

Pranee Liamputtong *Editor*

Contemporary Socio-Cultural and Political Perspectives in Thailand

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ISBN 978-94-007-7243-4 ISBN 978-94-007-7244-1 (eBook)
DOI 10.1007/978-94-007-7244-1
Springer Dordrecht Heidelberg New York London

Library of Congress Control Number: 2013958225

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*To my parents Saeng and
Yindee Liamputtong
who raised eight children amidst poverty*

Acknowledgments

In bringing this book to life, I owed my gratitude to many people. First, the book would not have happened without the contribution from all authors who worked very hard to get their chapter to me. I would like to thank Esther Otten, a senior acquisition editor of Springer who saw the value of this book and worked to ensure that I was contracted to edit the book. I also thank Rosemary Oakes who helped reading through several chapters in this book. Rosemary has been a great support for my academic life since I have known her, and I deeply appreciate her help and support throughout these years too.

I thank my own families, both in Thailand and in Australia. This book is dedicated to my parents, Saeng and Yindee Liamputtong, who brought their children up amidst poverty in the south of Thailand. Without their wisdom and hardworking life, I would not have come this far. I also thank all of my siblings who are now all in Thailand. They have given me much support all these years that I have become an immigrant in Australia. Last, I thank my two daughters, Zoe Sanipreeya Rice and Emma Inturatana Rice, who deeply appreciate their Thai heritage and for their understanding of my working life that I have to perform on top of my mothering roles.

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Contemporary Thailand: An Introduction

Pranee Liamputtong

1 Thailand at a Glimpse

Thailand, a constitutional monarchy, is located in Southeast Asia and has been known as the “Land of Smiles.” Thailand was historically recognized under the name Siam (Wongtes 2000). The term Thailand was formally created in the early nineteenth century. Its capital city, Bangkok, was established in 1782, 15 years after Ayutthaya, an ancient city, was destroyed (Baker and Phongpaichit 2005). There have been many speculations about the origin of Thai territory and ethnicity. The Thais may have originated in some parts of China and the Malay Peninsula. There is also evidence to suggest that they may have come from the area that is now southern China (Phillips 2007). Today, there are still many Thai people living in southern China (Terwiel 1989; Baker and Phongpaichit 2005). In the late nineteenth century, Thailand expanded its borders to cover a large part of Southeast Asia. Additionally, Thailand has always been an independent country because it has never been colonized by any other nations (Einspruch 2007; Phillips 2007; Suwankhong 2011).

Thai culture, politics, and social systems have been influenced by many neighboring countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia, Cambodia, Laos, and Burma (Terwiel 1989). The Burmese used to live in the central and northern parts of Thailand. As a result, their religion, Theravada Buddhism, was adopted by the Thais. Between the eleventh and twelfth centuries, Cambodia spread its civilization through Southeast Asia, and this also has powerfully influenced the construction of Thai hierarchical society (Naemiratch 2004). As we have witnessed nowadays, Thailand has adapted the culture and religion of its neighboring countries to create a unique Thai culture (Phillips 2007).

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Buddhism is the national religion of Thailand, with about 95 % of the Thais being Buddhists (Phillips 2007). However, people are free to follow any religion and practice. In some communities, it is possible to find Buddhist temples, shamanist and Chinese shrines, Muslim mosques, and Christian churches in close proximity (Wongtes 2000; Suwankhong 2011). As the majority of Thai people declare themselves to be Buddhist, Mulder (1985: 153) contends that Buddhism “is a way of life, an identity, and the key to primordial Thainess.” Buddhism has had a deep influence on the Thai’s modes of thinking and behavior. Buddhism, according to Mulder (1985: 132), is “the most visible and ubiquitous of Thai institutions.” Several chapters in this volume will attest to this influence.

The social transition of Thailand has been marked by economic growth, population restructuring, social and cultural development, political tensions, and reforms in its national health-care system (Suwankhong 2011). This is clearly evident in many chapters in the volume. As a society, Thailand has been undergoing progressive development since the introduction of the National Economic Development Plan in 1961 (Naemiratch 2004). The First to the Third plans (1961–1976) were mainly centered on economic developments. The Fourth to the recent Tenth plans focused primarily on social and cultural development, population restructuring (1977–2011), and the improvement of health-care system (Bureau of Policy and Strategy 2007).

