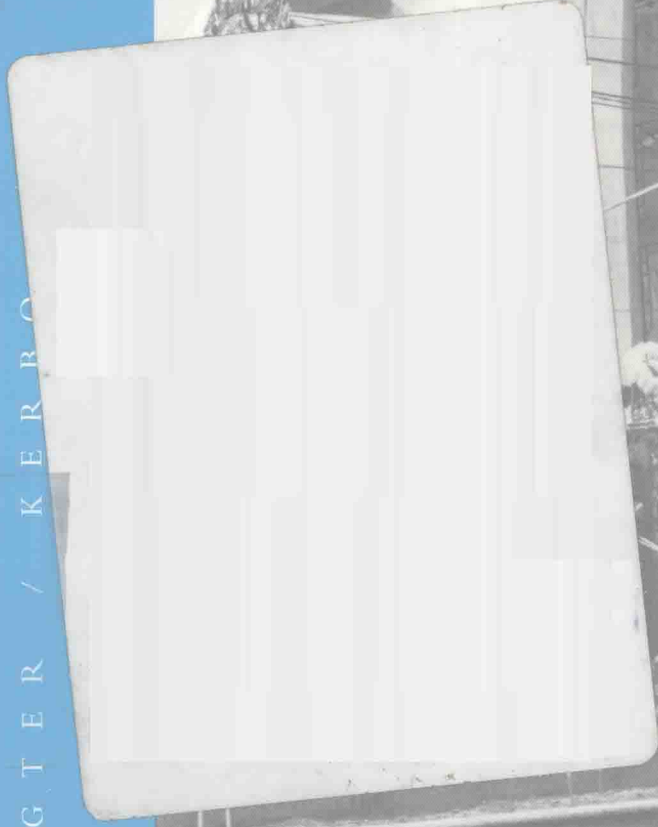# MODERN THAILAND

SLAGTER / KERBO

MODERN THAILAND

A Volume in the Comparative Societies Series

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MODERN THAILAND

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EDITOR'S PREFACE

In one of the early scenes of the movie *Reds,* the U.S. revolutionary jour-nalist John Reed, just back from covering the beginning of World War I, is asked by a roomful of business leaders, "What is this War really about?" John Reed stands and stops all conversation with a one-word reply—"profits." Today, war between major industrial nations would disrupt profits much more than create money for a military industrial complex. Highly integrated global markets and infrastructures support the daily life of suburban families in Chicago and urban squatter settle-ments in Bombay. These ties produce a social and economic ecology that transcends political and cultural boundaries.

The world is a very different place than it was for our parents and grandparents. Those rare epic events of world war certainly invaded their everyday lives and futures, but we now find that daily events thou-sands of miles away, in countries large and small, have a greater impact on North Americans than ever before, with the speed of this impact mul-tiplied many times in recent decades. Our standard of living, jobs, and even prospects of living in a healthy environment have never before been so dependent on outside forces.

Yet there is much evidence that North Americans have less easy ac-cess to good information about the outside world than even a few years ago. Since the end of the Cold War, newspaper and television coverage of events in other countries has dropped dramatically. It is difficult to put much blame on the mass media, however: International news sel-dom sells any more. There is simply less interest.

It is not surprising, then, that Americans know comparatively lit-tle about the outside world. A recent *Los Angeles Times* survey provides a good example: People in eight countries were asked five basic ques-tions about current events of the day. Americans were dead last in their knowledge, trailing people from Canada, Mexico, England, France, Spain, Germany, and Italy.* It is also not surprising that the annual re-port published by the Swiss World Economic Forum always ranks American executives quite low in their international experience and understanding.

Such ignorance harms American competitiveness in the world econ-omy in many ways. But there is much more. Seymour Martin Lipset put it nicely in one of his recent books: "Those who know only one country know no country" (Lipset 1996: 17). Considerable time spent in a foreign

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*For example, while only 3 percent of Germans missed all five questions, 37 percent of the Americans did (*Los Angeles Times,* March 16, 1994).

country is one of the best stimulants for a sociological imagination: Studying or doing research in other countries makes us realize how much we really, in fact, have learned about our own society in the process. Seeing other social arrangements, ways of doing things, and foreign perspectives allows for far greater insight into the familiar, our own society. This is also to say that ignorance limits solutions to many of our own serious social problems. How many Americans, for example, are aware that levels of poverty are much lower in all other advanced nations and that the workable government services in those countries keep poverty low? Likewise, how many Americans are aware of alternative means of providing health care and quality education or reducing crime?

