



Culture Notes

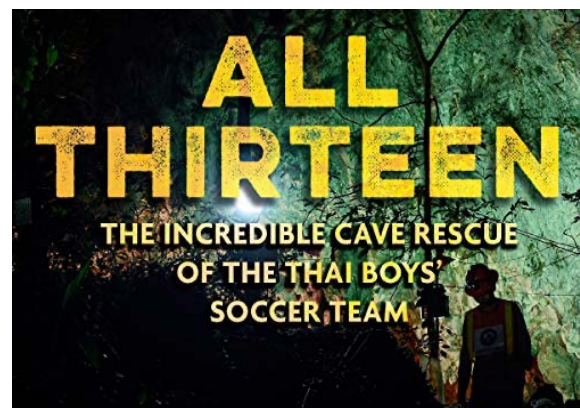
All Thirteen: *The Incredible Cave Rescue* *of the Thai Boys' Soccer Team*

by Christina Soontornvat

Non-Fiction, set in Thailand

2020 of Note, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult/Middle School Literature

In 2018, a boys' soccer team was trapped by rising water in a cave in Northern Thailand. This book recounts their dramatic rescue and the international attention it attracted. Written by a Thai American science educator, the book is a unique introduction to the country with touchpoints for curriculum connections to a number of subject areas. The author provides a wealth of information on the history and culture of northern Thailand, as well topics such as cave systems, diving, Thai religion, migration, and hypothermia. Since so much immediate cultural context is explained within the book, the following notes provide a wider national and regional context of geography, history, and culture for those who may be unfamiliar with Thailand and its place in the region of Southeast Asia.



CHRISTINA SOONTORNVAT



The Regional Setting: Southeast Asia

Geography sets the stage not only for the story told in *All Thirteen*, but also for the entire history of northern Thailand, where the Cave of the Sleeping Lady is found, as well as the wider region we call Southeast Asia.

Southeast Asia is often divided into two main regions: the islands and the mainland. There are broad cultural differences between the two regions, notably language and religion. Austronesian languages predominate in the islands: Malay, Bahasa Indonesia, and the many related languages of the Philippines. The mainland is home to many language families, some that were brought in by migrations from what is now southern China. These include the Tai family of languages, including Central Thai, regional dialects within



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Thailand and Laos, and a number of minority languages spoken in neighboring parts of Myanmar (also called Burma), Vietnam, and southern China. Religion also provides a contrast between the islands and the mainland. Islam is a strong cultural presence in the island nations, while Buddhism has played a dominant role in the history of the mainland

Mainland Southeast Asia—home to Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam—is separated from China, India, and Bangladesh by mountain ranges that helped insulate the region from imperial control by China or India. As the book points out, the mountains were formed by uplift relating to plate tectonics. Within Southeast Asia, four major plates intersect, and their interaction still shapes the geography of the region. The collision of the Indian Plate with the Eurasian Plate was one important interaction that formed the world's highest mountains in a crumple zone known as the Himalayas. This geologic process has had profound consequences for the climate, human migration and geopolitics, and the cultural history of the greater Southeast Asian region.

Monsoons and the Rainy Season

One enduring effect of the Himalayan uplift is the annual pattern of rainfall known as the monsoon. The monsoon affects not only the Indian subcontinent but the entire coast of the South China Sea, including southern China and mainland Southeast Asia. In Thailand, this results in three annual seasons: a *rainy season* from May or June until October or November, a cooler *dry season* from November through January, and an increasingly *hot season* from January until the arrival of the monsoon rains.

This pattern determines the agricultural calendar and many related cultural events, although the arrival of the first rainfall can be hard to predict. Annual flooding caused by the monsoon is beneficial to farmers, but it can also be destructive or dangerous, as described in this story. Directing the rainwater to



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protect and benefit crops has always been a challenge for Thai farmers, like those who lent their motorized “super pumps” to the cave rescue effort.

For centuries throughout the region, Thai, Burmese, and Cambodian kings have performed ritual spring plowing ceremonies to propitiate spirits of the rain and soil and ensure a good crop. The dates of these are determined by royal astrologers. The rainy season also signals the period when monks retreat indoors (or into caves) for three months of meditation and study, an important Theravada Buddhist tradition that has been practiced throughout history in Thailand and Burma.

How Rivers Shaped Thailand

The rains that fall on the Southeast Asian highlands run into streams that form great rivers flowing into the South China Sea or the Bay of Bengal. The floodplains of the largest rivers provide fertile soil for rice agriculture, rich habitats for fish, and a network of channels for boat transportation. The rivers set the stage for a number of lowland states linked by trade, diplomacy, history, and cultural heritage.

