

Bangkok Smile/s

Secrets of the Thais
from Phra Attit Road
to Sukhumvit



TART MAKEOVER

from the author of Siam Smile/s

by Hugh Watson

Vol. II

BANGKOK SMILE/S

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

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Text by Hugh Watson

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To: Barbara

CONTENTS

Note from the Author	6
Chapter 1: Vampire on Skin Whitener Aisle	17
Chapter 2: Bride-Price What Price?	22
Chapter 3: Artless Felony	33
Chapter 4: The Art of Felony 5	37
Chapter 5: Paradise Condo	45
Chapter 6: L'Amour, N'Est-Ce Pas?	51
Chapter 7: Post-Riots, Yawn	59
Chapter 8: The Bangkok Gee Gym, I	64
Chapter 9: The Bangkok Gee Gym, II	70
Chapter 10: The Peril of the Western Enterprise	75
Chapter 11: Engrossed in Modernity	85
Chapter 12: BRT!	89
Chapter 13: The Price is Wrong	96
Chapter 14: Tenacious Exporting	101
Chapter 15: Xenophobia I	107
Chapter 16: Xenophobia II	114
Chapter 17: Xenophobia III	119
Chapter 18: Xenophobes IV	126
Chapter 19: Eudemonia 24/7	131
Chapter 20: Guessing Culture from Afar	139
Chapter 21: Sugar Cane from the Mouth of an Elephant	146
Chapter 22: Angry Randy and TAT	149
Chapter 23: Buying a Car in Xenophobiastan	155
Chapter 24: Getting Out of Denial	160
Chapter 25: Tart Makeover	167
Chapter 26: The Nicest Money Can Buy	174
Chapter 27: Medical Care?	180
Chapter 28: The Beer Garden	187
Chapter 29: The Sine Qua Non for a 40th Class Reunion	192

Chapter 30: The Barbarianess	200
Chapter 31: Orderly Cinema and More	207
Chapter 32: The Zeitgeist Pii and the Future	213
Chapter 33: Hotlines	218
Chapter 34: Common Sense and Ethics	222
Chapter 35: Reality? Maha- Reality or Sub-Reality?	230
Chapter 36: The Captain Affair	236
About The Author	242

NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Assuming one has skipped *Bangkok Smile/s* Volume 1, the *Note from the Author* here will be a reiteration, an update and a nutshell. First, Volume 1 begins with a prelude of the good things in Siam and then gets into a series of concepts with which to compare cultures and aim at a big picture. This is trying to get to the whole spring roll, so to speak. Volume 2 is about the dénouement of concepts and paradigms produced in the beginning. However, sequence is loosely configured so that one, generally, can read chapters in a random-mood way. To assist, though, I will encapsulate some of the major themes.

First, the aim is to point out the amusing things for the visitor or resident in Bangkok. This is especially amazing as the entire world now is going into a mental meltdown, economics teetering, social unrest a general event, mother nature there showing the earthquakes and floods she has to pull out in order to break global monotony. Testosterone is down for males and relativism is up for world politics. Taking this all in in the sanctuary of seamy Bangkok is quite an experience. Thais quietly doing their own thing seem ready to buttress the collapses going on, and charge into the future like armadillos with pseudo Ban Ray sunglasses out to see a nuclear test. The Thais' unique tenacity to survive is wound up and ready to go. The world or at least the Asian region can stand back and learn. Thais, undaunted by a failed world, are jumping into exports and, in fact, have new market ideas for S.E. Asia. If a tsunami hits Bangkok, the roadside vendor people will grab their noodles, hop on floating picnic tables and start selling at sea. The tarts will grab old tires and soon be picking up survivors in the Ao

Thai or Chao Phraya River and looking for a bonus or two. (During severe floods in the Ekamai area, I have seen tarts with rasta-knit hats nonchalantly directing traffic up to their bare calves in rain water).

A note on the characters: the Cambridge Scholar was my colleague for a decade on all things Thai. Next is a mutual friend, Gulliver, 64 who had amazing ups and downs with Thailand ladies on a 10-year quest to find the right lovely. Then there is poor Rocco 74, US, who married a cosmetic girl and was had. Shanghai Jacob, 64, also had a cosmetic girl and did a bit better. Mr. Belfast, 48, is seeing how long his 'nice' reserve will hold out. And for the background of the Cultural Key Mistress, a special note.

When I first arrived in Bangkok years ago, I was shocked at the dirt, the heat and the squalor (June Sukhumvit) and wanted out. Day-three I marched to a travel office and asked for a changed ticket and to anywhere. Sorry, was the reply. There were sports going on and no air tickets were to be changed that summer. I was locked into Muang Thai for the three summer months. I was shocked, but the next evening, I was in a taxi and the driver pointed to a cutie on the sidewalk eating chicken soup and noodles. He jumped out, brought her over and noticing her eating, asked me if I'd like to take her to dinner. A brilliant idea. And, I must admit, it was a Dr. Zhivago moment and I could hear a symphony playing and expected the heavens to open up with rose petals.