During the Asian financial crisis in the late 1990s, the Thai economy was badly affected. Thailand sought help from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to help its economy recover. Thailand’s economic woes returned between 2005 and 2007 (Wibolpolprasert 2007). It was at this crisis time that the “sufficiency economy” philosophy was created to give new direction for the country’s development (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2009; Suwankhong 2011). This philosophy has been promoted as a guideline to deal with economic crisis and social change. The economic crisis sounded the alarm to all relevant sectors of Thailand. In fact, Thailand attempted to reform its developing country paradigm, focusing on this direction since the Eighth National Economic and Social Development Plan (1997–2001). Participation of all sectors of society, especially at the grassroots level, is given priority because these sectors could create a balance between economic, social, and environmental development (Wibolpolprasert 2007). The sufficiency economy philosophy was also incorporated in the Ninth National Economic and Social Development Plan (2002–2006). Although Thailand is now applying the Tenth National Economic and Social Development Plan (2007–2011), it strongly combines those concepts to prevent negative effects from an imbalanced globalization development in the Thai economy and society. It is likely that this philosophy will be included in the next National Economic and Social Development Plan (2012–2016) because it could maintain the balance of economic, social, and environmental development (National Economic and Social Development Board 2008). This philosophy is discussed in several chapters of this volume.

When mentioning Thailand, most people will imagine the land as portrayed in the *King and I* movie, a country with beautiful temples, and for many people, clubs, bars, Thai women, gay men, and transsexual individuals. However, contemporary Thailand has changed dramatically from what is known to many people. Although

we may still witness many traditional ways of life, contemporary Thailand is about changes and the immense impact of these changes on Thai people. Political situations such as coups and the recent Yellow and Red Shirts movements have been devastating. This internal political crisis has impacted tremendously on the life of Thai people and international relations between Thailand and other nations. Marked social and cultural changes have also occurred in Thailand. With this, we see new social movements and identities such as the rise of a new middle class and “lower” class groups and ethnic, gender, and gay movements. Social and health inequalities among Thai people continue to persist. These are captured in most chapters in this volume. Perhaps people still smile but there is much tension beneath the smiles of Thai people. I left Thailand about 30 years ago and I have also been going back home every year. Whenever I go back to Thailand, I could see the changes of Thai society, and more importantly, I could feel the tensions among Thai people, even among members of my own family who are also caught in the changing world of Thailand. These contemporary issues have not been captured in great depth in existing literature concerning Thailand. This book will fill this gap.

2 The Focus of the Book

This book has its focus on contemporary Thailand. The volume captures many contemporaneous aspects in Thai society. These are from social, cultural, and economic changes to the current political situations in Thailand. Chapters cover historical contexts to emerging issues in Thai society as well as range from social and public health concerns. The volume also includes issues concerning Thai people in general to those impacting on ethnicity, gender, social class, and sexuality. The volume offers comprehensive discussions regarding Thailand, its people, culture, and society from multiple angles as seen through multiple lenses. Due to a range of diverse issue covered in the volume, it is difficult to situate all chapters within a common conceptual framework. Thus, there is no appropriate common theory that pulls the chapters together in this book. I rely heavily on the contemporary perspective as a common theme of this volume. It must be noted that each chapter contains its own theoretical framework to which readers could refer.

There are too many books on Thailand and Thai people to list here. However, most of these existing books focus on a particular aspect of Thai society, for example, a political, social, cultural, historical, religious, gender, and transsexual perspective. For instance, Michael Connors’ most recent book entitled *Contemporary Thailand: Politics, Culture, Rights* (2009) only focuses on the political aspects in contemporary Thailand. In his book, Connors explores the struggle for political order by examining four significant sites of contestation: monarchy, culture, rights, and the place of the Muslim South in the Thai nation. Apart from Connors’ book, there has not been any recent book on Thailand that captures a full range of issues concerning contemporary Thailand as proposed in this volume. A search through Google as well as a library search does not provide any title that can compete with this volume.

This book was conceived when I attended and presented my work at the 11th International Conference on Thai Studies, in Bangkok in July 2011. There, I met many people who have their interests in Thai society and presented their work, which I found very fascinating. I made attempts to connect to many of them and those who were interested in presenting their work have now become contributors to this book. I am very grateful to all contributors who helped to make this book possible. Originally, there were more authors who had agreed to take part in the book, but for many personal reasons and work commitments, some were not able to deliver their work when the absolute deadline arrived. However, I believe that the contents of volume are still comprehensive and cover many fascinating contemporary materials in Thai society.

