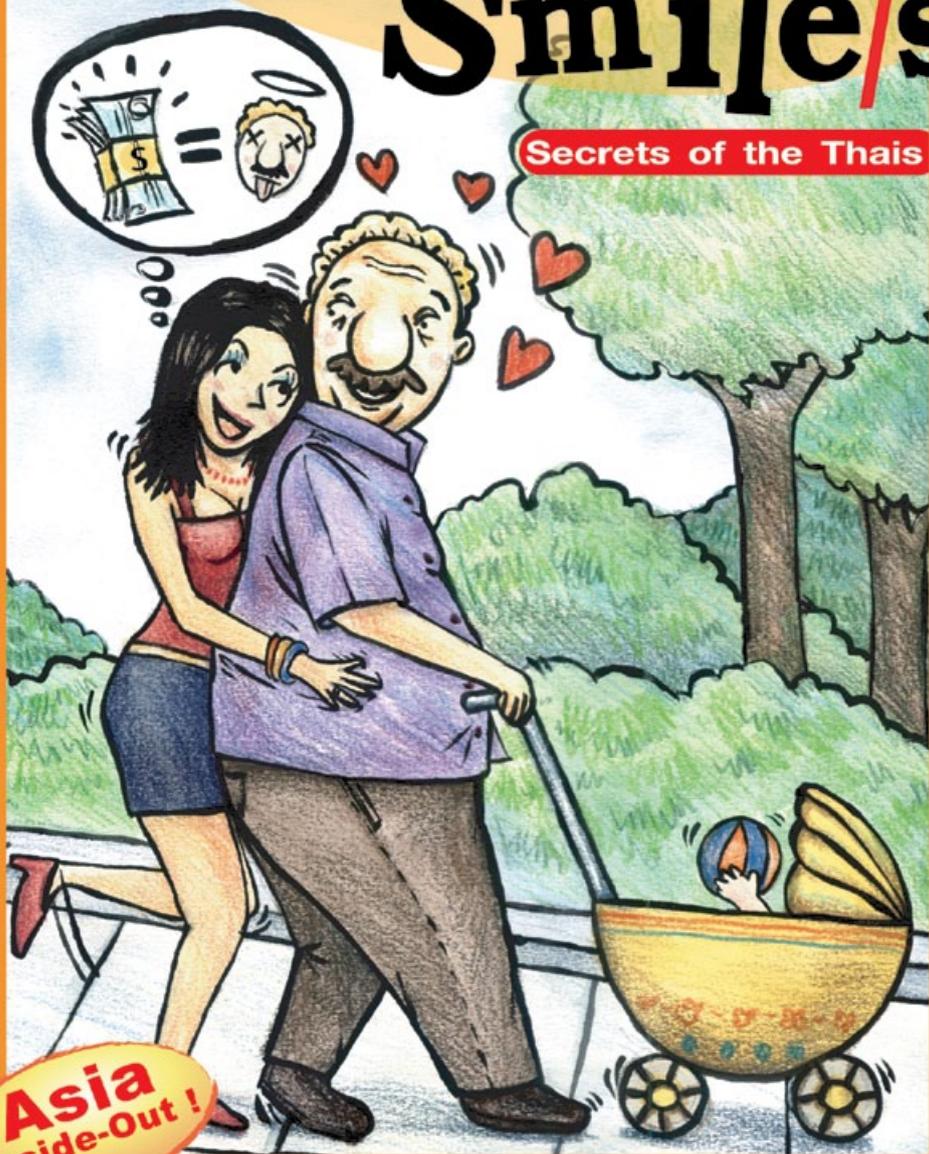


Siam

Smile/s

Secrets of the Thais



Asia
Inside-Out!

by Hugh Watson

SIAM SMILE/S

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SIAM SMILE/S

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Introduction

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Siam Smile/s is based on the lighter side of life in Thailand. It is an omnium gatherum of satiric, sardonic, and ironic insights. The examples and clues come from a long sojourn leading to abundant cultural observations.