We can take heart in the fact that sociology in the United States has become more comparative in recent decades. A comparative approach, of course, was at the heart of classical European sociology during the 1800s. But as sociology was transported from Europe to the United States early in the 20th century, it lost much of this comparative focus. In recent years, sociology journals have published more comparative research. There are large data sets with samples from many countries around the world in research seeking general laws on issues such as the causes of social mobility or political violence, all very much in the tradition of Durkheim. But we also need much more of the old Max Weber. His was a qualitative historical and comparative perspective (Smelser 1976; Ragin and Zaret 1983). Weber's methodology provides a richer understanding of other societies, a greater recognition of the complexity of social, cultural, and historical forces shaping each society. Ahead of his time in many ways, C. Wright Mills was planning a qualitative comparative sociology of world regions just before his death in 1961 (Horowitz 1983: 324). [Too few American sociologists have yet to follow in his footsteps.]

Following these trends, sociology textbooks in the United States have also become more comparative in content in recent years. And while this tendency must be applauded, it is not enough. Typically, there is an example from Japan here, another from Germany there, and so on, haphazardly for a few countries in different subject areas as the writer's knowledge of these bits and pieces allows. What we need are the textbook equivalents of a richer Weberian comparative analysis, a qualitative comparative analysis of the social, cultural, and historical forces that have combined to make relatively unique societies around the world. It is this type of comparative material that can best help people in the United States overcome their lack of understanding about other countries and allow them to see their own society with much greater insight.

The Comparative Societies Series, of which this book is a part, has been designed as a small step in filling this need. We have currently selected 12 countries on which to focus: Japan, Thailand, Switzerland, Mexico, South Africa, Hungary, Germany, China, India, Iran, Brazil, and Russia. We selected these countries as representatives of major world regions

and cultures, and each will be examined in separate books written by talented sociologists. All of these basic sociological issues and topics will be covered: Each book will begin with a look at the important historical and geographical forces shaping the society, then turn to basic aspects of social organization and culture. From there each book will proceed to examine the political and economic institutions of the specific country, along with the social stratification, the family, religion, education, and finally urbanization, demography, social problems, and social change.

Although each volume in the Comparative Societies Series is of necessity brief to allow for use as supplementary readings in standard sociology courses, we have tried to assure that this brief coverage provides students with sufficient information to better understand each society, as well as their own. The ideal would be to transport every student to another country for a period of observation and learning. Realizing the unfortunate impracticality of this ideal, we hope to do the next best thing—to at least mentally move these students to a country very different from their own, provide something of the everyday reality of the people in these other countries, and demonstrate how the tools of sociological analysis can help them see these societies as well as their own with much greater understanding.

> **Harold R. Kerbo**
> **San Luis Obispo, CA**
> **June 1997**

To the extent people from Western countries know anything about Thailand, they most likely have positive images, promoted by the tourism industry and the recent Hollywood movie *The Beach*, of beautiful tropical beaches (as at the islands of Phuket, Samui, or Pi Pi where the movie was made), or the negative images dominating the Western mass media, such as low-paid workers, prostitution, and AIDS. The reality of Thailand is much more complex than these simplistic images. It is a country of great beauty, and the Western fascination with the exotic or negative is often unfair and frequently misleading.

Yes, Thailand is a developing country with a large unskilled labor force, working for an average of $5 per day at the end of the 1990s. However, unlike many, or even most, developing countries Thailand's economy has been developing steadily since the early 1960s (and continues despite the "Asian economic crisis" beginning in 1997), and the Thai workers making $5 a day at the end of the 1990s were making much less only 10 years ago. Again, contrary to common assumptions, the outside exploitation of cheap labor by corporations from rich nations is not making the poor poorer; since the 1950s the proportion of Thai people living in poverty has dropped from around 50 percent of the population to only about 13 percent at the end of the 1990s.