This book comprises five parts and contains 32 chapters. Part I includes chapters that portray contemporary sociocultural issues in Thailand. The first chapter in this part is about redefining “Thainess” and is written by Suwilai Premrirat. In this chapter, Suwilai suggests that the notion of “Thainess” needs to be broadened to offer ethnolinguistic groups their own space within Thai political society on an equal basis so that they may be empowered to live a dignified life with security, justice, and opportunity. Willard Van De Bogart writes Chap. 2 on the Giant Swing and its significance to the religious culture of Thailand. In this chapter, Willard argues that the Giant Swing is one of Thailand’s most well-known landmarks. What is less known about this historic landmark is its symbolic significance. Sophana Srichampa presents Thai amulets as a symbol of the practice of multiple faiths and cultures in Chap. 3. She points out that Buddhism is the religion of the majority of Thai people. But in Thai life, people’s beliefs reflect multiple faiths and cultures. The value of amulets is an example of the influence of different faiths in Thailand. In Chap. 4, Saowapa Pornsiripongse, Kwanchit Sasiwongsaroj, and Pacharin Ketjamnong write about Buddhist temples from the perspective of a religious capital approach for preparing Thailand for an aging society. Thailand is experiencing a rapid increase in older population. The phenomenon has attracted the attention of various sectors in order to develop suitable guidelines to accommodate this situation. Mayumi Okabe, in Chap. 5, presents issues regarding community development and network construction among the Buddhist monks in northern Thailand. Mayumi examines how Theravada Buddhist monks have survived in the rapid social changes, which are the result of modernization in contemporary Thailand from an anthropological perspective.

Chapter 6, written by Adcharawan Buripakdi, presents an interesting contemporary issue in Thai society on hegemonic English, standard Thai, and narratives of the subaltern. This chapter addresses the status of English and Thai language related to the notion of Other – marginalized voices – in Thailand. The next chapter (Chap. 7) is about digital revolution and its discontents. It is about Thai “underground metal” scene and their love-hate relationships with new technologies and is written by Athip Jittarek. Athip presents a case from a sector that also received enormous impact from this revolution, namely, “Thai underground metal scene,” using the materials from his ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Bangkok from 2007 to 2011. Chapter 8 presents a fascinating work of Morakot Jewachinda Meyer on

reimagining nationalism and nostalgia of the past in the contemporary Thai novel and its stage and screen adaptations. In this chapter, Morakot provides her analysis of the novel *“Thawiphop”* (Parallel Worlds) and discusses how it has been received in Thai society. Ratana Tosakul, in Chap. 9, presents issues relating to capitalism and the sufficiency economy in rural northeastern Thailand. She contends that since the 1980s, the notion of village sufficiency economy has been developed and endorsed by major institutions in Thai society. There is a hope that the adoption of this economic ideology and practice might eventually result in a sustainable village economic development.

Chapters in Part II discuss political situations in contemporary Thailand. It begins with an interesting chapter by Aim Sinpeng who writes about the party-social movement coalition in Thailand’s political conflict, between 2005 and 2011. In this chapter, Aim seeks to address a gap between the literature about social movements and party politics by establishing a more systematic crossover understanding of the two fields. Following on from Aim’s chapter on political party movements, Allan Lee presents his writing on “For king and country?: Thailand’s political conflicts as dynamics of social closure” in Chap. 11. Allan argues that political conflicts in Thai society ought to be reexamined with an appreciation of the dynamics of social closure. The Yellow Shirts movement that emerged in the late 2000s is best understood as an attempt by various groups located in the middle stratum of Thai society to counter and contest their gradual economic, political, and social exclusion by the Thai state and elites. Chapter 12 is written by Pei-Hsiu Chen who discusses the vulnerability of Thai democracy with the main focus on coups d’etat and political changes in modern Thailand. In this chapter, Pei-Hsiu deals with Thai politics by delineating its type of regime, political culture, and elite politics. The coup d’etat in 19 September 2006 and the collapse of Thaksin regime are carefully examined in accordance with the analysis of political vulnerability in modern democratization of Thailand.

In Chap. 13, Serhat Ünalı writes about politics and the city, paying particular attention to the protest, memory, and contested space in Bangkok. Serhat argues that the past years have seen a significant shift in the configuration of political space in Thailand, metaphorically and literally. He suggests that the rudimentary but progressive development of politics along programmatic and ideological fault lines between political and social groups has led to bitter contestations both within the political structure and in physical space. Moving away from political conflicts between parties in Thailand, Diane Archer, in Chap. 14, presents the politics of change in Thai cities focusing on the urban poor as development catalysts. She points out that low-income communities are playing an increasingly important role in city development, with consequences for civic participation and democratization of Thai grassroots.

