DATELINE BANGKOK

FOREIGN CORRESPONDENT CLUB OF THAILAND

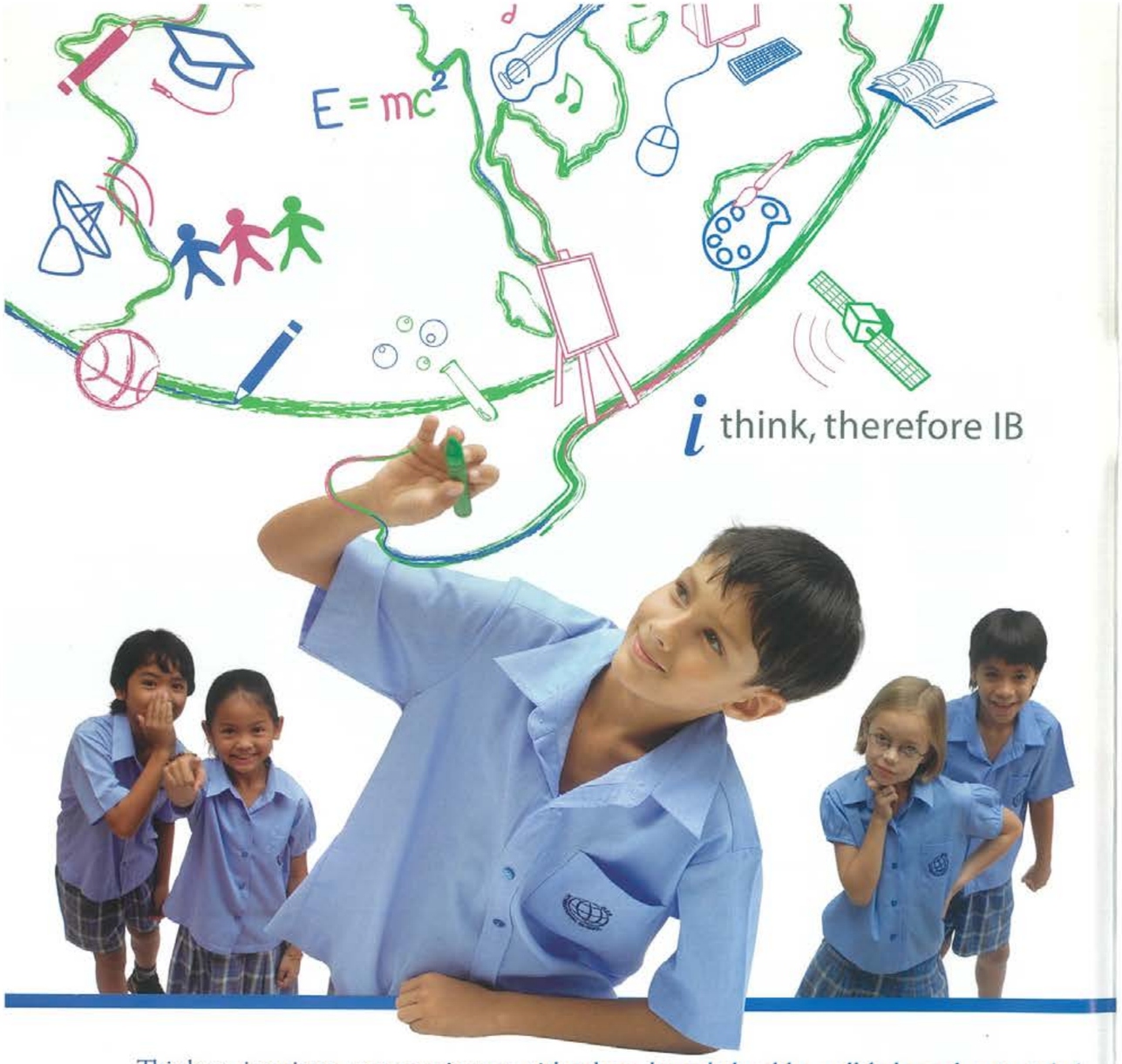
THIRD QUARTER 2006

Thailand's Silken Coup

FCCT 50th Anniversary at The Oriental

Tsunami, Revisited: InSIGHT Out!

The Day *ThaiDay* Died



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Photos: Roger Arnold

THAILAND'S SILKEN COUP

contents

Third Quarter 2006

Cover Photo: Roger Arnold

COLUMNS

Take a front line seat at world events and be part of the buzz in the region by joining the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Thailand.

Found at the heart of Asia's news and providing a hub of conviviality and professional commitment, the FCCT is a must for anyone wanting to engage in our times.

