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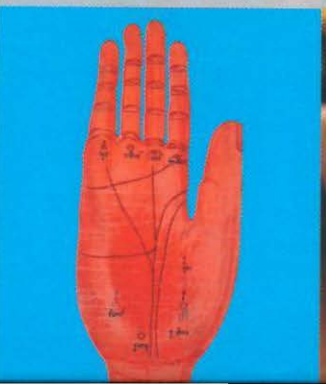


Very Thai

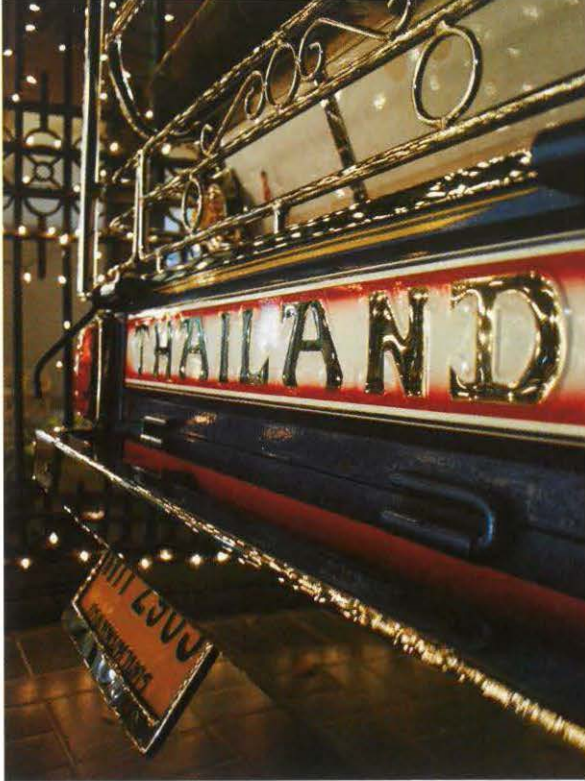
Everyday Popular Culture

Philip Cornwel-Smith text & photographs

John Goss photographs



Very Thai
Everyday Popular Culture





Very Thai

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front papers: A stall at Nana. JG

page 1: The iconic *tuk-tuk* carries
the country's name. PCS

page 2: Bang Saen beach. JG

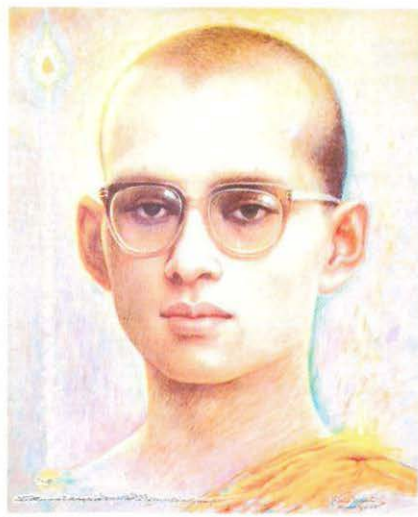
right: The McWai statue. JG

endpapers: The monk goods aisle
in Tesco-Lotus hypermarket. PCS



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Theravada Buddhism in Thailand

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Theravada Buddhism in Thailand

Preface

by Alex Kerr,

author of 'Lost Japan' and 'Bangkok Found'

This is the book I wish I'd had when I first came to Thailand. A hundred things which had intrigued me for decades became clear on reading it. Such as where the statue of the beckoning lady came from, or why the alphabet always appears with pictures. Another hundred things, to my embarrassment, I had hardly even noticed, but these turned out to be among the most interesting. Such as the little pink napkins set out on café tables, or the organisation of motorcycle boys at the mouths of *soi*.

Thailand seems an informal, free-wheeling place, even at times chaotic. But you do come to realise that there's an internal logic and symbolism invisibly ordering everything. One of my Ten Laws of Thai life is: "There is always a Thai way to do it." Somewhere, inside an item of molded plastic, or submerged in the glossy pages of a *hi-so* magazine, the inner structure is there to be found.

This book begins to get at that inner structure, at deeply ingrained attitudes towards life. In the popular culture, these are embellished with fantasy, redesigned for convenience, and finished off with a feeling of *sanuk*. Thus Hindu goddesses end up as beauty queens, court etiquette asserts itself at the whisky serving table, boat prows transform into the painted bonnets of trucks, and the sparkle of temple walls, in the form of electric light bulbs, drapes itself over trees and avenues.

I feel like a godfather to this book. I was there when many of the photos were taken, edited the text, and saw the book grow and transform. Philip and John, in their separate ways, both began collecting photographs and ideas years before the idea of the book arose. In his photos, John has a knack of capturing Thai things as we encounter them, on the street. With Philip, what struck me was his incredible curiosity and persistence. We would be speeding along a highway and he would suddenly insist that the car stop – so that he could investigate and photograph a roadside shack where they made trash bins out of used tyres.

Philip would grill an expert for hours about what society women's hairdos had to do with 19th century court fashion. If he heard about a temple fair, or a medium's convention, or a comedy hall, or a *luuk thung* concert – Philip was off to see it.



Only someone with great curiosity – and energy to match – could have written this book.

In the process, Philip ended up taking an entirely new approach to Thai pop culture. My mathematics teacher in high school used to jump on the table and shout at us: "The secret of life is to look deeply into simple things!" This is what Philip has done. *Very Thai* looks at the simple things of daily life that Thais and foreigners usually pass by, but in these very details lie the mystery and magic of what it is to be Thai.

The chapters link the past to the present, and Thailand to the outside world. They hint at delicate connections between the zany and wonderful, and often beautiful forms that Thai pop takes. Unlike most writing about Thai culture, it's not a book about the past, but a book about now. At the same time, *Very Thai* is a precious documentary of many customs that are dying away, or transmuting as Thailand loses a bit of its 'Thainess' and blends into world mass culture. It's a snapshot of a moment in time.

