

THAI LITE 2



More Selected Scribblings by **S. Tsow**

THAI LITE 2 - THE REFILL

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Text by S. Tsow

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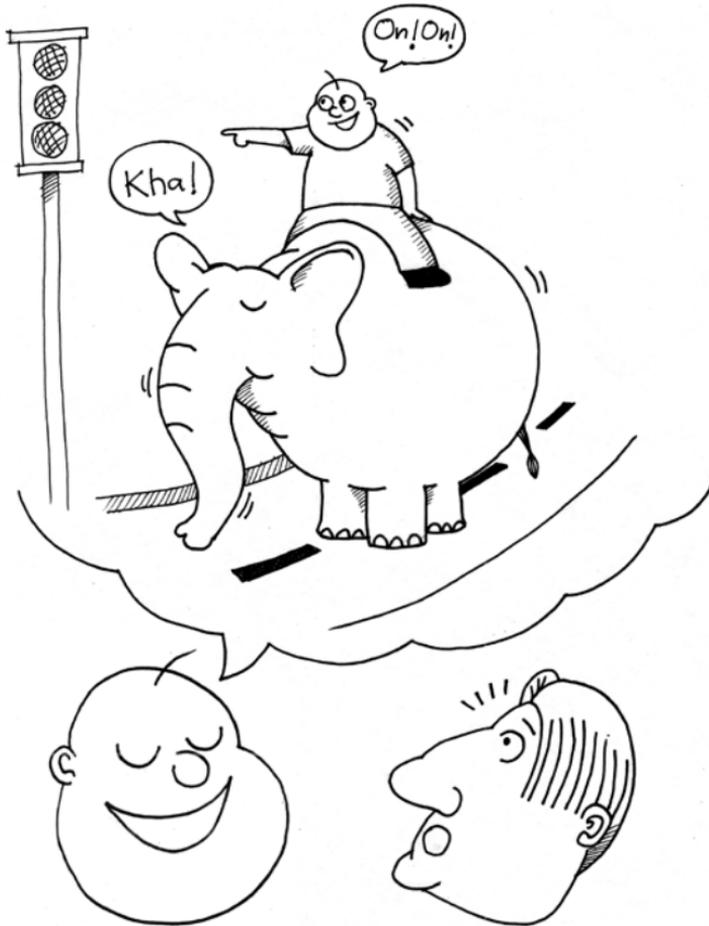
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Thailand Q & A



Questions which the homefolks ask returning expats: why we call it Tie-land, elephant traffic jams, Oriental wisdom, the quest for the winning lottery number.

I come from New England, on the northeastern coast of the United States, where people don't know much about Thailand. Every time I go home for a visit, people ask me questions like these:

Q. So what's it like over there in Thigh-land?

A. Tie-land. Tie-land. They pronounce it Tie-land, not Thigh-land.

Q. Oh? Then why do they spell it with an H?

A. "Thailand" is an English word, and English is not their native language. You can't expect them to get everything right. I bet you'd have a tough time writing "America" in *their* language.

Q. Why do they call it "Tie-land," then? Does everybody wear a tie?

A. No, it's too hot to wear a tie. They call it Tie-land because they love their homeland and are deeply attached to it. They're tied to it emotionally, you see. So they call it Tie-land to remind themselves of this emotional bond.

Q. I see. I hear they have elephants in Thailand.

A. Yes. Everybody has an elephant. Mine is named Esmerelda. I ride her to work every day, urging her on with hearty cries of "On, on, Esmerelda, thou best of pachyderms!"

Q. Where do they park 'em?

A. We have elephant parking lots.

Q. Don't the elephants mess up the roads with their poo?

A. No. We have elephant toilets for them to relieve themselves in.

Q. What's an elephant toilet like?

A. Big. [Editor's note: For further elaboration on this felicitous theme, see Chapter "Toilet Training the Elephant."]

Q. Well, but I hear you have lots of traffic jams. How can you have traffic jams if everybody rides elephants?

A. Our traffic jams are actually elephant jams. Instead of bumper-to-bumper cars, we have trunk-to-tail elephants.

It is an impressive sight, I can tell you, to see all those thousands of elephants jammed up on Sukhumvit Road during the morning rush hour. Instead of listening to the honking of car horns, we get to hear the musical sound of elephants trumpeting.

Q. Yeah? What does it sound like, an elephant trumpeting?

A. It sounds like a John Philip Sousa march. Some of our elephants have been trained to trumpet the “William Tell Overture.”

