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# Very Thai

Everyday Popular Culture

Philip Cornwel-Smith text & photographs

John Goss photographs



## Very Thai: Street, Style and Society in the Kingdom

How a book by a Bangkok-based British author came to embody a shift in Thai cultural consciousness.

By **Jonathan DeHart**

Thailand has faced a public relations crisis in recent months. The May 22 coup and the recent murder of two British tourists has cast a shadow over the sunny “Land of Smiles“ image of golden temples, graceful dances and saffron robed monks carrying alms bowls.

But neither political turmoil nor idealized cultural traditions reflect the reality of daily life as it is lived by ordinary Thai citizens. Discovering what really makes the nation tick was precisely the goal of veteran Bangkok-based British journalist Philip Cornwel-Smith when he set out to write his enlightening, encyclopedic and entertaining book, *Very Thai: Everyday Popular Culture*, now in its second edition.

Drawing on a wealth of insight from experts on history, anthropology, sociology and design; and generously illustrated with colorful photographs taken by Cornwel-Smith and American photographer John Goss, the book examines everything from aesthetics to folk arts.

Most significantly, it does so without succumbing to clichés or dwelling on the seedier side of life in Thailand, as exaggerated by media and bar-girl fiction. “The aim of my book was specifically to avoid those sensationalist things and to focus on topics that didn’t get looked at seriously,” Cornwel-Smith told *The Diplomat*. “I wanted to give a refreshing look at Thailand, to explain ‘low status’ or ‘realistic’ aspects of Thai culture. Not wholly modern, not wholly traditional – these are the criteria for things in the book.”

While a book that shuns hackneyed ideas about the kingdom’s beguiling culture would unsurprisingly be of interest to foreigners, *Very Thai* struck a chord with the Thai public as well. In the years following the release of its first edition in 2004, the book came to symbolize a shift in Thai society, which was on the cusp of a cultural awakening.

“The book came out at a time when the popular culture just started to become legitimized within the broader culture,” Cornwel-Smith says. “It wasn’t counted as ‘culture’ until that point. Ideas of ‘righteousness’ and ‘prestige’ were part of the official culture. Street life didn’t really fit into that. But it’s

unambiguously a form of culture.”

Indeed, street food stalls, motorcycle taxi drivers in multi-hued jackets, cats nibbling on fruit offerings at a shrine, a dog panting in the shade next to a pile of coconut shells, a jumble of power lines sagging above a man dozing on a concrete bench just a few feet from the road where hot pink taxis and tuk-tuks (auto-rickshaws) zip by – these are the common street vignettes that *Very Thai* accounts for, in impressive detail.

And while the book begins on the street, it goes on to explore all facets of life in Thailand. It is divided into five sections: Street, Personal, Ritual, Sanuk (“fun” in Thai), and Thainess. (It is notable that an entire section is devoted to fun.) The eclectic approach was a natural choice for Cornwel-Smith who says, “I had already been looking at the culture in a pixelated way... doing a city listings magazine and putting together *Time Out Bangkok* guide.”

Through this “pixelated” view, the book manages to explore the cultural soul of the nation by examining the minutia of daily life: food on sticks, taxi altars, temple fairs, ghost stories, soap operas, beauty pageants, energy drinks.

Other mysteries of the mundane that are explored include quirkily groomed “poodle bushes,” garishly decorated tuk-tuks and trucks, fairy lights, Greco-Roman building facades, the tiny pink napkins found on restaurant tables nationwide, and meticulously coiffed “hi-society” socialites who “actively seek face, invent face, even leverage borrowed face (by borrowing gems),” Cornwel-Smith writes. The book also offers insights on beliefs close to the heart of the nation, from ever-present royal family portraits and the astrological importance of colors to magic tattoos and fortune telling.

Some folk beliefs explored in the book – certain aspects of amulet culture, mediumship and shamanic practices to name a few – still carry a whiff of taboo. But attitudes around these topics are softening, at an alarming speed in some cases.

“The transition of popular culture being accepted within Thailand happened very quickly,” Cornwel-Smith says. An example can be seen in the way tattoos have achieved a higher

degree of acceptance in society within a short period. “The social context around tattoos has really changed since the first edition of the book (launched in 2004),” Cornwel-Smith says. “Tattoos are now much more acceptable, partially due to Angelina Jolie getting one.”

Thanks to its diversity of topics, street cred, and striking design, *Very Thai* has “gone beyond its creators,” Cornwel-Smith says. “It became a source book for those working in design, products, events, theater, among other kinds of work.” Yet, the book’s reach does not end with the creative class. “They at the cutting edge put it out into culture, which has gradually made it mainstream.”

In a testament to the explosion in *soi* culture’s popularity, it now forms the basis of a popular theme park, Ploen Wan, which opened in a resort town in recent years. Geared towards Thai visitors, Ploen Wan “includes things like local transportation, old barbershops, general stores, pharmacies... ‘retro’ stuff,” Cornwel-Smith explains. This form of “retro heritage” even carries a widely known slang epithet now – “Thai Thai” – coined by Suveeranont, who points to *Very Thai* as an emblem of this sensibility.

Ploen Wan is a physical manifestation of the Thai Thai boom, but a wider following has formed around the book online, where fans are exploring its themes further. “The Internet is a major part of the national discussion around culture taking place in Thailand now,” Cornwel-Smith says.

The Very Thai website serves as a portal on the topic. It features a blog and streams social media postings that use the #verythai hashtag in Instagram, Tumblr, Twitter, and Facebook. “These are posted not just by me but by fans of the book’s subject and aesthetic. These hashtags were actually started by fans of the book.”

In some cases, the book itself has been used as a cultural artifact, having appeared in several art exhibitions in Bangkok, Chiang mai, Brussels and Barcelona. It has also been turned into a video installation, formed the basis of a mime production and has even been physically performed with as a puppet on stage, Cornwel-Smith explains. “There are so many ways in

which Very Thai has become a cultural phenomenon in its own right.”

How could a book exploring such simple aspects of a culture have such a far-reaching impact in such a short time?

Suveeranont sums it up best. He wrote in the afterword to the second edition of the book: “The reason is that it reflects a mood, appearing at a time when Thai society began to debate the nature of ‘Thainess’... Cornwel-Smith’s book thus operates at the much wider level of a *phi meuang*, or *Zeitgeist* – the ‘spirit of the age’... This book enabled Thais to appreciate that ‘very Thai’ things, which were seen as low-brow, had been part of Thainess all along.”

## The Author

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**Jonathan DeHart** is a freelance writer based in Tokyo.