

# Bangkok

Secrets of the Thais  
from Phra Attit Road  
to Sukhumvit

# Smile/s

Vol. I



from the author of Siam Smile/s

by Hugh Watson

## **BANGKOK SMILE/S**

Volume I, Secrets of the Thais from Phra Attit Road to Sukhumvit

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*To the Bangkok taxi drivers*

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## NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

### *Part 1*

In *Siam Smile/s*, my earlier book, there were a few points to make, and a few concepts to ponder such as a diatribe on semiotics and a simultaneous eulogy on para-semiotics (not for Muggles). Plus a new creative idea, patanaffery, for the patently avant-garde. There were a few characters that will return in this book. One is Angry Randy who storms around Bangkok teaching manners to locals, the Cultural Key Mistress who is now married and secluded in Phayao, and, of course, my pal, the Cambridge Scholar. The Scholar came down with pollution sickness in late December and died three weeks later at age thirty-five.

In *Bangkok Smile/s*, there are some new theories and new people. Introduced are feral psychology, a behavioral look at humanish interactions, and Alpha-Betas, which is about people in modality categories clunking and fumbling through life. Also examined is a more in-depth look at denial among expats as it seems to be now epidemic. Denial among Western people in S.E. Asia nearly replicates a study done on Peruvian guinea pigs who were given ayahuasca in a laboratory experiment: the pigs post-treatment started to bob up and down in front of grasshoppers and cockroaches in what is clearly inchoate kowtowing. The new characters are Gulliver, Rocco, Shanghai Jacob and Mr. Belfast.

Like the first work, this book intends to point out how amusing humans are, especially when one is in a different country, as all the awkward and untoward things stick out like elephants wearing sunglasses. In fact, life is really a cartoon and getting more so every day as mass culture goes into a reality meltdown. It is astonishing, but true, that on

Jay Walk, CNBC weekends, an interviewer showed a large photo of Michelle Obama to a male university student on spring vacation break romping on a Texas beach:

“Who is that?” asked the interviewer holding up the big photo.

“Kundarini Riche,” said the lad full of sophomoric confidence and beach beer.

The student mistook Michelle Obama, wife of President Obama, to be Condoleezza Rice from the previous G. W. Bush administration. But the fellow even got that name wrong with ‘Kundarini’ and ‘Richie.’ I think Jay Walk is a kind of barometer on how low the US has dropped. The show has material suitable for a comparison to S.E. Asian folks who are equally not up to snuff on famous people and current events. You can do your own Jay Walk in Bangkok asking folks about world events or about world leaders. Stumper questions are about Asia to give you an idea. (In Chiang Mai during the weekend public market in the center of Old Town, I asked all the Thais around who the statues of the three kings were. The kings were right there in stony grandeur overlooking the market. Naturally, no one knew. (I found out myself later: Mangrai, Ramkamphaeng, and Ngam Müang).

In Bangkok things not-us (i.e. Thai), easily stand out *if we are paying attention*. In reality, there are hysterical things happening every day in Thailand. The trick is to spot the amusing moments and have a good laugh or snicker. The ability to spot stuff comes from cultural empathy and an eye on the locals, who are doing their best to not be like the rest of the globe nor like the Asian middle class. They are instead out to reinvent the wheel like oriental versions of the Flintstones. And, if that is not enough, an exegesis on

the many expatriates should produce a load of smiles. Their contretemps are unbelievable, their misunderstandings of everything Thai phenomenal, and their ability to duck into denial enough to embarrass a really timorous ostrich. Of course, once you catch onto the humor in daily situations, it is hard to keep from breaking out in belly laughs. At one point, Vladimir Putin at a news conference got a question about how US-style democracy was doing in Iraq, and he burst out laughing and had to quickly cover his mouth. It was an explosive, unexpected laugh and caught him off guard. He had to stifle this projectile-guffaw; once you know what to observe in Bangkok, you might have to do the same. The humor borders at times on the outrageous.

People coming to Smile Land tend to face a dichotomy. They go either too far to the negative into criticism and dislike or too far into the positive to denial, avoidance and defense. The best advice is to detour the extremes, and go to the middle just as Buddha suggested. Aristotle also recommended the middle way. As good and bad are ubiquitous, the middle is the place for the wise. One finds local Nice Barbarians ('Barbarians' is the term used for Western people instead of '*farang*' which means the same: 'Nice' refers to denial.) often cannot stand the slightest discussion of a local trick, gimmick or scheme. On the other hand, the pessimists get very annoyed if you point out something Thais have done that is remarkable. It seems, in the end, people are getting more irrational all the time, and, though alarming, it is interesting when in a Bangkok setting. In fact, the background of grim, gray buildings, squashed garbage, hot streets and tiny, weak traffic-island-trees is perfect for Godot-type humor. Kao San Road, for example, is a daily circus of the absurd. In fact, at times the craziness of Western

people trying to make sense of S.E. Asian culture takes one to the border of Zen. That is, the unreal is so overwhelming that after you have a good laugh, you go to *anatta*, no-self and pretend the entire universe has vanished. It can be too much. There are no answers, only the Void. The wise laugh when they tumble in and out of this Void.