Part III presents chapters that focus on ethnic issues in Thailand today. In Chap. 15, Sumitra Suraratdecha writes about language and cultural rights in the ethnic revival movement of the Black Tai in Khaoyoi, Petchaburi. The chapter addresses the notions of ethnocultural identity, language rights, stigma, prejudice, and discrimination in an educational sphere. Chapter 16, written by Matthew R. Juelsgaard, is

about Lahu students in Thai schools, focusing on two Lahu sisters: Som and Noi. Teaching in an elementary school, Matthew observed that Lahu students encountered challenges different from those of their Thai peers. For both sisters, overcoming linguistic borders as well as socioeconomic constraints were significant aspects of their schooling experiences. The stories of these two Lahu women echo many of my personal experiences as a child growing up in a poor family in the south of Thailand. Chapter 17, written by Alexander Trupp, discusses rural–urban migration and ethnic minority enterprise, paying attention to Akha migrants. Over the last years, an increasing number of Thailand’s ethnic highland minorities have moved to urban and tourist areas to enter self-employment. In this chapter, Alexander illustrates the evolution of urban Akha souvenir businesses over time and space and explores the embeddedness of female Akha entrepreneurs in social networks and in the wider economic and political-institutional structures as well as the resulting chances and challenges. He also explores the strategies Akha migrants employ to become successful entrepreneurs by showing how they transform cultural and social resources into economic capital.

Part IV is concerned with gender and queer perspectives in contemporary Thailand. It commences with a very interesting piece of Kosum Omphornuwat who writes about learning to look good. It is about Thai women office workers and everyday consumption practices at work in Chap. 18. By arguing that consumption practices involve learning, in this chapter, Kosum explores how, through their engagement in the consumption of clothes and makeup, Thai women office workers learn to look good at work. Chapter 19 presents the work of Chantanee Charoensri who examines Thai daughters, English wives from the perspectives of a critical ethnography of transnational lives. Her chapter tells their story and reveals how the life trajectories of Thai women, as wives of Englishmen, have been deeply structured by a number of interconnecting forces beyond their control. However, at each stage in these trajectories, key qualities of the women’s characters have played a pivotal role: characteristics of discipline, skill, and deep loyalty. In Chap. 20, Megan Lafferty and Kristen Hill Maher discuss the expat life with a Thai wife presenting Thailand as an imagined space of masculine transformation. In this chapter, they examine the narratives and circumstances of white western men living in Thailand to explore how their structural privilege plays out once they settle there. Their position and identity as western men generate not only social status but also a heightened sense of insecurity and social isolation. The narratives of the men illustrate some of the ways that they negotiate new forms of vulnerability and shifts in power by constructing themselves as neocolonial expats and masculine decision makers.

Chapter 21 discusses women NGOs movement for fighting against domestic violence by Suangsurang Mitsamphanta. In this chapter, Suangsurang shows that women’s NGOs are groups of people who are concerned about the problem. Additionally, they have expended much effort in fighting against the problem. Many strategies are employed in their movement both in the private and public sectors. They finally managed to get involvement from the government. Andrea Katalin Molnar in Chap. 22 presents issues relating to women’s agency in the Malay Muslim communities of southern Thailand. Andrea contends that women have invariably been described as

victims in the literature on women's political participation in Southeast Asia. This discourse obscures women's agency. Andrea argues that women are politically engaged – whether through the formal political arena as politicians or through civil society as leaders and activists in social movements and NGOs. Women are agents of change and their political engagement makes significant impact on various human security issues including peace-building efforts in different parts of Southeast Asia. In her chapter, Andrea examines Malay Muslim women's agency in the conflict-torn Deep South of Thailand, focusing on civil society engagement.

Chapter 23 is written by Erin Kamler on trafficking and coerced prostitution in Thailand and pays attention to the reconceptualization of international law in the age of globalization. In this chapter, Erin argues that coerced prostitution, particularly in Thailand, should be regarded as a transnational rather than a local issue. She uses the migration practices of Shan ethnic community members as a case study to illustrate how cultural and economic push factors influence coerced prostitution. In Chap. 24, Monica Lindberg Falk writes about gender and Buddhism in the wake of the tsunami. This chapter deals, from a gender perspective, with the significance of Buddhism in the post-tsunami recovery process in small fishing communities in southern Thailand. It explores local adaptation strategies.

Witchayanee Ocha, in Chap. 25, presents the first fascinating chapter on queer perspective. This chapter forms a body of gender knowledge through the study of the emergent identities in Thailand's sex tourism industry that Thailand is becoming a well-known place for sex change operations. The chapter shows that bodies are plural and very diverse. There are not just two kinds of bodies. There are multiple kinds of bodies and lots of differences among them. The most important proposition of her paper is to revise gender concepts for a fuller understanding of "gender" in the world of technology. This clearly represents a challenge in current knowledge of "gender and development." In Chap. 26, Dredge Byung'chu Käng provides his writing on conceptualizing Thai genderscapes looking at transformation and continuity in the Thai sex/gender system. This is another fascinating chapter in this volume. In Thailand, Dredge suggests that genderscapes, or the terrain of gender and sexuality, continue to evolve quickly, with alternative genders proliferating. In this chapter, Dredge argues that genderscapes provide a provisional conceptualization of contemporary Thai gender and sexuality. In Chap. 27, the third gender as seen in Thai fiction is written by Jenjit Gasigijtamrong. There is a myth that Thailand is the haven of the third gender, be they lesbians, gays, bisexuals, or transgender (LGBT), although results from empirical studies regarding this issue remain inconclusive. Her chapter explores this topic in Thai language novels written in 1980s and early 2000s. Jenjit suggests that the third gender is mainly perceived and presented through the influence of a patriarchal idea. Being the third gender is not socially accepted; it is perceived as an illness that needs to be cured. Family influence or the way a person is raised is thought to be the main cause of such behavior.