A book seemingly about trivia and trifles, *Very Thai* is about Thailand's very soul. As such it has a truly transformative power. I know that I can never look the same way again at a motorcycle taxi boy's jacket, a potted plant, fairy lights, a little pink napkin, a blue pipe, or the number nine.

left: The portrait and flag of King Bhumibol on a house in Thonburi. PCS

above: Thais put flag colours on countless things, like this wind vane in Suphanburi. PCS



Introduction

What makes something very Thai?

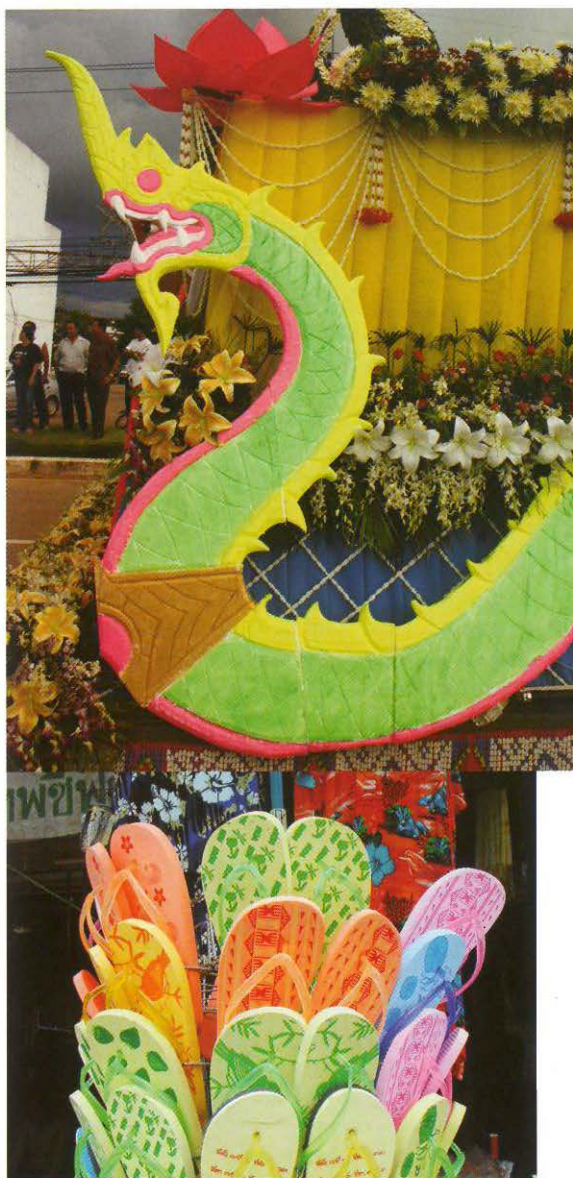
“What made society women’s hair so huge?” “How come napkins are tiny and pink?” “Why so many ladyboys?” Bemused onlookers often reach for the catch-all description “it’s, well... very Thai”.

This book gets its name from tracking down that elusive ‘very Thainess’. For over a decade, while editing *Bangkok Metro* magazine and guides to Thailand, I’ve repeatedly been asked to unravel such curiosities. So I set out to discover what these things really are – resulting in this book, which turned out to be the first overview of Thai popular culture. To unravel the mysteries I had to research deep into the traditional culture to find where modern Thai behaviour came from. Each step yielded surprises for eyes, ears and nose, but precious few explanations.

Coffee-table books and advertisements like to present an Amazing Thailand™ of dancers and temples, elephants and floating markets, with lots and lots of fruit carving. While these marvels of official Thainess do exist, you often have to look for them. Most of the time, what residents and visitors experience is the unsung popular culture. Day-Glo paintings of village huts zoom by on mini-buses. Overloaded broom carts resemble a roadside art installation. Vendors sell multi-bladed knuckle-dusters off souvenir stalls. Rubber tyres get recycled into lotus ponds. Such everyday things, being the public’s choice, are no less Thai and do frequently amaze.

Popular culture is the combined expressions of daily life as accepted by the vast majority, from commercial essentials like food, transport and consumer goods, through tastes in entertainment and pastimes to memes, beliefs and cultural moments. Shared through mass production and mass media, pop is imitative, and in the case of developing countries like Thailand, often adapted from imports to suit local ways and needs.

“Pop is an urban phenomenon, hard edged and savvy,” says Gilda Cordero-Fernando, the Filipina author of *Pinoy Pop*, which shares much with Thai pop. “It’s different from ‘folk’, which is rural, traditional, communal and a lot more innocent. It’s different from ethnic, which is also all the above but comes from the minority groups.”



left: Styles clash at every turn. Florid eaves at Wat Suan Plu gets dwarfed by balustrades on the neo-classical skyscraper State Tower, which is topped by a huge gilded dome on the 65th floor. JG

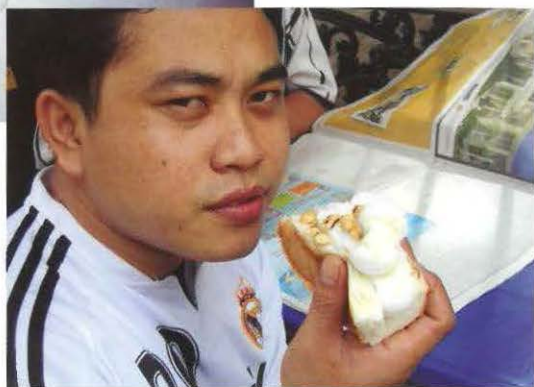
top: A Styrofoam Naga in neon hues protects a float at a fair in Sakon Nakhon. PCS

above: The national shoe in all its colourful glory, on sale at Cape Promthep, Phuket. PCS



left: Taxis turn into amulet altars and art installations, sometimes with karaoke, M-SB

below: An example of how imports turn Thai. Ice cream from Italy, with peanuts from America, served in a bun of the light, sweet bread style brought by the Portuguese to ancient Ayutthaya – served from a roving vendor cart. The customer's European football kit has now become an informal uniform of millions of Thais. PCS



Many pundits use 'pop' interchangeably with 'popular culture', but they aren't quite the same. 'Popular culture' is the broad result of industrial urban lifestyle; 'pop' arose in the 1950s as a specific term for youth fashion; and pop has been refined since the 1960s as the subject of itself in 'pop art'. In another layer, out-of-date pop and popular culture get reprocessed with irony as 'retro'.