We hit it right off, and she had a great sense of humor. I don't remember ever laughing so hard. So, day-five in Thailand I was on a jungle rice farm in the north actually tilling a field with one of those interesting but hard to use machines: a powered rice-tiller. The Cultural Key Mistress, in

addition to going up trees better than Tarzan in the movies, lived in a perfect pole hut with the big teak plank veranda, some thatch and some corrugated steel for roof. This was the full *chao nah* (farmer) experience. The parents were the salt-of-the-earth kind one finds in provinces. Poor but kind. At the same time, dinner each night was on the teak plank floor in a circle around the food. Discussion was always how much the family collectively had for a few new hits. The Mistress's brother had been bumped off for informing on some neighbor boys (trafficking heroin) and was found with five bullet holes in a garbage can in front of the elementary school. Naturally, the family knew the fellow who set up the hits and had him as number one on their list. So they had a kitty going with contributions. When a certain amount was reached, an uncle who was also a cop would carry out the deed. And a lot more. This hamlet at least was stuffed with feuds. Anyway, imagine this. Much later and off the rice paddy in Bangkok, as an official working for the Thai government, I was to give a talk to some engineers. The Mistress came along for the event and suggested I start off with "*Swasdee kap engineers took took khon*" or Hello everyone. I did what she said to about 60 engineers and a fellow near the front, the leader, in all gray-green overalls, with kinky brown hair, large black frame glasses turned around and said:

"*Ma put Thai dai!*" (A dog can speak Thai!)

I didn't get it at all but the Key Mistress did and sitting on the side gave the guy such deadly looks that at the coffee break he went over and apologized. Looking back, if I had caught it, I might have continued and said, "In fact, all dogs understand Thai fairly well and that's why I addressed you in dog, oh, I mean Thai. But now let's get on with things

and in a real language, Esperanto.”

I might add the Mistress was a patriotic *neua* (Northern) girl, was proud that her village would not allow Klang or the like to stay after sundown, spoke Northern, ate Northern and thought Northern. Her family could not eat and hear Klang at the same time so in Bangkok we had to find the Northern cafes. (‘Klang’ refers to Central Thais).

In this vein, I started Volume 1 with a brief look at a Phra Attit girl. She was around nine, right after school from a wat for slum Klang kids. She jumped up on a small cement table in a tiny park area and started to do the traditional Thai dance but, instead of graceful hand movements, she gave the north the wand and then ritually, the same to the south. One finger up as a kind of existential up-yours to the area. If, however, she had given the finger east and west as well, this would have turned a whim into a ritual and one would suspect the girl in the dark arts and maybe secretly reading Harry Potter and going to the Bangkok version of Hogwarts. The point is, the expat friend who thought the girl did not know what the finger was yesterday announced he is abandoning the country (and a Thai wife, a kid and a farm) after over ten years. His complaint is after many years no one can understand a thing he says in Thai. I told him people pull the old I-don’t-understand stuff all the time. I gave him the example of the ‘fan girl.’ I was at a Central and on a furniture floor. A girl asked what I wanted:

“*Ow alai kaaa?*” (What do you want?).

“*Mi paet lom mai?*” (Do you have fans?).

“*Alai?*” (What?)

“*Paet lom.*”

“*Alai?*”

“*Paet lom.*”

“*Oh, paaAAEet lom.*”

Now, at his point I usually just nod but have gotten tired of being voiced-over. So, I continued:

“*Baan jing yu tee nai?*” (Where are you from?)

“...Buriram.”

In Thai, I told her that *PaaaAAEEt lom* was fine for Buriram in the provinces but in Bangkok it was *paet lom*. Of course, she was astonished and didn't have the right fans to begin with. But a post note is the clerk would race back to tell the staff a Barbarian insisted she speak Thai the *farang* way! And at that point one of the Klang girls would have asked what the Barbarian asked for and the girl would do *PaaaaAAEEt lom* again and the other girl would coldly say, “You know, the Barbarian is right, this is not the way we say fan in Bangkok.” Life is no win for all of us. Actually Isan women tend to over-pronounce tones in Thai whereas Isan men will not pronounce a lot of tones at all.

I told him of another case. At the Siam Paragon supermarket, I asked a produce lady where the *heet fang* were (straw mushrooms) and she looked quizzically as I repeated the words over and over. Finally, she cocked her head and said, “*Oh, heet faaAAAang.*” And then, right there after doing the over-voice on me, turned to the head produce lady and asked exactly what I had asked, “*heet fang tee nai?*” This tedious stuff drives people right out of the country. It is an amusing and petty way to take nips at foreigners. Unfortunately, I was too tired to give the produce lady a lecture on mushroom pronunciation. Or being rude around vegetables and well-intended fruits. Anyway, the expat friend who left did not get the girl giving the finger and would never get the fans or mushrooms either.

There are several concepts in Volume 1. One is dividing