Thailand’s territory, about the size of Spain, centers on the Chaopraya River valley in the center of mainland Southeast Asia. Central Thailand is watered by this river and its tributaries as the Chaopraya flows into the Gulf of Thailand near the modern capital city of Bangkok.

Two longer rivers, rising from headwaters on the Tibetan Plateau, define the western and eastern boundaries of Thailand. On the western boundary is the Salween River, which drains (along with its tributary, the Moei River) much of the Thai borderland with Myanmar into the Andaman Sea on the rim of the Indian Ocean. To the east, the Mekong River flows from China through the Shan Plateau, forming the border between Thailand and Laos. From there,



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the Mekong flows through Cambodia to its broad delta in southern Vietnam, emptying into the South China Sea.

Northern Thailand

The incident recounted in *All Thirteen* took place in the northernmost district of the northernmost province in Thailand, very close to the border with Myanmar. This is not far from a region known as the Golden Triangle, where Thailand, Myanmar, and Laos come together at the Mekong River. The district's main city, Mae Sai, is a major border crossing and market town where a friendship bridge leads over the river into the Burmese town of Tachileik. Historically, Thai, Lao, Burmese, and locally independent principalities (Thai: *muang*) ruled here at various times, and the population includes ethnic minority communities that transcend the political borders.

To the east of this region the Khorat Plateau rises toward mountains in Laos to the north and east, and in Cambodia to the south. Southern Thailand reaches down the Malay Peninsula to encompass Malay states that were vassals of the Thai kings. Within the borders of the modern nation is a considerable diversity of languages, cultures, and religions. Some of this diversity is reflected in the Wild Boars soccer team.

The Cave of the Sleeping Woman is located in the province of Chiang Rai. The city of Chiang Rai was an early capital of the Lanna kingdom, founded by King Mangrai (r. 1292–1311) after whom the city was named. Lanna expanded to become a major regional power in the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries. Chiang Mai was built as a capital for Lan-na early in this period, and it is now the second-largest city in Thailand, after Bangkok. In 1556, a new Burmese dynasty expanded and took control of Lanna. Later it became a vassal of a new central Thai kingdom founded in Thonburi (now part of modern Bangkok) in the 1770s.



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As Thai kings of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries instituted modernizing reforms, Thailand transformed into a modern nation state, and former *muang* like Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai became provincial capitals. Chiang Mai was brought under direct Central Thai control in 1886 when princess Dara Rasami of Lanna married King Chulalongkorn in Bangkok. By the end of the century, Chiang Mai was officially annexed into Thailand, and by the 1930s, Chiang Mai's royalty was replaced by a governor appointed from Bangkok.

History of the Thai Monarchy

The roots of the Thai monarchy go deep into Thai history and reflect the influence of Indian political culture in Southeast Asia. The current King Vajiralongkorn is the tenth monarch of the Chakri dynasty, so his name is also styled "Rama X," following the naming and numbering system established in 1916 by King Vajiravudh (Rama VI). The current king's father, King Bhumipol Adulyadej (also referred to as Rama IX or "Bhumipol the Great") reigned for 70 years until his death in 2016. His reign was the longest in Thai history and possibly the third longest in the world. Interestingly, he and Queen Elizabeth II of England each reigned for 70 years and were born within a year of each other. Before his death, he had the distinction of being the longest-reigning living monarch in the world, while she was the oldest monarch on the throne.

The royal name "Rama," as applied to kings of the current dynasty, echoes the name of King Ramkhamhaeng ("Rama the Bold"), a celebrated thirteenth-century ruler of the Central Thai kingdom of Sukhothai, and other Thai kings like Ramathibodi ("Rama the Overlord"). The name can be traced to the Indian prince Rama of Ayodhya, who is held up as an ideal ruler and avatar of the god Vishnu. In addition to being an object of worship in India, Prince Rama is also the hero of the *Ramayana*, the ancient Hindu epic, and its popular Thai version, *Ramakean*. The capital of the Central Thai kingdom founded by Ramathibodi I in 1360 was named Ayutthaya, another reference to the Indian prince.



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Ayutthaya prospered for four centuries in the Chaopraya River valley until it was destroyed by a Burmese invasion in 1767. A year later, a former official of Ayutthaya named Taksin drove out the Burmese and established a successor kingdom. He built his capital farther south along the Chaopraya river at Thonburi, then sent his most trusted generals to drive the Burmese from Lanna and Laos in the north. After securing the north, General Chao Praya Chakri launched a campaign in Cambodia. During his absence, Taksin was ousted by rebels. In 1782, the general returned to defeat the rebels and crown himself ruler of a new Thai kingdom called Rattanakosin. He built his new capital, Bangkok, directly across the river from Thonburi. He is remembered today as "Rama I," founder of the Chakri dynasty.