Q. Is Thailand famous for anything in particular?

A. Yes. Thailand is famous for its smiles. In fact, it’s called the Land of Smiles. We have more smiles than bananas. And we have a hell of a lot of bananas. The advantage of smiles over bananas is that you don’t have to peel a smile.

Q. They got a lot of wisdom over there? We hear a lot about Oriental wisdom.

A. Oh, yes. The Thais are always bouncing zippy Zen koans off us, like this one: “What is the sound of two elephants farting?”

Q. Gee, I have no idea. What is it?

A. KA-BOOM! KA-BOOM! See? Thailand is full of Oriental wisdom.

Q. Give me another example. Say something wise.

A. “Money is God.”

Q. Huh?

A. That is an example of Thai folk wisdom that was popular during the late lamented bubble economy. Thailand has so much wisdom lying around that they pile it up on the sidewalks at night to be taken out with the garbage. Sometimes it overflows into neighboring countries. Take

this wise proverb from Malaysia, once quoted in *Asiaweek* magazine (now unfortunately defunct): “When two pestles collide in one mortar, fowls will have their fill.”

Q. Gosh. What does that mean?

A. I have no idea.

Q. Are they spiritual over there? We hear a lot about Oriental spirituality.

A. Oh, yes, indeed. Why, they pray all the time.

Q. Yeah? What do they pray for?

A. Mostly for the winning lottery numbers.

Q. I read someplace that the Thais are Buddhists, and Buddhism is all about trying to eliminate craving. So how come they pray for the winning lottery numbers?

A. In Thailand, you see, they’ve figured out that the best way to eliminate craving is to satisfy it. And in Thailand, the quickest and easiest way to satisfy craving is to win the lottery.

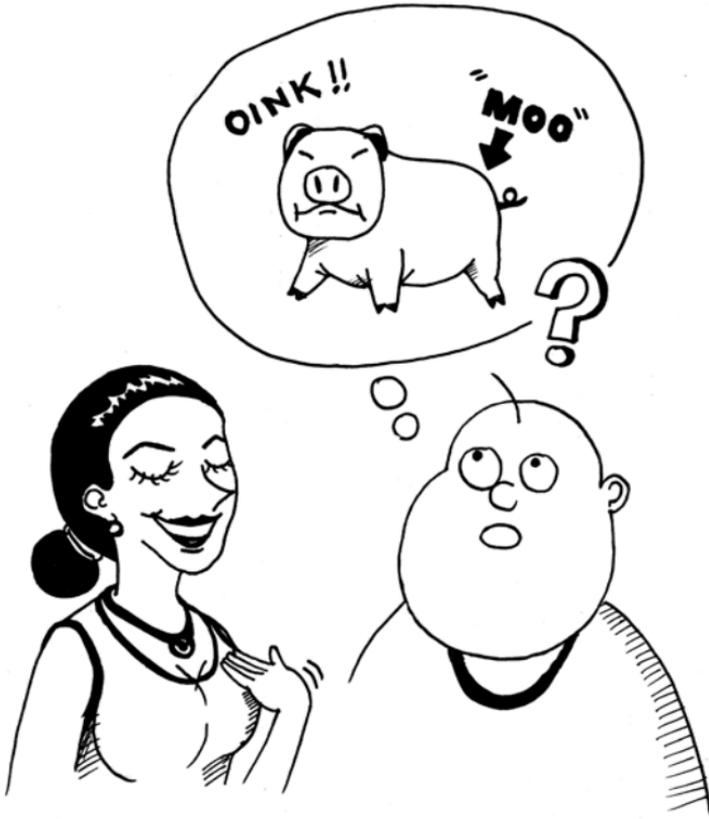
Q. What sort of things do they crave?

A. Mercedes-Benzes. BMWs. Mobile phones. Condominiums. Wealth, power, status, enjoyment. The same things everybody craves.

Q. Gee, it sounds like they’re just like us.

A. For better or for worse.

Fun and Games with Thai Nicknames



A learned disquisition on such lively Thai nicknames as Benz, Balloon, Big, Bank, and Beckham, capped by suggestions for improvements in this exciting genre.

One of the most fascinating aspects of Thai culture is the rich variety of Thai nicknames. Every Thai has a nickname, and most nicknames have a meaning.

Since nicknames are usually conferred at birth,

sometimes they reveal what the person looked like as a baby: Daeng (Red), Dam (Black), Khao (White), Yui (Plump), Yai (Big), or one of the several words that mean small: Nit, Noy, Goi, or Lek.