The fad for 'Cultural Theory' lets pop embrace almost anything outside elite culture, to legitimise working class tastes, avant-garde pioneers and underground subcultures. One Western definition holds that 'pop culture' pushes the trend ahead of the curve, while 'popular culture' is the curve. In Thailand, popular culture lags *behind* the curve and pop is barely on the curve, because anything ahead of the curve tends to have been imported rather than created from within due to Thai social strictures against innovation and non-conformity.

In this modernising, status-oriented society, what counts as culture is decided by legitimacy and awareness. Traditional Thainess – whether refined elite arts or romanticised folk ways – involves national prestige and so is promoted through pageantry, propaganda and tourism advertising. Commercial 'pop culture' lacks that credibility, but is self-consciously in tune with fads. "Thais think of 'pop' as being the big mass phenomena that everyone knows through TV, media, malls or music," says media and design expert Pracha Suveeranont. "Whereas 'popular culture' is the ordinary things that Thais overlook or don't consider as culture." Street-level reality is seen as undeveloped and so lags unselfconsciously out-of-sync and below the radar. Public and official comments tend to gloss over local lifestyles, especially when they touch on taboos like sex, gambling or magic.

There's actually an official definition of Thai culture: *watthanatham*. To the mid-20th century dictatorship of Field Marshal Phibunsongkhram, it had "qualities which indicated and promoted social prosperity, orderliness, national unity and development, and morality of the people." Coined in a nation-building era influenced by Japanese and European Fascism, it enforces a fixed, centralised vision of a state culture from the top down. *Khwaam pen Thai* – Thainess – is thus an ideology, not a *description* but a *prescription*, a set of instructions of how to be a well-behaved citizen.

Popular culture, by contrast, is the incremental result of decisions by diverse, ordinary people – a continual reinvention of the moment. Welling up from below without plan or policy, pop proves more responsive than policy to 'development', whether in fashion, technology or customs. Official attempts to dictate clothing and pastimes get outdated fast and reveal how pop doesn't fit the military 'orderliness' that businessmen-turned-politicians still try to enforce. Still, *khwaam pen Thai* generates a sincere national pride.

Both high and pop culture draw upon traditional values. Information continues to be guarded by seniors and issued bit-by-bit, like masters passing down nuggets of knowledge – and then only to initiates. Getting it is like a video game treasure

hunt; you reach the next levels by sifting clues and acquiring keys to overcome barriers. Never subject to colonial standardisation, Thais keep up their ancient ways, imbued with Buddhism, hierarchy, and spirit beliefs. Indirectness avoids the taboo of confrontation, so asking questions is very un-Thai. And then, when asked, Thais disarmingly respond ‘*mai pen rai*’ – ‘never mind’. Because questions, when asked or answered, can lead to the biggest booby-trap, namely ‘face’. ‘Face’ relates more to self-image than to what others actually perceive, but losing face – either yours or someone else’s, or even the nation’s face – means ‘game over’.

Anthropologists call this ‘bricolage’, an animist society arranging the objects of life into a self-contained logic – in this case Thainess – that can bewilder outsiders. The science of bricolage ‘reads’ objects as signs. So in looking at lots of cultural objects, this book hopes to signpost the domestic, ritual and social lifestyle of the average Thai.

That average Thai is increasingly urban or suburban. Bangkok, as the focus of most national activity and much of its wealth, imposes its ways and tastes on the remotest provinces. In return, rural migrants bring the village to town, through the vast informal economy.

In this collision of values, delicate traditional Thainess has taken on a harder, commodified edge. Wood carvings turn out to be cast in resin. Garlands swinging from a car mirror may be of moulded plastic. Monk supplies fill an aisle in the supermarket. Other traditions end up disguised: lucky car plates are numerology in action; beauty queens embody deities. The status-aware middle classes tend to distance themselves furthest from old ways. Bourgeois pop veers towards fashionable, processed modernity – think TV, celebrity, golf,

cute. This leads to a Warhol-like obsession with brands, whether imported, adapted or pirated.

Today, the official culture is propagated to tourists: sanitised village festivals, sound and light extravaganzas, landmarks cleared of their vibrant old neighbourhoods. When the national narrative occupied the mainstream, much genuinely popular culture was pushed to the margins, from herbalism to folk garments. Discomfiting subcultures – magic tattoos, mediums, blind buskers, ladyboys, phallic charms, naughty massage – face haughty disapproval. Yet often what’s most fascinating are the things left unregulated and unabashed.