There is indeed a large sex industry in Thailand, with brothels to be found all over the country; and Thai people as well as tourists flock to these places, especially in Bangkok. Thai people will sadly admit that today there are more prostitutes than Buddhist monks in Thailand. In contrast to this image of rampant prostitution and sexual immorality, it must be recognized that young Thai women are much more modest in their behavior, with respect to sexual activity and dress, than women in Western countries. And as we will see, when it comes to opportunities in the workplace and professions, Thai women are in some respects ahead of their sisters in many Western nations, including the United States. Although extensive prostitution is usually assumed to be associated with low status and power for women, this is not necessarily so in Thailand.

One common and interesting indicator of gender-role differences in Thailand is that until this century Thais did not have family names. While many traditional agricultural societies were patrilineal with the male line dominant and the male family name passed from generation to generation, this was not the case in Thailand. It was only through increasing contact with more powerful and threatening Western nations, however, that the king in the early 20th century decided that Thais

needed last names. Although they were required to have them, then and today Thais have not warmed to the system of family names. They continue to use primarily first names only, as well as what we might call cute nicknames such as "little bird."[1]

As we will see throughout the coming pages, Thailand often appears full of contradictions. The country and its people challenge many of our assumptions about human nature, conditions in developing countries, and even the old stereotypes about Asian people and their cultures. Because of this, an examination of Thai society and culture can make us confront our assumptions on these and other topics and perhaps lead us to begin to look at the world in new and different ways. We think it is useful to study Thailand because it is a very interesting place, because a focus on Thailand is beneficial for learning more about the nature of societies in general, and because we can learn more about our own by comparing it to Thailand.

This little book about modern Thailand begins with an introduction to the place and its people before turning to more detail about Thai culture and social organization. Chapters that follow will introduce you to some important aspects of Thai history, the basic social institutions in Thai society—the political system, economy, family, religion, and education. Concluding chapters will focus on social problems confronting Thailand today and the process of social change. Throughout these chapters there will be explicit comparisons to the United States and other Western nations, and at times to other Asian nations. In every chapter our goal is not only to help you understand the fascinating and sometimes puzzling people who live in Thailand today but also to understand something about the basic nature of societies and humans in general and in the process learn much more about yourself and the society of which you are a part.

Finally, we would like to extend our sincere thanks to several people in the United States, Thailand, and other countries who have helped us better understand Thailand in general and specifically helped us in writing this book. Our old friend Uthai Dulyakasem at Silpakorn University, helpful in many ways over the years, aided us in obtaining some of the information used in various places in this book. Much the same can be said for Nikom Tangkapipop, Pornlerd Uampuang, and Kanit Kheovichal, also at Silpakorn University in Bangkok, and Nakorn Pathom. At the Prince of Songkla University in Hat Yai, Sommart Chulapongse and Jongpid Sirirat were gracious hosts while we were living and teaching at their university; they also helped us understand many aspects of Thai society. Seksin Srivatananukulkit of Chiang Mai University also provided valuable insights.

We would also like to thank Volker Bornschier at the University of Zurich and past president of the World Society Foundation for a generous research grant that allowed us to conduct research in Thailand for

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At McGraw-Hill we would first like to thank Amy Smeltzley, who got behind the Comparative Societies Series in its early stages of planning; and then our current editor, Sally Constable, and her assistant, Kate Purcell, who have kept us on track and put up with our long delays; and finally Kimberly Hooker, who as always did a superb job in the editing and production process with McGraw-Hill. In various ways all of the above individuals helped make this book a reality.