So if you happen to meet a skinny girl named Uan (Fat) or Moo (Pig), don't be surprised. She might have looked like that much earlier in her career.

Some nicknames denote animals, like Maew (Cat), Chang (Elephant), Ling (Monkey), Sua (Tiger), Nok (Bird), Gai (Chicken), Pet (Duck), Gung (Shrimp), Buu (Crab), Plaa (Fish), Hoy (Oyster), Gop (Frog), Tao (Turtle), and Mot (Ant).

Thai nicknames don't have to be in the Thai language -- English words will also do. One of Thailand's most famous singers, Thongchai McIntyre, is nicknamed Bird. I've also read of girls named Nooden -- the Thai pronunciation of "noodle" -- and Balloon. I would not care to speculate on which portion of Ms. Balloon's anatomy inspired her nickname.

A few nicknames sound like English body parts. I've heard of guys named Arm and girls named Knee, but never of anyone named Foot, Thigh, or Elbow.

There's a singer named Heart, but none named Liver; a boy named Start, but none named Stop; another named First, but none named Last. You might name your child Win, but probably not Lose; Good, but not Bad.

At least three people are named after prestigious cars like Ford, Benz, and Ferrari. I've never heard of anybody named Toyota, Honda, or Isuzu, but I'm still waiting for some macho Thai father to name his son Humvee, Tank, or Bradley Fighting Vehicle.

We have rock stars named Big and Fluke, and girls

with names like Juicy and Pinky. One sports-minded lad chose the nickname Beckham. Tennis star Paradorn Srichapan's nickname is, suitably, Ball. It might also have been Net, Racquet, or Wimbledon. Tiger Woods could have been nicknamed Golf, Club, or Swing -- but he's already nicknamed Tiger.

I'm told that if parents want their son to be rich, they might name him Bank. Well, how about Stock, Bond, or Dividend? Not to mention Rich, Cash, or Profit.

Sometimes Thai nicknames follow a pattern. Two parents I know of are fond of music, so they named their daughter Jazz and their son Pop. When Jazz had two sons, I thought she ought to name them Rock and Roll, or Hip and Hop. But no. She named them Pan and Knob, thereby bringing to a sad end the possibility of an ongoing dynasty of musical nicknames.

In an intercultural world, some Thai nicknames tread on dangerous ground. I would not care to count the number of Thai girls nicknamed Porn who have ventured abroad only to be devastated when they found out what their nickname means in English.

Rat, too, seems an odd nickname for a girl, even though it's pronounced Rut. A young man called Mink probably didn't know that he's named after an animal which is often associated with rampant sexual activity; and the girl who chose the nickname Cherry was almost certainly unaware of its meaning in American slang.

Sometimes the unwary foreigner must be careful when pronouncing Thai nicknames. When General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh was prime minister, I asked a class of students why people called him Big Jiew. "Jiew" means tiny, which the portly General Chavalit most certainly is

not; and “Big Tiny” seems a contradiction in terms. But I mispronounced his nickname as “Big Joo,” which elicited gales of laughter from the class. Only later did I learn that “joo” refers to a well-known male reproductive organ.

Occasionally there is a problem deciding how to spell a Thai nickname in English. A lady of my acquaintance had a nickname pronounced, roughly, “Dtoom.” She didn’t want to spell it that way, because it looked strange. She had been told to spell it “Tum,” but she knew that English-speaking people would pronounce it to rhyme with “bum.”

This lady was very exacting. She insisted on a spelling that had flair and panache; a spelling that would bowl her friends over by its aptness, originality, and charm.

A friend of mine and I both considered the problem, and eventually we came up with two possibilities which we both thought were ideal, especially for this particular lady: Doom and Tomb.

Last time I looked, she was spelling it Tum.

There don’t seem to be any rules governing the choice of Thai nicknames, and the really good news is that if you get a nickname you don’t like, you can always change it.

Given this happy situation, we ought to be able to give people any nickname we want. As a man of perverse tastes, I favor onomatopoeic names like Gag, Retch, Puke, Barf, and Gargle. If a person is conceited, you could bring him down to earth by calling him Waste, Trash, Garbage, Error, or Delete.

I know foreigners who ought to have nicknames like Mao (Drunk), Bah (Crazy), or Ngo (Stupid), not to mention Men (Smelly), Hualan (Bald), and Nagliat (Ugly). Dork, Nerd, Dweeb, and Doofus also have undeniable charm. But most of my friends ought to be named Beer.