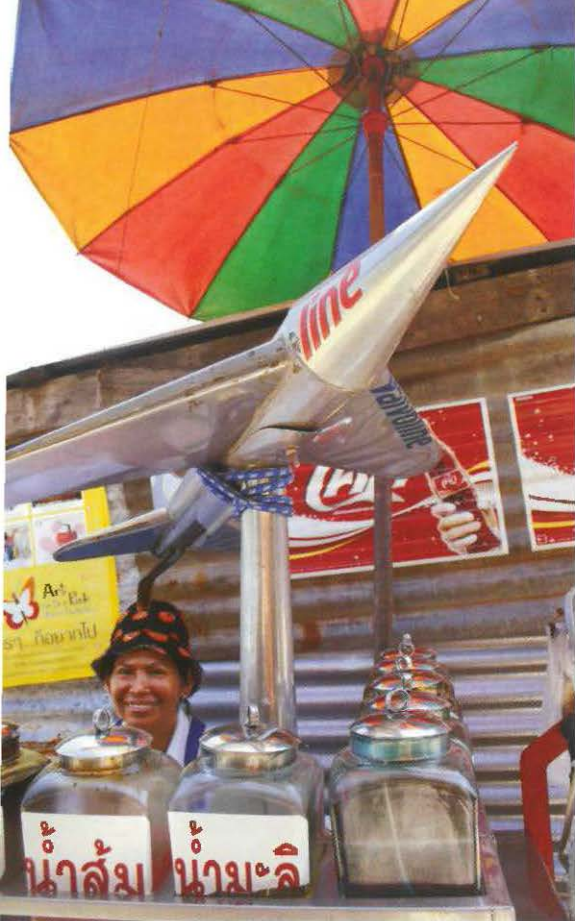
The underground economy operates openly, though under increasing scrutiny. Formally labelled the ‘informal sector’ it is a kaleidoscope of handcarts towering with furniture, palmists reading fortunes at piers, trash collectors sifting bins, tuk-tuk drivers touting gem scams, demi-mondaines pouting in doorways, seafood eateries camped on the sidewalk. These fringe activities reveal an everyman biography – and therein lies their interest.

As many authentic things aren’t seen as *riab roi* (tidy or decorous), to dwell on the humdrum requires tact. “To disparage the great is sacrilege and arrogance; to honour the small is either stupidity or sarcasm,” writes Mont Redmond, nailing the dilemma facing journalist and historian from the Thai belief in *faa suung paendin tam* – a fatalistic order of ‘sky high, land low’.

It often takes an outsider – or at least a detached perspective – to see the patterns of what’s hidden in plain sight. The current discussion among Thais and informed foreigners about what is Thainess has parallels in other countries. The English are now pondering how Englishness differs from



left: Much Thai life is lived on the street, where vendors will hawk almost anything. Around the PC mall Pantip Plaza, that can mean selling second hand computers on the sidewalk of the information superhighway. The vendor doesn't need a chair when he can balance perfectly in the compact Thai squat. PCS



Britishness, but most books about the topic are penned by non-English, half-English or English people who grew up overseas. “Every country is ordinary and unexotic to itself,” writes artist Tom Phillips, in his book on Thai postcards. “Therefore it is often through foreigners that we learn what is remarkable and strange in the places and among the people that we take for granted.”

This book joins a diverse literature of books, studies and more recently blogs and status updates written by foreigners who delight in discovering and revealing cultural quirks. I’ve tried to steer a balanced course through the minefield of outsider opinions: orientalist fantasists; sensationalist moral scolds; earnest students of culture; old hands (some rejoicing, some embittered); champions of Thai exceptionalism who are jaundiced about the West; universalist ideologues suspicious of cultures that are more judgmental of gender, race, class, faith, minority or other social markers; religious believers who interpret Thailand through their faith; anthropologists who filter Thainess through academic categories. I try to be the open-minded ‘flaneur’ – the wandering seeker of raw experience, open to impressions.

Outside commentary on Thai popular culture has been the norm for centuries. Official Thai histories dwell little on ordinary folk, about whom knowledge relies heavily on Chinese and Western journals. Temple murals, a rare record of daily lifestyles, erode and get over-painted with a new era’s sensibilities, as when murals stopped showing playful sexuality in response to missionary censure. Over time, it becomes hard to track changes. The difficulty in pinning down Thainess is not just the lack of records and its slippery histories, but also the sudden acceleration in those changes.

In one dizzying spasm, Thais are experiencing long-term forces that shaped the West – industry, urbanisation, modernism, post-modernism, sexual liberation, puritan prohibition, music tribes, cults, and democracy – along with newer phenomena like consumerism, indy experimentation, rave nightlife, globalisation and online networks. Much of value from the past is being junked in the rush to be *sivilai* (civilised). Yet some traditions draw renewed energy from this whirl. In few places have so many subcultures existed simultaneously. While Thailand might not lead these trends, there’s nowhere better to sample the cultural fusion.

Drawing these threads can be done many ways. I’ve focused on themes under-explored elsewhere, so art, film, fashion, media, theatre, and traditional arts emerge as cross-currents in chapters focused on how popular culture is actually experienced in public and in private, at work and at play.

Of the five sections, ‘Street’ dwells on public space, and ‘Personal’ on the intimate domains of body, home and identity. ‘Ritual’ explores beliefs and luck. ‘Sanuk’ (the fun sensibility) covers entertainment and how Thais socialise. A new 5th section, ‘Thainess’, shows how popular culture has gone mainstream as ‘Thai Thai’ (the Thai phrase closest to ‘Very Thai’) and birthed a new genre of ‘Vernacular Design’. An Afterword by Pracha Suveeranont assesses the impact of *Very Thai* itself. Another new chapter, starting opposite, examines what has changed since the first edition.

These headings overlap. Many activities have public, private and spiritual sides, while *sanuk* infuses all. *Sanuk* was one crucial trait excluded from Field Marshal Phibunsongkhram’s list of approved Thai culture, and ever after viewed with suspicion and fear by the authorities. But *sanuk* animates streetlife; it’s a creative wellspring for Thais; it attracts travellers to visit and expats to stay. Writing this book was *sanuk*. I aim that it’s also *sanuk* to read.

New Realities

This 2nd edition records a Thailand changed since *Very Thai* launched in 2004.



"I hope you're collecting this stuff," said a voice from the audience at the UK launch of *Very Thai* at Asia House, London, in 2005. "You must realise that it's all going to disappear." I was all too aware of pop culture's transience, because I'd had to revise chapters even as I wrote them. And after eight more years of rapid change, so much more needed a revamp. The folksy designs of motorcycle taxi jackets became standardised, Songs For Life declined, and fewer vendors haul carts of furniture through traffic. Yet that very Thainess continues to infuse pop phenomena, from green tea to Yellow Shirts to whitening cream.