The last part of this volume is dedicated to health issues in contemporary Thai society. The first chapter, Chap. 28, is on Theravada Buddhist temple taking care of people living with HIV/AIDS in Thailand and presented by Yoshihide Sakurai and Kazumi Sasaki. This chapter illustrates the case of social support by Wat

Phrabatnampu in Lop-Buri province, Thailand, from the perspective of social inclusion by the private sector in Thai civil society and the strategic usage of moral practice in Theravada Buddhism. They suggest that the case of Wat Phrabatnampu, regardless of being based on traditional Theravada Buddhism, could be considered a pioneering example of socially engaged Buddhism. In Chap. 29, Pranee Liamputtong and Somsri Kitisriworapan address the issues of authoritative knowledge and folk knowledge in antenatal care in contemporary northern Thailand. The chapter also presents the experience of pregnancy and antenatal care among northern Thai women. In this chapter, they conclude that to many Thai women, the cultural authority of biomedicine pervades. Despite several decades of campaigns for reproductive choices among women's movements, these notions are still problematic in Thai antenatal care.

Chapter 30 presents the work of Yongsak Tantipidoke on the moral aspect of local healing to show the process that morality can contribute to the effectiveness of healing. The chapter focuses on the story of two folk healers and analyzes how the healer associated his sensibility with the moral values in the local world and led to a starting point of a healing process, how sympathy and other related moral dispositions are called up in the process, and how the healer, through a healing process, becomes able to reify local moral values into practical humanized healing. The chapter then explores the outcomes of the healing process – power of virtue and merit – that can strengthen the effectiveness of healing. Dusanee Suwankhong and Pranee Liamputtong write about *phum panya chao baan* (local wisdom) and traditional healers in southern Thailand in Chap. 31. Thailand is now focusing on forming a sufficient health-care system by using local wisdom and traditional health resources. The use of local resources such as traditional medicine (TM) and traditional healers to share expenses can be cost-effective in increasing the good health of the Thai people. In the final chapter, Chap. 32, Atchara Rakyutidharm discusses issues regarding Thailand's NGOs and the Thai Health Promotion Foundation (THPF). She suggests that many Thai nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and people's organizations (POs) willingly cooperate with THPF and other government agencies and business groups. The relationship as "collaboration" is not just only because the two parties gain benefit from each other but also because they have some things in common, particularly the vision, the concepts, and the approaches that they adopt in development.

3 Conclusion

Readers will see that the book captures many aspects of contemporary Thailand. Most chapters included in this volume are written using information from empirical-based and historical research. What we see in this book comes from real-life experiences of the writers and people, mostly Thai people, who took part in the research. Additionally, contributors are composed of both Thai and foreign scholars who have undertaken extensive research in Thailand. The book offers critical

analyses of issues concerning contemporary Thailand as seen through the eyes of experts, both inside and outside Thailand. As I have anticipated, it is expected that this volume would be valuable to many readers who have your interests in Thailand and its contemporary sociocultural and political issues.

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Part I
Thailand and Current
Socio-cultural Issues

Chapter 1

Redefining “Thainess”: Embracing Diversity, Preserving Unity

Suwilai Premsrirat

1 Introduction

To be Thai is to exude the distinguishing qualities, behavior, and virtues of the Thai nation as encapsulated in the term “Thainess.” For the nationalistic designers of the concept, at least, unifying the diverse, though not entirely disparate, cultural and linguistic varieties existing on the fringes of “Central” Thai society was a means to fashioning a sense of homogeneity that would serve the interest of the political elite in Bangkok at a time in the mid-twentieth century when colonial pressures threatened all borders of the country formerly known as Siam.

Today, many still regard the somewhat limited Thainess ideal as representing a single people with common traits. The significant diversity of language and culture is frequently ignored or misunderstood and this has resulted in marginalization for many and the gradual extinction of language and cultural heritage for some. But now, efforts are being made at a grassroots level, with considerable support from concerned parties outside, to restore pride and dignity to ethnic communities through language revitalization. It is hoped too that, as a matter of sensitivity and historical accuracy, Thainess will come to be redefined to encompass groups for whom the current erroneous definition does not fully fit and, in so doing, reflect the true cultural complexity that is, and always was, Thailand.