The initial theme of *Siam Smile/s* is the more you can see the funny side of life, the better. The plethora of anecdotes will hopefully lead to a fuller understanding of this S.E. Asian country. When you, assuming you are a Western reader, finally get the nuances of subtle Thai daily culture, your title changes from *farang* (Western barbarian) to *farang ki-nok* (bird poop Western barbarian). You may wonder if this title is honorific or not and you can certainly mull it over. Some have reached the *ki-nok* level but are unaware of the term; others are miffed when they hear it while a few find it amusing. So, if you are a newcomer, this could be a quantum leap in ki-nokology and if an old hand, perhaps a confirmation and if lost in D & D (Dogma and Denial), just another shot at the vulpine locals.

Underneath the apparent pacific cultural chaos is a sharply defined hierarchical social system with concomitant rules and signals; but as these are subtle and manifest in a way very ambiguous to Westerners, it takes a long time to really get clues to Smile culture. This means years perhaps of faux pas: so to facilitate a quick assessment of the environs, and get the passage to *farang ki-nok* started in a speedy way, *Siam Smile/s* will be your guide.

There are lots of suggestions and concepts in *Siam Smile/s* and the reader is warned before trying anything such as the herbs, to consult a *mor phi* (spirit doctor), *mor do* (fortune teller) or regular *mor* (doctor). In fact, while thinking over some of the observations herein and seeking validation, instead of gawking and asking blunt questions in a milieu that is largely inarticulate to begin with, it is suggested to start with a newspaper and a #2 pencil: poke a hole in the paper and then do all the cultural observation you want.

You may want to rush up at the end of each chapter, grab a

local and sputter, “Is..is it really true that...?” Not a good idea: locals are in a state of *being* and rarely theoretical about their situation. Instead, sit back (maybe with the newspaper and pencil hole) and observe for yourself. You see, this is *not* where ‘the unexamined life is not worth living’ maxim holds sway: it’s more like the point of life is not examining anything –especially the self- and in Confucian terms what most people do is probably right (follow the leader): hence you find life in Smile Land generally not examined, analyzed or scrutinized, above all not questioned, and in a way, the mental environs are: *non-cogito ergo non-sum* which in Pali could nearly be rendered *anatta* (non-self).

Smile/s is a guide (an insight Baedeker) to a very indirect and fuzzy world that nonetheless has a sharply defined hierarchy (based on *sak dinah*: see Mulder¹) and ipso facto it is easy for visitors to commit contretemps; a great deal of this has to do with unexamined assumptions which Western people carry around like army packs.

There are at least 12 known kinds of Thai *yim* (smiles): at the outset I would like to point out the first smile (*Yim #1*), is the one Smile Land is famous for – the ready, toothy-smile especially and particularly at *first encounters*. Thais also have another smile for *second encounters* (*Yim #2*) and here is where I take license and use my own term: *yim ki-ma* (dog poop smile) where the real feelings are revealed and pretense about being nice long gone. In this case, at the same time you fake a smile or grimace, you roll up your upper lip like you just stepped in a really awful dog stool. The particular smile, #2, I find on occasions not limited only to second-meeting scenarios. Good looking women love to do this to staring-men on buses and other places, but they add a head-to-toes glance as they *yim ki-ma* to expand on the core sentiment of pure disdain.

Even in, and maybe especially, in department stores, a salesgirl may chat you up royally all *yim #1* and asking you the first encounter banter: *Where you come from? How long you stay here? You have Thai wife or not?* But this is just standard hype and doesn’t mean a thing; hence, next time through the same store, you might pass the chatty pleasant girl, but this time, she rolls out the second

1 Mulder, Niels, *Inside Thai Society*, DK Books

smile, yim ki-ma and you are a bit boggled- maybe you will go into existential angst. But if you are on your way to ki-nok status, you will just Mentally Erase the girl and her weird expression.

The sales chat is part of prescribed first-time-stranger behavior: just a little ritual.

The sudden welling up of latent contumely (in the *yim ki-ma*) is partially introduced in the first chapter on the 7-11 dealing with CSAS or ASS. Keep in mind that people don't just do the different yims, they practice them with mirrors! You may need your own mirror to catch many of the yim ki-ma because most are done behind your back.

Many observations are from BKK but a good many from Chiang Mai.