Most chapters needed updating, with fresh examples like the Jatukham Ramathep cult that transformed the amulet trade. Others needed edits or wholesale rewriting. And I've revised the chapter sequence. The 64 more pages allow space for bigger text and translations into languages including German and Japanese. I have added four new chapters and over 200 new pictures.

Originally, I didn't end with a conclusion, but the intervening years have been a revelation in all fields of Thai study. Websites, books, magazines, conferences, courses and social media have

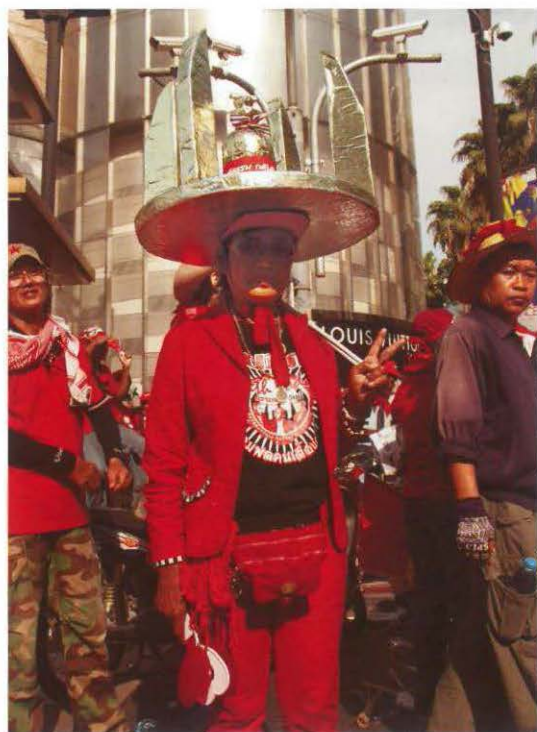
proliferated as a traditional oral culture gains a thirst for serious writing about Thai life. The recent politicisation of Thais at all social levels has made discussion more open, direct and heated. As censorship grows futile, we all now know so much more how this country works. The official version has lost its monopoly.

A new fifth section, 'Thainess', includes a reflection on how popular culture has gone mainstream called 'Thai Thai', a chapter about Vernacular Design, and an Afterword by Pracha Suveeranont, who documents the book's post-publication role in art, design, advertising, exhibitions and the debate about Thainess.

The essence of *Very Thai* revolves around *soi* culture, which the increasingly bourgeois Thais regard with ever less consensus. Some righteous crusaders target the messiness of streetlife, which is regarded by progressives as vernacular heritage, and by the masses as a practical necessity.

far left top: A *nam saa* soda fountain at Talad Ban Mai in Chachoengsao takes the shape of a jet plane, ready to fizz-up syrups. PCS

above: Facebook star Mae Baan Mee Nuad (Housewife with a Moustache) brings glamour to hardscrabble *soi* life with a knowing wink. MBMN



Hi-so ambition reveals itself though aggrandised spirit houses and luxury baskets for monks. Meanwhile, indy types rehabilitated traditions that had until recently been *déclassé*, notably streetfood, recycling, magic tattoos, *mor lam* music and *yaa dong* herbal whisky.

Thais are extremely faddish. History clearly records how they have for centuries been keen adopters – and adapters – of foreign trends, since the hippest gowns were Persian and sweetened bread a Portuguese novelty. *Very Thai* focuses on hybrids from the transitional culture of recent decades. I excluded both historical artefacts like buffalo carts, and modern generics like pickups, in favour of fusions that either customise imports or update tradition, such as the tuk-tuk. Yet somehow even generic globalised products, once in Thailand, end up gaining Thai characteristics. Bangkok taxis may be standard brands, but drivers still decorate them symbolically as if they were boats, turning them into a shrine on wheels.

Pundits, the public and authorities often fear that the Internet might flatten and dilute Thai culture. No more so than did print, radio, TV or electricity, which all found *very Thai* expression. Digital media actually suits the Thai character. Local websites collide multiple diversions as discombobulating as their predecessor, the temple fair. Cameraphone uploads reflect the Thai way of display: group poses showing alliances, proofs

of visit, brandishing of luxuries, sharing of prized foods, conformist cuteness. Little surprise that Instagram's top two world locations in 2012 were Thai: Suvarnabhumi Airport and Siam Paragon mall, beating Times Square into third. Online networks reinforce the pursuit of *sen* social connections. Thais are among the world's biggest Tweeters, Line callers and users of Facebook, with the highest per-head count of 'Friends'. Micro-commerce clutters status posts just as vendors clog *sois*. The use of chatrooms for informal broadcasting shows Thai creativity in skirting restrictions, while perceived ills like gambling, virtual sex, sedition and attempted censorship all mirror pre-existing ways. Thailand's Whack-a-Mole blocking of web pages set world records, then the 2014 coup made it risky to post or re-post criticism, click 'like', or not report culprits. The difference this new medium makes is that we can now see through the former taboos.

Much of what *Very Thai* covered has since become fashionable as retro, a nostalgia that reveals how much Thai culture is in flux. Beauty pageants seem quaint since reality TV stole their role in launching celebrities. Painted fortune telling signs feel antique in an era of online numerology. Novelty theming once produced 'Frankenvenues' like the Coliseum nightclub, a hodgepodge of Gothic castellations, a Thai Mount Rushmore, and a giant statue of Neptune with a

beer mug. No sooner had such naive styles been outgrown than a new mishmash of foreign clichés re-emerged in self-aware guise at Terminal 21 – a mall designed for shoppers to pose for photos with fibreglass sumo wrestlers, a London tube train and an Istanbul souk. Thais historically favour ideas from the great powers prevailing at that time, so their growing enthusiasm for things from Japan, Korea and China acts as a barometer of the West's sudden slip in influence.