The Thai kingdom is unique among Southeast Asian kingdoms in that it successfully avoided European colonial rule. The kings of Ayutthaya engaged in vigorous diplomacy with European countries, sending ambassadors to Europe and hiring foreign advisers. By the time of the Chakri dynasty, France and Britain were competing for influence—from Bengal to Burma to Malaya, Vietnam, and China. Bangkok had a geographic advantage, wedged between Burma, which was gradually rolled into Britain's Indian Empire, and Indochina (now Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia), which France colonized. To the south, Britain also extended its empire into Malaya, but not before Thailand exerted its own imperial control over some of the northernmost Malay states.

Three nineteenth-century Thai monarchs instituted important reforms to bring Thailand in line with Westernized norms of international trade, diplomacy, and nationhood. The first of these, King Mongkut (Rama IV) is popularly known in America as a character in the Broadway musical *The King and I*. The musical, based on a memoir by missionary teacher Anna Leonowens, is controversial in Thailand. Many take offense at what they consider its buffoonish caricature of a beloved monarch. However, the theme of the musical—Thai monarchs coming to terms with Western ways—was in reality an important aspect of Mongkut's reign and that of his son, Chulalongkorn (Rama V). The reforms



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implemented by them and by their successor Rama VI helped to ensure that Thailand remained independent, relatively stable, and prosperous into the twentieth century.

Constitutional Politics

Thailand's absolute monarchy was overthrown in 1932, when a bloodless coup imposed a constitution and political reforms. Since then, regular coups and political crises have produced new constitutions on an average of every four years. Through all of these unscheduled and often forced changes in government, the Thai monarchy helped to maintain a degree of stability and continuity through the twentieth century. More recently, critics have blamed the royal court for meddling in democratic institutions to forestall reforms that might threaten its interests.

World War II hastened the end of European empires in Mainland Southeast Asia but ushered in a new set of geopolitical realities during the Cold War era. Imperial Japan occupied French Indochina, British Malaya, and most of Burma. Thailand's leaders were inspired by both Japan's rapid modernization and its efforts to beat the West at its own imperial game. However, Thai leaders were smart enough to neither join Japan's empire nor resist it. Thailand allowed Japanese forces to pass through its territory in exchange for recognition of its neutrality in the conflict.

After the war, Thailand became a key Cold War ally of the United States. In exchange for investment and military assistance, Thailand allowed the U.S. to build airfields for its bombers and let its warships call at Thai ports during the Vietnam War and after.

Since 1982, the United States and Thailand have cooperated in an annual large-scale joint military exercise, "Cobra Gold," to ensure coordinated operation for military and humanitarian operations in the region. The exercise



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has expanded to include twenty-seven Indo-Pacific nations as participants or observers, highlighting the importance of U.S./Thai military and diplomatic cooperation in the region. The coordination of U.S. and Thai military personnel during the cave rescue in *All Thirteen* was undoubtedly made easier by their long history of working together.

By the 1990s, relative political stability, capitalism, and foreign investment positioned Thailand as an emerging "Tiger economy." It seemed destined to outstrip its neighbors in economic growth and prosperity. However, the 1997 Asian Economic Crisis, which began in Thailand brought a period of political change and turmoil.

As Thailand recovered from the economic crisis, former police officer and telecom-industry tycoon Thaksin Shinawatra was elected prime minister in 2001. His popularity and policies presented a challenge to entrenched backers of the Thai monarchy and military. A populist reformer, he reduced rural poverty, supported access to education, and introduced universal health care. The political parties he was associated with won election after election between 2001 and 2023.

His popularity and autocratic style angered royalists, urban elites, and military conservatives whose "yellow shirt" supporters clashed with the prime minister's "red shirt" backers in a series of street protests. He was accused of human rights violations in a violent war on drugs and the military's merciless response to Muslim insurgents in the southern provinces. Crucially, his business dealings exposed him to accusations of corruption.

The prime minister was removed by a military coup in 2006. He went into exile and was convicted of a corruption charge in absentia. He remained active in Thai politics remotely and by proxy through a series of successful political parties. His younger sister Yingluck Shinawatra was elected Thailand's only female prime minister in 2011. In 2014, she was also removed by a



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military coup and a new government was led by coup leader Prayut Chan-ocha until 2023.

After a democratic reformist party beat his Pheu Thai party in the 2023 parliamentary elections, Thaksin Shinawatra returned from fifteen years in self-imposed exile to form a coalition with the former generals who had previously deposed him. This coalition government installed a prime minister who had not been popularly elected. Although Thaksin faced prison time on his return as well as hospitalization for a heart condition, he is expected to be a powerful force shaping Thai politics while the king, who is much less popular, spends much of his time abroad in Germany. Thaksin was released on parole on February 18, 2024.