This chapter will discuss the language diversity in Thailand and how the indigenous communities and academics make a lot of efforts to reverse the language shift by preserving and revitalizing their threatened language in addition to improve the

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chronic underachievement in schools for the students in the border areas. This is especially for the Patani Malay-speaking students in the south which has led to cultural conflict and language identity issues that underlie the political unrest and violent situation in the area.

2 The Reality of Linguistic and Cultural Diversity in Thailand

Geographically, Thailand is situated at the center of Mainland Southeast Asia which is one of the most complex areas of languages and ethnicities in the world (with around 1,000 languages).

The linguistic diversity of Thailand is evident by the fact that with a population of 60 million, speaking more than 70 living languages, belonging to five language families: Thai (24 languages), Austroasiatic (23 languages), Austronesian (3 languages), Sino-Tibetan (18 languages), and Hmong-Mien (2 languages). Thai is the official/national language. Details can be found in Premsrirat and Others (2004) (Fig. 1.1).

The languages and the cultures they represent provide this region with a rich and rewarding diversity of ideas, philosophies, and values. To some people, cultural and linguistic diversity can be considered as a resource; to others, it is a problem. And to some, it represents a struggle for basic rights. Each consideration leads to the ways in addressing the diversity situation by either promoting and supporting or eliminating diversity as much as possible. It could also be seen as a right of the indigenous people that has to be protected.

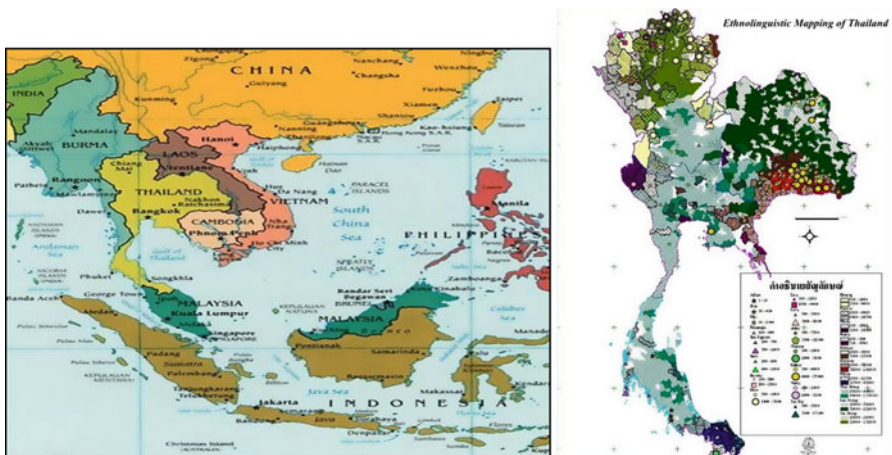


Fig. 1.1 Map of language diversity in Thailand at the heart of SEA

3 Language Endangerment Issue

World languages are now in crisis. The twenty-first century is an age of rapid change. Language loss, like the loss of biodiversity, is accelerating at an alarming rate. According to the estimation of linguists such as Krauss (1992), 90 % of world languages are facing extinction by the end of this century (or shortly thereafter) if nothing is done. The 10 % that seem to be “safe” are official/national languages or languages with political support. And at the moment, 50 % are not being learned by children. Languages in Thailand are facing the same fate. Ethnic minority languages, big and small, are not safe.

Globalization and nationalism are the main causes of the changes in the language ecology that lead to language shift and language loss. As for globalization, the global economy and sociopolitics and global culture influence the lives of most people. Even in remote areas, global communication, especially the powerful mass media, can reach into homes of people. Such media use global languages such as English or a national language. Nationalism too plays a role whereby national language and education policy determine or sculpture attitudes and values. For example, it heavily influences the speakers’ negative attitudes about their ethnic language. The younger generation does not see the value of their ethnic language and increasingly choose to use the language of wider communication.

3.1 *The Language Situation in Thailand at the Present Time*

Ethnic minority languages in Thailand are declining (Fig. 1.2). The younger generation is becoming monolingual in Thai which is the official/national language. At least 15 languages are seriously endangered. They are small, enclave languages that are surrounded by bigger languages. They are Chong, Kasong, Samre, Chung (Sa-oc), So (Thavung), Nyah Kur, Mlabri, Maniq (Sakai), Lavua, Mpi, Bisu, Gong, Moklen, Urak Lawoi, and Saek. All major nondominant languages in Thailand are potentially endangered and show signs of contraction, especially in vocabulary and grammar such as Northern Khmer, Patani Malay, Mon, Lao *Isan*, and Kammuang (Premsrirat 2006a, b). Oral traditions such as folktales, poetry, and songs are severely endangered and are disappearing even faster than the spoken language itself. See also Chap. 15 in this volume.