Social changes have deeper impact on the shift from folk to chic, like the declines in family size and communities. Thai beachgoing reflects the fragmentation of classes and cliques. Condo names have switched from boasts of wealth to hip lifestyle in the 'creative economy'. And since the 2014 coup, a purge of petty trading has rid many streets of vendors and closed old markets.

A crucial change agent is upward wealth and prices, whether in Bangkok's bourgeois bubble or among the provincial lower middle class now demanding a say. Development, migration to the capital, stints working abroad, and the growth of upcountry cities with students, malls and condos have made Thai lifestyle more uniform, but also connected the provinces with the wider world. The forest frontier was gone by the 1980s; now the upcountry cultural frontier also dwindles. Increasingly, the Internet and ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) will erode the national frontier.

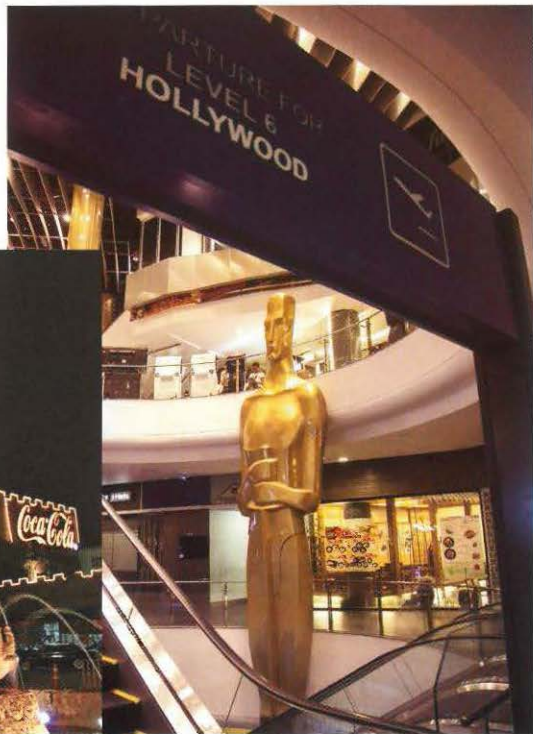
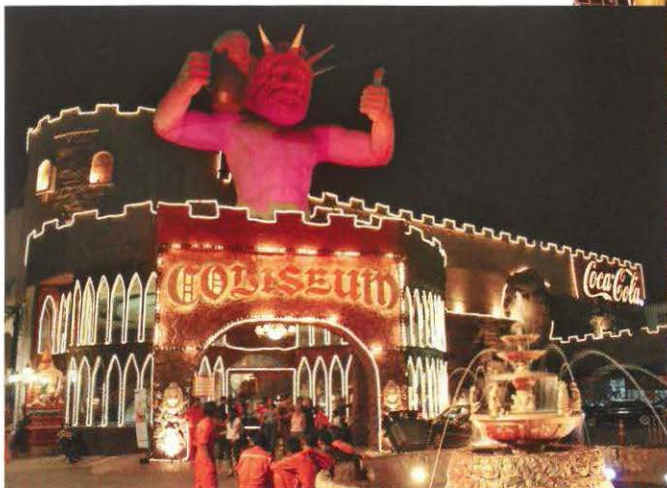
Mass culture has a new credibility in media, museums and online memes. Since 2005, both Yellow and Red Shirt protests have generated pop icons. The Day Colours chapter had spotlighted an archaic tradition that then became famous via the Yellow protests against Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. The Songs For Life chapter also had to change, because that earlier pro-democracy movement has split between Yellow and Red. The yellowish Bangkok Shutdown occupation of 2013–14 spawned creative protest gear, like whistles, art and flag-hued food. The 2014 junta then banned all protests, from eating sandwiches while reading 1984 to the three-fingered *Hunger Games* salute.

Political conflict has changed Thailand's 'Land of Smiles' character. Or rather, blown its prim PR image. Thainess had long been a genteel masked dance, but that mask has since slipped. One result of always presenting a pretty face is that the reality must be messier, though not necessarily a disappointment. Everyday street culture is part of that less pretty face, but its cheery spirit, earthy character and surprising juxtapositions are some of the reasons this country is so cherished by visitors, expats, and locals alike.

Very Thai reached its different audiences in phases. First came the readership of my peer group: expatriates who sought insights beyond the clichés. One described it as "a photo album of the pictures I forgot to take while living here."

facing page left and right: Thai protest art. A tin-foil hat of Democracy Monument in the Red Shirt occupation of Central Bangkok. The Yellow Shirts waved hand-clappers in the occupation of Government House – to which the Reds retorted with plastic foot-clappers. PCS

below and right: We're losing novelty decor like Coliseum club's neo-Gothic windows, Baroque fountain, and Roman god with beer mug. But theming continues, like the airport signage and slimline Oscar at Terminal 21 mall, where each floor evokes a world city. PCS





Thai indie creatives soon adopted it as a source book. Later *Very Thai* popped up in student theses, once Thai and foreign scholars took it up as the first comprehensive book on the subject. Then the Thai public encountered it when the retro wave went mainstream, especially through the *Very Thai* exhibition of photographs from and inspired by the book, held in 2012-13 outside ZEN at Ratchaprasong in Bangkok.

Scholars ask for my theories, but the cultural masks and impulsive behaviour of Thais scupper any grand schema. Thainess does have tendencies – face, indirectness, status, surface dazzle, group jollity, deference, karmic righteousness, being in the moment, spicy sensuality, pretend prudery, appeasing dark powers, carefree impunity, punishing critics, upholding seniority – but these traits defy principle, system or even measure. So do the amorphous pieties of state Thainess and folk Buddhism. My focus on transitional hybrids shows how Thainess is not a fixed tradition, but a constantly changing process that has enabled Thailand to become modern whilst remaining itself. The resulting fusions can puzzle, since their origins were hazy or deliberately hidden in the tussle between a top-down national ideology and the cultural exuberance of a diverse public.