Buddhist Monks

Monks are central to the practice of Buddhism throughout Mainland Southeast Asia, and Thailand in particular. In the book, elements of two aspects of Thai monasticism are represented: the official, "national" Buddhist *sangha* (the order of monks), which the Wild Boars enter briefly when ordained as novices, and the locally important forest monk tradition in the visit of Khruba Boonchum.

The picture on p. 217 shows the Wild Boars after they are ordained as novice monks. Their heads have been shaved, and they are wearing orange robes and holding alms bowls. This is the rite of male initiation into Thai Buddhism, when young men enter the monastery for a brief period of time. This rite of ordination, which virtually all Thai men undergo, reenacts the Buddha Gautama's life story, when he renounced the comforts of his princely life to become a religious seeker.

Monks are required to live by an ancient set of rules restricting their diet, dress, and interaction with other people. They in engage in meditation, study



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the Buddhist scriptures, and preach the Noble Truths that by tradition the Buddha Gatuama revealed to his disciples. Laypeople participate in this process by supporting the monks with alms in the form of daily food, robes, monastic buildings, and other necessities. By supporting the community of monks, who in many orders are not allowed to handle money or own any possessions, laypeople can accrue merit toward a future existence.

Some monks, however, choose to live as hermits outside of monasteries. The tradition of forest monks exists in contrast with the official monastic orders. The forest monk tradition is particularly strong in the north of Thailand, where it is associated with a kind of saintly monks or *khruaba* (literally, “venerated teacher”) dating back to the Lanna kingdom, providing a source of region-specific tradition and sometimes even political opposition to Bangkok.

The Sangha Administration Act of 1910 drew northern monks under the control of the capital in an extension of the centralizing political reforms of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V). Northern forest monks who continued to practice ordination without permission from the center were subject to censure and even arrest. One such forest monk, Khruba Sri Wichai (1878–1938), was so popular that the authorities arrested him but soon released him, fearing his arrest would spark a rebellion among the hill people, who believed he had supernatural powers.

Khruba Boonchum, who visited the cave and predicted that the boys would be rescued, sits firmly in the Northern Thailand forest monk tradition. He is known as the “monk of three countries,” moving freely among Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar. He was born in Chiang Rai, but his parents were from Keng Tung in Burma’s Shan State. He often meditates in caves, a practice that dates to the earliest days of Buddhism. Reportedly, some locals believe he is the incarnation of the princess’s lover from the legend of the Sleeping Lady, so it’s no surprise that he would be thought to have supernatural influence in this cave. A Thai newspaper claims he was urged to visit by a local restaurant



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owner who saw in a vision that if Khruba Boonchum visited, the boys would be saved.

Soccer and Other Sports

In Thailand, football (what Americans call “soccer”) is extremely popular and provides a sense of national belonging. At the turn of the twentieth century, football was only a niche sport in Thailand, played at the foreign-dominated Bangkok sports club. But under Rama VI, son of the great modernizer King Chulalongkorn, sports became a means of promoting national pride. Rama VI learned about English football when he studied at Oxford University and at the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst before that. He started the first football league in Thailand. He also promoted youth sports and activities, particularly football and Boy Scouts (“Wild Tiger Cubs”) to promote social cohesion, fitness, military readiness, and self-reliance.

Today, Thailand is home to a variety of football leagues from youth clubs, like the Wild Boars, up to the professional level. The annual King’s Cup brings Asian teams to Thailand for international competition. The men’s national team has been successful in the Southeast Asian Games and Asian Football Federation tournaments but has not yet qualified for the World Cup. The women’s national team has qualified and competed in several World Cup group stages.

Many Thai fans follow European football on television, particularly the English Premier League; Manchester United and Liverpool are particularly popular. After Prime Minister Taksin Shinawatra went into exile, in 2007 he bought Manchester City Football Club, a mainstay of the British Premier League. This was widely considered to be a publicity stunt, and he sold the club in the following year. However, it is interesting that an exiled Thai politician would use English football to connect with voters back in Thailand.



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Another popular sport in Thailand is *takraw*, or “kick volleyball,” which has been played throughout Southeast Asia from Burma to the Philippines for centuries. Players hit a woven rattan (or plastic) ball back and forth over a badminton net without using their hands or arms, as in soccer. *Takraw* is popular with schoolchildren, and pick-up games are common throughout the countryside.

The story recounted in *All Thirteen* exposes readers to key aspects of Thailand’s geography and culture, including sports, religion, weather, and current events. The dynamics of regional history and politics, particularly the impact of royal reforms imposed from Bangkok, have shaped the culture of Northern Thailand as much as the monsoon rains have shaped its hills and caves. International pursuits depicted in the book—soccer, Buddhism, cave rescues, and more—take on particular significance in the light of these local traditions.

Author: Will Womack, Independent Scholar
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