The title can be read four ways:

- 1) *Siam Smile*, which is singular and a noun, or
- 2) *Siam Smiles* which is the verb, and you have a happy country, or
- 3) *Siam Smiles* with a plural option for the noun, or
- 4) *Siam Smile/s* which is either/or in the Kierkegaardian sense and, thus ambiguous and could be a noun and singular or plural. Of course, you remember the prior admonition about the first and second encounter smiles.

May you tread in the kusula (skilled) manner through the twilight local cultural labyrinth to arrive successfully at the panjandrum of full ki-nokery.

Preface to the Second Edition

.....

This is an opportune time to correct the errata in the first edition. I would like to introduce some characters that fell through the cracks first time around. *Siam Smile/s* was originally 80 chapters, slimmed down to 42, and some of the personae missed their introductions:

Cultural Key Mistress, who whisked me day-four of my first time in Smile Land to a far north hamlet, where I was immediately put to plowing rice fields. She was my culture mentor for several years, and gave me insights into the nature of the *chao nah* (rice farmers).

Angry Randy, who is a real, but nearly mythic character that roams BKK demanding justice, and teaching manners to queue-jumpers. A US fellow, and ex-Hong Kong actor, Randy is still at large.

Maude and Ralph, who are two prototypic, geriatric, Kansas travelers ready to try whatever they happen to read. They function a bit like a warning label about what might happen, if one tries to prove or disprove ideas stated in the book.

Percival Gibberish, who, although relegated to footnote status, is nonetheless an important character. Formally, he is Dr. Gibberish, MBE, Prof. of Para-semiotics at the G.I. P.¹

One thing, which comes to the fore in culture-oriented works, is the information itself. Some societies, in spite of a modern façade, remain pervasively noncommittal about their own realities. Hence, the challenge to figure things out is a bit up to the visitor. In Thailand one has the helpful works of Danish sociologist, Niels Mulder, and US historian, David Wyatt, for insights. Regarding Thais, however, I have only found one expert in years of searching. She is a lovely *ajarn* (professor), heading up a linguistics department, and can explain in depth Thai language and customs. On the other hand, many nationalistic Smile citizens, who are quite confident of their level of cultural knowledge, are only minimally better than the US souls on Jay Leno's (CNBC Saturday nights in Asia) Jay Walk – who, when

¹ *Gibraltar Institute of Pataphysics*

interviewed, identify Einstein as a comedian, and Abraham Lincoln as a communist. Especially in BKK, enthusiastic locals, can rarely go beyond 'Good' for historical Siamese VIPs, and will identify regional languages, when they hear them, Tai-related or not, as Yawi, a Malay-Arabic language. This indicates an incurious, surface reality society explained in detail by Mulder. When considering the astounding lack of general information in both the US and Thailand, a fellow named Mr. Weh', who is on the guru path, said, "Well, it's the end of the Kali Yuga, isn't it? This is the worst of all times. What do you expect?"

Is this drop in awareness Nietzsche's Last Man, who turns out to be the mindless, deracinated, disinterested, and lackluster consumer, drifting from meal to meal? Is this the period when history, geography, famous people, and time itself melt into the glow of shopping mall florescent lights?

Time to update.

Queues and Q-jumping, in *Chapter 7 To Queue or not to Queue*, have been addressed everywhere, even in CM, where at post offices, they now have cardboard numbers 1-500 on a nail, a number-showing TV monitor with a soft, recorded, siren voice telling who is up, and where to go, in case you are visually-challenged, plus rows of plastic seats for waiting. This is another mini-step into the world of order and regulated politeness.

Felony, of course, continues, but with some justice... I discuss a dodgy, cable TV company (*Chapter 19 The Art of Felony 3*) that fleeced me for years – I recently learned the girl responsible is in hiding, and the cops after her. I was also cheated on an ADSL modem by a representative of a phone company, but that scam has been officially terminated. The condo, that overcharged me for a year on rent, paid me back. Is this light at the end of the tunnel, or is it Diogenes fumbling with a candle because someone stole his lantern?