Ambiguity is the bane of Thai studies – yet also its saving grace. At the research stage, Thai vagueness makes the pedant weep. Nailing facts is elusive, thanks to censorship, scant archives, face-saving myths, a genial aversion to being ‘too

serious’, reluctance to upset delicate relationships, or the fear to name who did what when, and why. But, conveniently, it turns out that there’s often more than one right answer.

The process of giving public and university talks has crystalised many ideas. The gap between witnessed reality and official history always crops up in Q&As. That ongoing dialogue forms the basis of the new edition’s extra chapters.

The response of the Thai public is much more sentimental and amused. Many of these ordinary Thai things hadn’t been presented in such a way in a hardback book in English, and treated respectfully as culture. I’d wondered if some might take exception, but the feedback has been warm and keen. The book addresses things that every visitor, expat and local has a relationship with, but may not have treated seriously. In some ways *Very Thai* is a vindication for a neglected approach to Thai life – realism.

One reality is that globalism makes culture less characterful. Universal ticketing will banish conductors and their ingenious clapping ticket machines. Truck art may not survive more container transit. Fewer taxi drivers who own their cars means less quirky dashboard shrines. And tissues may not for long be so tiny or so pink.

As these very Thai things morph or become obsolete, they won’t necessarily disappear. Happily, examples get saved by collectors, such as Anake Nawikamune at his House of Museums. Traders at retro markets also prize pop ephemera. Digital galleries, notably Siamese Dust, 2Bangkok and the Facebook page Yornadit Wan Waan (Sweet Days Retrospective), preserve evidence of everyday life, past and present, in an ongoing interactive record. And *Very Thai* itself has now become an archive of this transformational era in Thai popular history.

VeryThai.com

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Photographing Found Art

By John Goss

The look of this book departs from the posed, styled or doctored pictures that dominate imagery of Thailand. The photography began on our arrivals in Thailand, me in 1988, Philip in 1994. I soon began to document the sights in market, street and fair. Lots of these subjects remained puzzling until this collaboration with Philip to uncover the origins and interconnectedness of unusual everyday things like coins in ears and poodle-shaped bushes.

As for many people, my first encounter with things Thai started with food. Perfumed soups, Technicolor cubes of desserts, drinks tasting like spiced wood in hand-embossed mugs – a sensory overload calmly overseen by portraits of monarchs in every restaurant. While pop in many countries has become appropriated by commerce, still in Thailand these mundane marvels of ‘found art’ remain an unselfconscious part of daily life.

I’ve sought to capture this unsung beauty through serendipity. These scenes were not set-up or re-arranged, aside from a few object close-ups. While Thais love to prepare for portraits, I prefer to record their smiles in a natural, impromptu way. I shoot in natural light wherever possible, avoiding flash, using Sony digital cameras.

Philip Cornwel-Smith took two-fifths of the images in the second edition. He, too, brought years of photos to the book, drawn especially from festivals, performance and research trips whilst a magazine and guidebook journalist. As foreigners, we are, inescapably, observers, but we’ve tried getting to the heart of the action. Philip was stampeded by men in animal trances at the Tattoo Festival, wiped flying perspiration off the lens at the boxing ring, and found himself becoming part of the comedy routine he was photographing.

Some pictures related to mass entertainment needed to be sourced. We thank those who kindly supplied images in the Acknowledgements. Overall, our visuals cover every taste, class and region, because there’s more to Thai pop than Bangkok. These images offer an invitation to experience the mixture of ancient origins and global hybrids, official culture and underground intrigues that envelop anyone on a walk through Thai life.



above: Carved soap at Amphawa Market. PCS

left: Monks' robes at Wat Loka Ya Suttharam, Ayutthaya. JG

facing page: Devilish camera phone cover at a festival in Bangkok. PCS

ไนซ์ พาเลซ

NICE PALACE

娜 士 旅 店



Street



Dinner on a Stick

For the constant urge to snack, streetfood is always close at hand

Thai streets smell of many things, but foremost is the whiff of food. Even where cooking carts have moved along, their traces slick the pavement, their aroma spikes the air. You can sense clouds of atomised chilli from a hundred paces, not least because it stings the eyes. Indeed, a hundred paces are the most you need travel before encountering something more to eat.

'*Gin khao reu yang*' ('eaten rice yet?') is the original Thai 'Hello', not the blander World War II invention, '*sawatdee*'. Like Osakans greeting each other with 'Earning money yet?', it sets the cultural priority. The implication being, whether you've dined or not, conversation should continue over food. Tellingly, the term for snacking is *khong kin len* – play eating. Fun food must be available at all times, in all places. And so it is. Bangkok boasts around 11,000 restaurants and fixed stalls in their tens of thousands. Day and night, food vendors

gather at markets, hover informally at *pak soi* – the mouth of a *soi* (lane) – or ply the backstreets by trolley or with baskets over a shoulder yoke.

Convenience is guaranteed with roving streetfood, which saves you from walking in the heat. With ever less time available for home cooking, many revert to the instinct of the hunter-gatherer – grab food when you can – and start snacking. Modern Thailand elevates that survival impulse into an art. Snacking accompanies labour, punctuates boredom, makes arduous teamwork *sanuk* (fun) and typifies the Buddhist injunction to live in the moment. And the moment hunger strikes, food is at hand.

