

# ACHAN

*A Year of Teaching  
in Thailand*



Elayne Clift

# ACHAN: A YEAR OF TEACHING IN THAILAND

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# ACHAN: A Year of Teaching in Thailand

by

Elayne Clift



*For my Thai sisters,  
Lena and Laura,  
who gave the year its glow,  
and  
With thanks to the special friends  
who shared it.*

## Prologue

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### *WEEK ONE IN CHIANGRA-LA*

Flying halfway around the world nonstop — a 17-hour journey — is similar in some respects to giving birth: the thought alone is daunting, and the actual event is arduous and difficult. Thai Airways makes the journey more than tolerable and lives up to its slogan, “Smooth as silk.” Still, nearly 9,000 miles is a long way to go without touching down, even when punctuated by three excellent meals, enough movies for the duration, and a nap or two. Thanks to the amenities and clear skies, my usual flight angst was absent during my flight from New York to Bangkok, one of the longest nonstop flights in the world.

I had to suspend my usual catastrophic imaginings about flying, of course. I mean, how does something larger than a New York apartment get up there in the first place? How do tons of metal lift off in just a few short minutes of racing down a runway, and what in the world keeps it up there? My luggage alone for this year away from home, laden with books and other teaching materials, is enough to keep anything grounded, and there are nearly 200 others onboard, no doubt with similarly overweight bags. That is reason enough to worry, even before I get to consider mechanical failure or human error.

And so I arrive in Bangkok and overnight in a convenient airport hotel where I have a large room and a complimentary buffet breakfast. The next morning I fly to Chiang Mai, Thailand’s second largest city and capital of the north, where I am met by my new best friend and, as it turns out, my next-door neighbor, Lena, the

real estate agent with whom I've been exchanging emails and who has found me a house to rent.

My new home is sweet, light and airy, and just the right size. I like its tiled floors downstairs, and the dark wooden ones up. Like traditional Thai homes, the kitchen is outside; this will be hard to adjust to in the heat. It has two gas burners, a temperamental microwave and a sink. Lena explains that the house is designed so that the heat of cooking and the smell of spices will not permeate the house.

Then she takes me shopping at one of the huge supermarkets, Carrefour, where I buy a crockpot, a toaster, a coffeepot and a wok. I open an account at Siam Commercial Bank, arrange a rental car, laundry service, and a weekly housekeeper. The tireless Lena follows our shopping spree with a visit to the university where I will begin teaching in a week. Just ten minutes from the house, it is modern and manageable in size. There I am introduced to *Achan* Laura, another American teacher from New England; within minutes she clues me into campus politics and within days she, too, is my chum.

Just before I collapse from jetlag, Lena guides me to the Internet cafe, the cell phone shop, the hairdresser and the cheapest place to buy gas. In short, she has become my guardian angel.

And so I take up life in my new home and, in the few days before school starts, begin to learn my way around. One thing I know already is this: there are kind, smiling people everywhere to help me as I become accustomed to Thai culture. There was the businessman I met in the Bangkok hotel lobby who taught me how to say thank you, the student on the long flight from New York who explained Thai food customs, and the young housewife who shared an airport limo and hoped fervently that we would meet again in Chiang Mai. And of course, there is Lena, who knows how to get anything done in Chiang Mai, and Laura, who mentors me through the first days of adjustment and anxious anticipation about being *Achan*.

The world seems oddly smaller from this side of the globe than it does from the familiarity of home. Contemplating "exotic" Asia from North America, places like Thailand are so mysterious. But from Chiang Mai, the green mountains of Vermont are somehow

much closer. Watching people go about their daily lives, seeing familiar products, eating a meal in a coffee shop makes one realize just how universal some things are. People work, shop, walk their pets, love their kids. They do the same things we do to make the world go around, and that is reassuring. In this peaceful place, the differences among us shrink. They are there to be explored and enjoyed, but not to divide. Seeing that, I rise each morning with a sense of calm curiosity, wondering what challenges and pleasures the new day will bring.



# Part I

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*ALL IN A DAY'S WORK*

Thai people are gracious, calm and reserved. I love the ubiquitous greeting, *Sawasdee-(ka)*, often accompanied by hands clasped as if in prayer, and a gentle bow. This posture is called *wai*. But I also sense that Thais are just as private as they are polite. Closeness, and I imagine confidences, are only shared with family or best friends.

Family life is important.

The babies are all gorgeous and so are most of the young women, with their slim hands and graceful, small bodies.

There is a sizeable, and comfortable, subculture of gay men as well as courtesy among social classes. (Who says this is an “undeveloped country?”)