As there are four chapters on felony, *Chapters 17 – 20 (The Art of Felony 1-4)*, I would like to add, after a trip back to the US, it came to me that, in Siam you find micro-felony with small-time people out to pull one over on you. This gets tedious, and is exasperating, but nothing compared to the macro-felony you find in the West. Just

walk into a US supermarket, or get gas for a car, or rent an apartment to find out what real extortion is. Macro-felony is done on the CEO-level, not small-time stuff, and is just as alienating, if not more so, but impersonal. The results are two kinds of alienation: in the US people react to macro-felony by going 'postal' and shooting everyone in sight, whereas in S.E. Asia, the tendency is to go into Mental Erase, or the Maya Bubble (All is Illusion). Westerners hop into their Pollyanna Bubbles and slip into denial, or buy Prozac by the wheelbarrow. A few will succumb to drink, and others to EP (Expat Paranoia) and become ornery.

In the *Chapter 9 The Language/s*, I mention how you have to call Peter, Pe**TUUUHH**, for his secretary to recognize his name. I have since discovered a lady from NZ called Roberta, who has modified her name, for all involved including expats, to rober**TA**. Well, that's perfect, isn't it? This makes her the first historical case of Orthographic Assimilation.¹ One suspects, if rober**TA** had been born a lemming, she would not only have been the first over the cliff, but the first rodent to actually carry a banner (*Jump R Us*), and be heard to scream **banZAI!** in lemming² at that peak, cliff, annual moment.

The *ki-ma* (dog poop) smile, or sneer, is introduced as part of daily interaction. It can be seen on Thai soaps all the time. But, some call this facial expression, *kin manaow* (eat lemon/lime), which is accurate with the immediate sour-citrus twist. But I prefer *ki-ma* because of the inherent disdain.

The term *kin muu* (eat pig), in Chapter 26, has the tacit meaning of 'taking advantage,' and can be seen frequently, when an alien pays the bill for the smirking in-laws at restaurants.

About *Chapter 41 The Inimical Wai*, Prof. Reechard (Brit.) said he has been endlessly shocked at Western geezers, who decide to *wai* everyone. These are the geriatrics that amble around in the Nice-Mode. However, if an elder *wai*-s a younger person first, the

1 Some *gung-ho* foreigners will changed *Bill* to *Bin* or *Michael* to *Michun* but only rober**TA** has changed capitalization, a radical grammar violation, but award-winning in this instance.

2 **ssssssssssqueeeeeKO!**

younger gets years and years of serious bad luck. Hence, the *wai-ing* old-timer, in his/her saccharine glow, dispenses ill-fortune right and left. Because Thais are shy, or whatever, they do not inform the pre-senile of the rules, and some elderly terrorize unabated for decades on end. Nice-Mode Bubble people assume being pleasant 24/7 is more than enough to a smooth Smile experience, but there is more to reality that loading up more pretenses in an already semi-pretend world. Sometimes you actually have to know something of the culture to be 'nice' in the first place.

Regarding nuptials and romance in hindsight, *Chapters 21* and *35*, a good many Thais are quietly forming 'relationships.' They just move away from parents to set up a love nest, and duck the entire bride-price issue. This is often the middle class starting to modernize. Hence, right off the bat, the idea of *sing sot* (bride-price) is starting to go more to theory than to practice. In reality, bride-price is status-specific, which means the rural poor are not in line for much of a windfall, if anything at all (eloping is common), and some middle class families shrug the whole thing off. It is, however, a major event among the wealthy. It is also a big deal, when a foreigner tumbles onto the scene. Suddenly ordinary farm girls, who might be lucky to be a second wife, and who might not be hoping for a bride-price at all, are getting unbelievable deals. As the Camelot scenarios play out, the dusky maiden from Siskaet has a knight from Ohio riding a shining golden goose, which will honk all the way to the altar... or to the Ampur's office. The bride-price will astonish the entire province, and the once impoverished family, will eagerly await a life of opulence.

There is a kind of glowing incongruity, when the foreigner, with a high-level job, posh pad, chauffeur, and the like, has in tow an improbable, landless, provincial girl, selected, not by comparable background and status, but by gogo ability, and maybe even good at ping pong balls. Although she might have more tattoos than David Beckham, her bride-price has set provincial records. This match is alarming to locals, who would prefer such dalliances be discreetly kept out of public awareness. But our junior CEO is now living in the New Freedom Era, and could care less. Maybe Thais are in their own time zone?