Some vendors have pre-prepared dishes, such as vats of stewed pig leg or pots of curry. Others cook on the spot, whether it's boiled, stir fried, deep fried, barbecued, marinated, or pounded with a pestle and mortar.





left and above: Sausages and fishballs. A fast snack for a permanently grazing public, meat on a stick is fuel for the Thai smile. JG

below: Dessert on a stick for this ice-cream loving kid in Dan Sai, Loei. JG

facing page: Duck tongues and dried fish on skewers with a garnish of chilli and coriander leaves. JG

previous spread: A typical scene found at a *pak soi* junction in Saphan Khwai, Bangkok. PCS



Thai food's prime format is the morsel. In curry, dips made with shrimp paste, *yum* (spicy salad) and most other dishes, the cook pre-cuts each portion so you can shovel with spoon and fork, or nibble off skewers, often from inside a plastic bag. Every imaginable *khong khob khiao* (thing to bite or chew) sits skewered on bamboo, displayed in glazed cabinets or arrayed in patterns on trays, racks, grills and griddles. Myriad parts of pig or chicken are lanced satay-style over charcoal: meat, liver, heart, intestines. Sausages come long, short, round or sliced. Meatballs might be pork, fish or buffalo disguised as beef. Much else gets speared: dumplings, cuttlefish, parboiled eggs in their shell and unhatched chick foetus. Even *miang kham* – a do-it-yourself mixture of savoury ingredients you fold into a leaf – has turned into a lazy snack, pre-wrapped and lanced for eating without effort.

Dessert comes morsel-sized too. Huge trays atop vendor tricycles tempt passers-by with gelatinous cubes. Speared by a cocktail stick they're concocted from coconut, palm sugar, banana, taro, bean paste and rice in myriad forms. Whole fried bananas can also get served on a stick.

The archetypal all-day nibble is fruit. Wheeling his glazed trolley, the fruit vendor performs a well-honed system when hailed. Opening the hinged



left: Dried squid are heated, then cranked through rollers to tenderise them into an off-the-peg treat. JG

below left: Layers of deep fried batter on doughballs. JG

below right: Clouds of smoke indicates marinated *satay* being grilled over charcoal. JG

top right: Khun Nisa's famous giant meatballs the size of a melon, at Ayutthaya Floating Market. PCS

below right: One continuous spiral potato chip cut from a single potato and deep fried on a stick. Seen at Wat In temple fair in Bangkok. PCS



glass lid, he stabs at, say, an unripe mango with his all-purpose knife, flips it onto a curved metal cutting plate, and repeatedly chops through to the hard seed while rotating the fruit. He levers off slivers of the sour green flesh and slides them through the plate's funnel-like end into a plastic bag. This – with other bags of fruit like spiral cut pineapple, bendy lengths of papaya or half-moons of melon – enters yet another plastic bag, this one with handles. Pink sachets of sugar, salt and chilli provide the dip, satisfying the tropical body's need for liquids, salts and sugar to rehydrate. After a quick swab with a cloth, knife, tray and glass lid get eased back into their designated slots.

Another vendor art is wrapping in banana leaf. The waxy waterproof leaf is folded around savouries, desserts or an entire meal on rice then secured with a bamboo pin. When opened it forms a hand-bowl or lays flat like a plate. Fading from stalls, banana leaf is increasingly consigned to smart restaurants to convey traditional ambiance.

Thais rarely invite acquaintances home in the style of a Western dinner party, so impromptu daily dining at holes-in-the-wall, night markets and vendor carts keeps streetfood standards high, especially where multiple vendors gather. Favourites naturally emerge, and famed one-dish specialists draw pilgrims for decades. Simple open-fronted eateries are essentially a stall parked inside a shophouse instead of outside under a dusty green umbrella. You pull up the generic plastic stool to the generic steel trestle table under the generic awning of cobwebs congealed with oil and dust.

How differently Thai restaurants evolved. "Only with the post-World War II influx of foreigners and Thailand's rapid economic development did Thai cooking begin to be appreciated as worthy of a night out," comments Lonely Planet guru Joe Cummings. Adopting the Western format in the 1960s, wealthy Thai wives in Bangkok's Sukhumvit district converted buildings fronting their family compounds into outlets for their cooks. That old format persists, joined by shophouse and purpose-built restaurants of great sophistication. Yet gourmets often complain the posher the premises, the less authentic the cuisine, with timid spicing and lame fusions. And a Western sequence of courses, whereas Thai dishes normally arrive like buses. Only when they're ready – and in any order.

Thai cuisine's phenomenal success in the West since the 1980s – coming long after exposure to Indian, Chinese, Indonesian and Indochinese food – was partly prompted by returning backpackers enthusing about what they'd tasted on Thai streets. The government now promotes Thailand as the 'Kitchen of the World'.

In the eyes of the face-conscious authorities, authentic streetfood isn't *riab roi* (politely tidy) or upmarket, and they constantly seek ways to cleanse and standardise stalls. The Singapore formula of hawker centres located off pavements could well follow. Appearances may deceive, however. Stalls could be more sanitary, but streetfood tends to be bought, prepared and eaten on the same day. Ingredients kept refrigerated for days in restaurants are at least as responsible for any tummy troubles.

Availability and quick preparation means that many Thai street dishes already count as fast food, though the urge to nibble now extends to fatty, sweetened, additive-laden junk foods. It's dubbed *ahaan waang* (empty food), and hails mostly from the West and Japan, as do the main outlets: convenience chain stores. These clean, brightly-lit franchises glare from every busy street, designed to promote impulse buys of plastic-sealed preserved snacks. They pull Thais away from their past diet at corner shops and vendors through clever marketing, scripted greetings, sheer ease, and a modern, synthetic image.

While obesity now mushrooms among the young, generations of eating at will had kept Thais famously svelte. The health difference lies in the freshness Thai food requires instead of the fried, dried, frozen or otherwise preserved dishes from convenience stores. The West's nutritious, convivial 'Slow Food' movement's response to processed Fast Food comes naturally to Thais, who so prize socialising over meals as an essential of life. Their dexterous vendors combine the best of both worlds, supplying Slow Food at fast pace.