Large language groups in border regions are not only facing the problem of language decline among the younger generation, but most also cannot access government services such as education or health. In general, ethnic minority peoples are considered, by outsiders, as slow and not likely to succeed in the modern development process. In some areas such as in Thailand’s Deep South where the majority of the population are Muslim Melayu–Thai speakers, there is

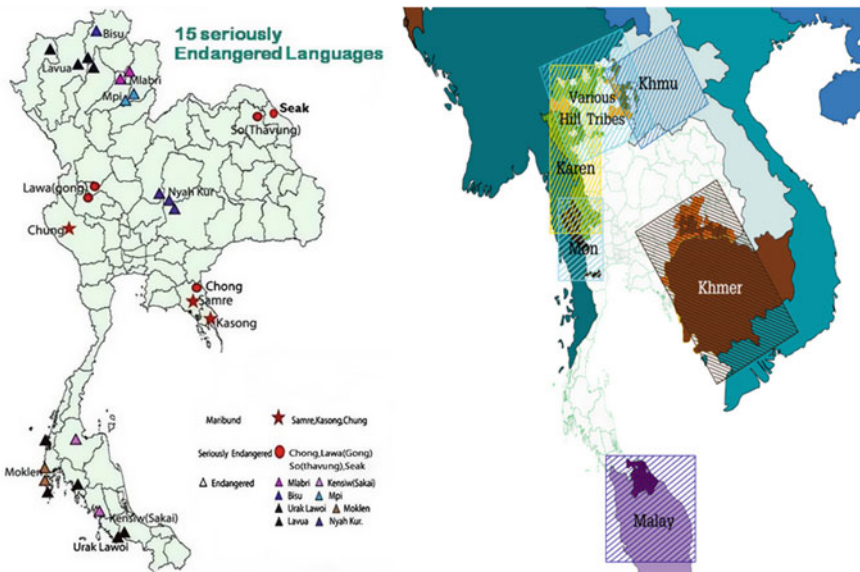


Fig. 1.2 Languages in crisis

resistance to many government services. The language identity issue and cultural conflicts are among the underlying factors which contribute to the violence and political unrest (Premsrirat 2008 and 2010).

According to the eight stages of Fishman’s Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scales (GIDs), by which the degree of language endangerment can be identified, all languages in Thailand (large and small) with the exception of official language (standard Thai) are classified by Premsrirat (2007a) as being on the weak side for reversing language shift. Only Patani Malay, Northern Khmer, Lavua, and Mon can be put in stage 4 (strong side) if their tongue-based bilingual education, which is now being conducted as action research in formal school system, is accepted (Fig. 1.3).

3.2 What Is Being Done to Slow Down the Death of Languages?

There are several observations that I wish to make here. First, academics and language speakers are being encouraged to document as much as possible the language, culture, and oral traditions of languages at risk before they are lost forever. Second, the language speakers/ethnolinguistic communities are being encouraged to conduct language revitalization programs with technical support of academics (linguists, anthropologists, education experts, and so on) and with initial financial support from Thailand Research Fund (TRF) and other funding agencies. Last, the reconsideration of the national language policy to facilitate and support the use of ethnic minority languages along with the national language (Thai) and international languages (Fig. 1.4).

Weak side	Stage 8	So few fluent speakers that community needs to reestablish language norms; often requires outside experts (e.g., linguists) [<i>Kasong, Sumre, and Chung (Sa-oc)</i>]
	Stage 7	Older generation uses language enthusiastically but children are not learning it [<i>Chong, Lawa (Gong), So (Thavung)</i>]
	Stage 6	Language and identity socialization of children takes place in home and community [<i>Maniq (Sakai), Kensiw, Lua (Lavua), UrakLawoi, Moklen, Mlabri, Mpi, and Bisu)</i>]
	Stage 5	Language socialization involves extensive literacy, usually including non formal L1 schooling or teaching L1 as a subject “Local Studies” in school [<i>Chong, So (Thavung), NyahKur)</i>]
Strong side	Stage 4	L1 used in children’s formal education in conjunction with national or official language [<i>Patani Malay, Northern Khmer, Lavua, and Mon)</i>]
	Stage 3	L1 used in workplaces of larger society, beyond normal L1 boundaries
	Stage 2	Lower governmental services and local mass media are open to L1
	Stage 1	L1 used at upper governmental level

Fig. 1.3 Eight stages of language endangerment (levels of language vitality) according to Fishman’s Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDs)