Robert Slagter
Harold R. Kerbo

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Modern Thailand: An Introduction

THE PLACE

Thailand is a part of the region we refer to today as Southeast Asia. In typical fashion, most earlier descriptions of Asia contained Western biases: The "far East" was not the far East unless you were in Europe; "further India" assumes you are on the other side of India and that Southeast Asia has much in common with India; and "Asia of the monsoons" is a clear misnomer for much of the area (Osborne 1995: 4). The name Southeast Asia, however, does well in locating Thailand among the Asian nations that are south of China and Japan and east of the huge Indian subcontinent. As can be seen in the map of Thailand, on the west and north Thailand borders Burma (or Myanmar as the current military dictators of Burma insist the country be called), with Laos on the north and east, and Cambodia further down the east. Thailand extends southward along the Malay peninsula to its border with Malaysia. The other large countries that make up the Southeast Asian region include Vietnam, Indonesia, and the Philippines.

There are some common characteristics shared by all countries in this Southeast Asian region, but there are also many significant differences. In contrast to another general image shared by most non-Asians, not all Asian countries are alike; in fact, it may be that there are greater differences among the nations of East and Southeast Asia than among European nations.

One characteristic generally shared by all nations of Southeast Asia, however, is climate. The entire region is tropical or subtropical, with some remaining dense jungle and rain forest, extensive rainfall, and consistently high temperatures. Upon first entering Thailand, in fact, it is often the heat and high humidity that form the first impressions of Western visitors. Such visitors may wonder why early people would want to settle in such a hot and humid country in the first place. But after traveling around

the country even briefly a very basic answer will come to mind: food. Like other countries in the region, Thailand is a virtual greenhouse; in the hot and humid climate many varieties of plants thrive, and even today outside of the major cities there is an abundance of food growing naturally. It takes a major human-created tragedy, such as the Khmer Rouge revolutionary experiment in Cambodia, to provoke starvation in Southeast Asia. In the case of Thailand, climate and social organization have combined to make the country a rich center of agriculture production and exporter of food.

Not all of Thailand, however, is made up of hills covered with dense jungle rendering the country a popular place to film Vietnam War movies. In the center and northeast of Thailand there are broad flat plains, which are ideal for rice cultivation. This is especially true of the central region, which has much more rainfall than the northeast. Bangkok, the national capital of Thailand, is set near the southern end of a flat delta formed by the mighty Chao Phraya River. It is rice agriculture, particularly wet rice, that made civilization possible in Thailand, and this type of agriculture has shaped some of the basic characteristics of the Thai society and culture examined in later chapters.

THE PEOPLE

Just over 60 million people live in Thailand today in an area about the size of Texas. Thus, again contrary to popular assumptions in the West about most Asian countries, Thailand is not a particularly crowded nation. Crowding is a problem in the capital and central city of Bangkok, but that is a matter of choice rather than a problem of overpopulation. Officially, Bangkok has 6 million people, or 10 percent of the population of the whole country, but in actuality there are closer to 10 million people living in the city. The problems of managing that city and its rapid growth, which is an urban planner's nightmare, are considered later in Chapter 8.

With respect to the total population of Thailand, over 70 percent are ethnic Tais, the dominant cultural and **ethnic group** today. The Tai moved into what is now Thailand from China about 1,000 years ago. People have lived in the region for at least 40,000 years, however, and there is now some evidence that the Bronze Age actually began in Thailand almost 6,000 years ago (Shearer 1989: 198; Wyatt 1984: 3–4). While the Tai is the largest group, Thailand's population is made up of a rich mixture of ethnic Asian groups, including many **hill tribe** people with quite different traditions, ethnic Chinese, Laos, and Malays (who are mostly Muslim, in contrast to the Buddhist traditions of the other ethnic groups) and other nationalities from Southeast Asia. One of the most important characteristics of Thailand that other people around the world would do well to understand and

emulate is the relative racial and ethnic harmony in the kingdom despite this rich diversity of peoples (Fallows 1994: 291).

An additional important factor in Thailand's history is its experience with the Western nations. In terms of level of development there are over 130 nation-states in the world classified as less developed nations (LDCs), including Thailand. Of these countries, only four—Afghanistan, Liberia, Turkey, and Thailand—were not subject to colonization by one of the more developed nations (Hadenius 1992). While all of the other nations of East and Southeast Asia experienced some form of colonization—Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos by France; Burma and Malaysia by England; and Indonesia by the Dutch—Thailand escaped despite its strategic location and the fact that it was militarily and economically weaker than many of its neighbors. As a result, throughout the 20th century Thailand has remained an island of relative tranquility as nationalist anticolonial revolutions were waged in nations all around her. Today there is less resentment and anger toward foreigners among Thais since they did not experience the humiliation of colonialism.