Thai women have a good thing going: they can order out and have cooked food delivered for ridiculously low prices, or their families can eat in the abundant restaurants — many of which are open air — that serve fabulous inexpensive food. Thais also seem to have a penchant for coffee — there are lots of coffee shops and cafes around as well as fabulous bakeries!

Cars, gasoline, books and imported foods are the expensive commodities. Everything else is cheap by western standards.

Massage is big here. You can get a one hour foot and/or back massage in the shopping mall or the Night Market, often expertly delivered by gentle rural folks, for about US \$1.50. A terrific haircut costs less than US \$5.00 and a manicure/pedicure the same. What price luxury!

Life seems laid back and there is an aura of calm about the place. My neighbors, middle-class professionals, leave for work at 8:00 a.m. and return by 6:00 p.m. at the latest. Many people from Chiang Mai work hard in places like Bangkok, or further afield in other countries, but they call Chiang Mai home, retreating here on weekends and holidays because it is so mellow — and the good life is so inexpensive.

Traditional life is rapidly giving way to commercial modernity. Twelve years ago when I was last here, Chiang Mai was small, old-world charming and manageable. Now it hosts giant shopping malls,

serious smog, five-star hotels, and ever-increasing urban sprawl. But the Night Market is bigger than ever and still wonderful!

Like elsewhere in Asia, women are expected to be patient, obedient, demure and hard-working. They are — often to their own detriment.

Thailand is decidedly hi-tech. Cell phones are ubiquitous and sophisticated, high-end computer retailers abound, and everyone is really savvy about this stuff.

Thais are potentially good entrepreneurs but they have a way to go when it comes to customer service. Neither Carrefour nor Tesco Lotus, for example, the two superstores frequented by many foreigners, have staff on duty who can understand enough English to guide *farang* (westerners) to a product. (On one of my first solo outings I asked for a hook and was guided to cookery.)

Thais drive like maniacs! The copious motorbikes are a particular threat. And no matter what happens in a fender-bender or worse, the *farang* is always to blame.

There are two temperatures in Thailand: Hot and I-can't-take-it-anymore.

They are from Thailand, Burma, Japan, Indonesia, Turkey, China, Korea. They are eager, polite and curious about their new *achan* (teacher). And they are so young — mostly nineteen or twenty — that I feel like a western relic. But age and teachers are respected here and their beautiful, dark, almond-shaped eyes are fixed attentively upon me as I introduce myself and the courses I will teach in the university's International English Communication program.

Universally, they want to speak English better, to travel widely, to learn more about the world. And in an icebreaker exercise on our first day together, they reveal unanimously that what they hope for most fervently is for peace to prevail everywhere.

Coming to teach here has been a new challenge for me. While I've taught many academic courses in the U.S. ranging from Women's Studies to Health Communication, this is the first time I've taught students who are struggling to become fluent in my native language while I understand nothing of theirs. (Luckily, when I ask them to make table tents of their names almost all of them write their western nicknames.) So I must learn to slow down, to enunciate clearly, to interpret idioms, to plan creative, well-paced lessons week by week. At home, I plan semester by semester, so the pressure is on.

As the first week of my new teaching adventure progresses, I grow increasingly comfortable with the challenge. Both my Thai and expatriate colleagues have made me feel at home and my students are so eager that even when I ask them to fill out a brief questionnaire about themselves, they whip out their electronic dictionaries and oversized erasers, hunker down over their papers, and give it all they've got. When I tell them about my prior experiences and travels, they gaze up at me with awe and one student writes on her questionnaire, "I want to be an internationalist, just like you!"

As we begin to focus on the work before us — oral presentation, listening and speaking, writing in English — we start to develop a group dynamic that includes trust, inquiry and risk-taking. It also

includes having fun.

The classes are by definition practical, dynamic and applied. So each day I arrive in the classroom armed with exercises that I hope will be challenging, instructive and entertaining. Sometimes they flop, like the time I handed out names of famous people and asked the students to write questions they would ask if they could interview the historical figure. Many students didn't know who Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela or Napoleon were. But most of the time, the exercises work. The students talk or write about things they wish for, animals they would like to be, guests they would like to invite to a dinner party. These early exercises serve as icebreakers, assessment tools, and practice sessions for the work ahead. They let the students experience my teaching style and they help me learn the personalities of the young people I will work with. After each class during the first week, I know them a bit better. I see their strengths and areas for improvement and I sense who is especially well-motivated. I know who is doing okay as a college student away from home for the first time, and who is feeling lonely and afraid. And I return to my lesson planning with a bit more confidence about what is needed and what techniques (and games) will be most effective in the week to come.