Fig. 1.4 Language and oral traditions documentation by linguists

4 Language Revival Efforts from Grassroots Communities and Indigenous Rights Movements (Focusing on Education)



A Mon lady uses a vivid metaphor to describe the Mon language endangerment situation comparing it to a fruit which “*is breaking off from the stem*” and the language revitalization activity as “*the last breath of the speakers.*” (Preamsriat 2007b)

Language revitalization is an attempt to provide a new domain of language use in order to increase the use of the language and the number of users. According to Crystal’s (2000) six postulates to guide attempts of revitalization, an endangered language will positively progress if its speakers (1) increase their prestige within the dominant community, (2) increase their wealth relative to the dominant community, (3) increase their legitimate power in the eyes of the dominant community, (4) have a strong presence in the educational system, (5) can write their language, and (6) can make use of electronic technology. Since many ethnic minority languages (large and small in Thailand) have been classified as being potentially endangered at various stages, a group of linguists at Mahidol University have pioneered a cooperative program to preserve these languages. Endangered language speakers and communities will participate in language documentation and description as well as in the language revitalization and maintenance program. The focus is to put community members at the heart of revitalization efforts through involvement in almost all steps of the revitalization process such as orthography development, creation of local vernacular literature, collection of local knowledge, and instruction of the language to the next generation of speakers. This Mahidol Revitalization Model has been implemented with the cooperation of 22 language groups and the technical and moral support of the Mahidol research team (Preamsriat [Forthcoming](#)). The community-based language revitalization and maintenance model that has emerged from these efforts incorporates basic principles of reversing language shift (Fishman 1991), yet is sensitive to the distinct needs of each individual community. See also Chap. 15 in this volume (Figs. 1.5 and 1.6).

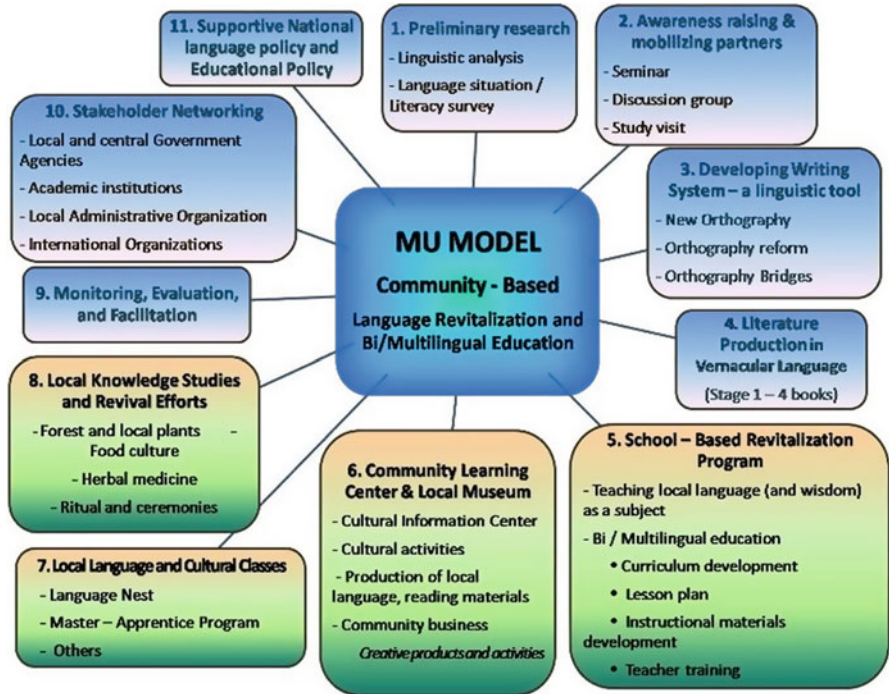


Fig. 1.5 Mahidol language revitalization model by Premrsirat (Forthcoming)

The model consists of 11 component activities which are adapted to utilize the best fit to the unique contextual needs of individual communities. The first step in the model is preliminary research, which consists of assessing the morbidity of a language in an area, surveying the literacy of the people, and performing a linguistic analysis. Once the linguistic situation is understood, awareness-raising activities such as seminars, discussion groups, and study visits are arranged to mobilize partners in the effort. After partnerships have been established, a writing system is developed for the language. With a writing system that has been deemed acceptable by the community, literature production commences; local authors create stories for big books, small books of different stages, and dictionaries that the language speakers compile themselves. The next step is to introduce the language into the formal school system. For small, seriously endangered languages such as Chong, Nyah Kur, and So (Thavung), the language is taught as a subject in local schools. This involves developing a curriculum and instructional materials, lesson planning, and teacher training. For the bigger language groups or languages that the children still speak such as Patani Malay, Northern Khmer, and Lavua, a mother tongue-based bilingual education is conducted in order to address the language identity crisis or cultural conflict and to raise students’ levels of achievement in school. This form of language revitalization commences when the child first starts school. A way to