Equally important, Thailand's ability to remain free of direct colonial domination meant that its indigenous development was relatively less influenced by foreigners and its traditions and culture are better preserved than those in neighboring countries that have been disrupted by colonialism. In fact, many of the positive characteristics found in Thailand today can be related in one way or another to the Thais' ability to remain free of the Western powers (Muscat 1994: 28; Kulick and Wilson 1996: 5; Girling 1981: 163).

THAI CULTURE AND SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

We now consider some aspects of this Thai culture and its traditions, in particular some of the core values and beliefs of the Thai people. We describe Thai culture first by focusing on those elements that Thais share with many other Asian peoples and then examining other values and beliefs that distinguish the Thais and create the complex and sometimes puzzling mix of behaviors and practices one finds in Thailand.

We should begin with a few examples. As a foreigner traveling in Thailand you are likely to immediately notice many customs not found in Western nations. For example, in a variety of settings you might notice people greeting each other with a **wai**—hands together, fingers pointing up, held about chest-high, and accompanied by a bow. Looking carefully you might also notice that all wais are not equal; sometimes the hands are raised a little higher, the bow is a little deeper. These subtle differences are evidence of one of the most important aspects of Thai culture, **hierarchy.** To a much greater extent than in the United States and other Western nations, in Thailand there is a well-defined social hierarchy that is recognized and acknowledged by people in a wide variety of social

settings. These differences in wais (greetings) are just one of the ways relative positions in the hierarchy are acknowledged. The person giving a wai just a bit more emphatically, as you might expect, is the subordinate person, while the one whose wai is more perfunctory with hands held lower than the head is of higher rank.

After befriending Thais you have the opportunity to observe another element of Thai culture, the extremely *strong sense of self*, or a preference for **individualism**, which can lead Thai people to be rather spontaneous and free. One of your friends might suddenly quit a job (or just not show up for work) to go traveling with a friend, visit up country, or do something else for a good time. Here we come to one of the puzzling contrasts in Thai culture: Societies with well-defined hierarchies normally do not feature such individualistic behavior. Japan, for example, is more consistent in this respect, with both a well-defined status ranking and less of what can be defined as individualistic behavior. Thai society, therefore, has been described as "first and foremost hierarchically structured where individualism and social relations are of the utmost importance" (Suntaree 1990:131–138). This contradiction between hierarchy and individualism is indicated in two Thai proverbs: "dogs will not bite you if you follow the social superior" and "to be able to do what one wants is to be a real Thai" (Akin 1996: xx).

A third key element of Thai culture is important to recognize: avoidance of conflict, or maintaining smooth social relations. This is the lubricant of Thai society. A logical question may have occurred to you: With many individualistic people placed in a complex set of hierarchical relationships, how can constant conflict be avoided? For the most part, social order in social interactions is maintained by **norms,** or rules, stressing politeness, a calm and even temperament, modesty, and the avoidance of direct confrontation. In other words, at least on the surface, people should act as if all is well and people are getting along, even if such is not really the case.

Let's consider another example: If you were the manager of a foreign corporation in Thailand, you might call a meeting of the Thai staff hoping to discuss some problems the organization was experiencing. Instead of the open and frank discussion you anticipated, however, it is likely that you would find everyone quite reluctant to speak up; and if someone did, his or her ideas would be expressed only in a vague and general way (Holmes and Suchada 1995). Disappointed in the meeting, you would probably be surprised that over the next few days many of the same people spoke to you privately, giving an excellent analysis of the problem topic of the earlier meeting and proposing excellent workable solutions. In this case you would be experiencing all three aspects of Thai culture noted above: the emphasis on smooth social relations, showing respect to authority figures, and the avoidance of confrontation and injury to anyone's honor, or a loss of **face.**