Thais, by the way, and I mean many Isan cab drivers, are having a great laugh at life in Bangkok. They see the cunning local girls as a flock of specious schemers, the foreigners as totally clueless similar to macaques who have been hit by too many falling coconuts, and being ethnic Lao people, they are not kind to the Chinese or Klang Central Thais either. Chinese are felt to be *kineow*, (stingy) and Klang Central Thais *jai dam*, meaning black-hearted. In the end, the countless cases of people doing strange things, making enormous mistakes about human interactions, and being off the wall (foreigners) about most things Thai, provide loads of amusing material for those so inclined. Right under the surface, Isan people find the country fairly hysterical in a quiet snicker-behind-your-hand way. They have loads of private stories and jokes, but are judicial as with whom they share their humor. They will quickly assess/calculate your experience-level. If you are a newbie in delirious, drooling week-one, they will tell you Thailand is the best place in the world, and wait until you meet the fabulous women. But, when you give them the clue that you are catching onto local culture, they open up. The first thing they hammer on, ironically enough, is the fantastic Thai women. (While at a jeweler's in Seattle, a salesgirl finding I resided in Bangkok, remarked on how the Thai ladies came in with Thai husbands, had them buy a load of jewelry and then divorced: the jewelry as personal property will not be divvied up). They have

a lot of negative comments on the ladies. In fact, the whole thing about the hapless Westerner fellow falling for a goofy, uneducated and daft tart gets them going. When asked how I like Thai women, a kind of introductory screening-question, I say “*Ot ton me dai,*” (I can’t stand them). They roar with laughter, give me a high-five that nearly ends with a crash into the back of a bus, or just want to shake hands. Then you start hearing real things. Isan people (Laos or Khmer) can be perceptive about themselves and very realistic about Siamese life. They have a lot to say, but are silent when faced with the off-the-plane visitors, who are generally at the ‘near-infatuated *farang*’ level. *Farang* is a derisive term for Westerners meaning ‘Barbarian.’ Then you have the expats who have been here over ten years and are still at level-one. This causes cabbies and others to assume a myth of Western people as being simple and clueless. In the end, the northeast provincial people have a head start on awareness, as they are not ethnic Thais to begin with, and can sit back and observe how the Klang (Central Thais) and Chinese behave or misbehave. They have a bit of ‘distance.’ Instead of not seeing the forest for the trees, they are sitting in a meadow having Lao sticky rice, *kaonieow*, and sagely watching the forest clearly in the background.

An aim of *Bangkok Smile/s* is to hint at the humor in culture without insisting everyone read *Homo Ludens (Man Plays)*. There are some things to know. Time to people-watch. However, Thais, like many other Asians, are subtle. They will not dash up and tell you even when you are really doing something wildly wrong. They giggle and let you go. So, just studying Asian culture takes some doing. In fact, many Western people, especially a few Americans, are so lost in denial, they actually need psychological counsel-

ing plus the graham-crackers-Prozac-and-milk outpatient program. Coming close to realizing how different people are (from those in Ohio) is so traumatic, it puts some on the edge of a saccharine psychosis. This can be scary. You think you have dodged culture shock only to be hit with culture psychosis-neurosis. The clue is: if you superimpose your culture on another, Cincinnati on Bangkok, you are no longer in the rational world. One suspects that people who were closet-neurotics at home in the West blossom into full simple-psychotics in Bangkok. You are off course to superimpose. Instead, you should do like the Romans in Rome and order a pizza. If you are in Bangkok, order rice gruel (*kao tum*), and do not scream for your Grape Nuts. You have to come to terms with the fact that not everyone in the world eats Wheaties for breakfast.

To give an example of the gap in expat life to local life, I once saw a girl about nine right after school 4:00 PM on Phra Attit Road. She had just come from the local *wat* (temple) school that caters to the area Klang slum kids. She jumped up on a cement table in a tiny park area, and gracefully started to do the traditional Thai dance with all the traditional hand gestures. She was probably just learning this at school. But she added something; as she turned to the right, instead of a delicate hand gesture, she gave the entire area the finger. Then she turned to the left and gave the finger to all in that area. What was remarkable was not the girl doing some after-school strange stuff, but how a US expat friend interpreted it. I told him about the girl, and he laughed and said, "They don't know what it means." That got me. I didn't say anything, but if you really want trouble, give a Thai the finger. A US fellow in Chiang Mai (geezer on a motorbike) was rudely passed by two fellows in a pick-