Frequent programme nights reveal and explain current affairs. Meet friends, colleagues and leading figures from the region's business, government, diplomatic and media circles at the bar. Press conferences, film nights and international receptions all happen here.

Members have special privileges: exclusive Internet access; this unique quarterly magazine for free; a weekly bulletin detailing upcoming events; insight into path-breaking photography and art, Jazz on Friday nights, special gourmet nights, and more. For street cred and sustenance in these trying times, the FCCT is the only choice.

FEEDING THE MACHINE

Dateline magazine looks at the stories behind the stories. All offerings will be considered, from articles and photo essays to letters, essays, haiku or sonnets. How you covered a story, what you think about how journalism works, or even some gossip for the Soi Whispers column – send it all in, to editor Patrick Barta (Patrick.Barta@wsj.com) or deputy editor Azhar Sukri (azharhsukri@yahoo.co.uk). Submissions are paid for with glory and bar coupons.

From the President...

By Ian Williams, President

I WAS SITTING in a seafood restaurant in Pattaya about to tackle a deep-fried sea bass when the messages and calls started arriving.

"Tanks on the streets of Bangkok," my phone flashed. I recall starring at the screen in disbelief before abandoning the meal and my startled companions and rushing to my car to race back to the capital. I worked the phone as I went, all the time thinking it would all turn out to be a false alarm, more hysterical rumour.

A large television screen was mounted at the end of Walking Street in Pattaya, near a tourist police post, and a crowd of bemused holidaymakers was crowding around watching reports about two military factions possibly coming to blows. The tourists all seemed to be on the phone, ringing home, saying, "guess what mum, there's a coup!"

Of course there were no clashes. It was bloodless, but I never expected Thailand's political crisis to come to this. Sure there were rumours, but I was skeptical about them, and had felt confident enough to head out of Bangkok for a day's scuba diving.

Just a few days earlier I'd sat down with a senior minister who had become steadily disillusioned with the Thaksin government and was worried about the danger of political violence. I had asked him about the danger of a coup. He'd told me he hoped there could still be a constitutional way out, though he expected the military might exert influence behind the scenes. He dismissed any possibility of a classic coup. Thailand had grown out of that, he said.

That's what a lot of people thought and what we all hoped.

When it came it wasn't just classic, it was, well, retro – a coup of the old school, with tanks at Government House and soldiers at TV stations, all of which abandoned their scheduled programmes and showed the same newsreels, followed by the grey military spokesman apologising for any inconvenience caused.

Now we find ourselves under military rule for the 18th time since Thailand became a constitutional monarchy in 1932.

In this issue of Dateline we have reports from correspondents describing how they covered the coup. Dominic Faulder, who's lived through a fair number of them, gives us an historical overview, while Chris Baker gives his perspective on the military takeover. We also have an essay from Craig Knowles looking at the lighter side of covering the coup with so many foreign correspondents scrambling to Bangkok for the event – and many being rather bemused by the smiles and lack of violence.

As we went to press, newly appointed Prime Minister General Surayud Chulanont was promising an eventual return to democracy. General Surayud is a man of integrity, who during his time as army chief probably did more than anybody else to professionalise the army and remove it from politics. He has said on more than one occasion that soldiers should not be involved in politics and we are confident that he will want to see elections and a return to civilian rule as soon as possible.

Deposed Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra was no friend of the media, and did a great deal during his tenure to limit press freedoms in Thailand. We have every confidence from General Surayud's statements that he recognises the importance of a free, open and critical press – freedoms that will be more important than ever in the weeks and months ahead, as he navigates the Kingdom back to democratic rule.

Thailand needs to build democratic institutions strong enough to ensure that the Kingdom's 18th coup is its last, and the media has a vital role in that process.

The coup provided a backdrop to the club's 50th anniversary lunch at the Oriental Hotel (it was also the Oriental's 130th anniversary!), and there were some remarkable insights from some of our longer serving-members. We have photos and some highlights from that event in this issue.

One newspaper that didn't report the coup was Thai Day. They'd followed political events very closely, but folded before the tanks took to the streets. It is always sad to see a newspaper go out of business, and in this edition of Dateline we have a piece written anonymously by former staff members about the last dark days of Thai Day.

We also have a memoir from Robert Kinnear, who recently returned to Mae La on the Thai-Burma border after many years away. He didn't like what he saw.

Finally, we have a photo essay about a photography project that's helping children recover from the 2004 tsunami – proof if it were needed that coup or no coup there are other abiding problems that need addressing.

EVENTS

NOVEMBER

Burmese Cartoons: Burmese cartoonists are known for their expressive power and their sense of humor – but that doesn't always endear them to the country's military junta. FCCT is pleased to present the works of two of Burma's best political cartoonists, both of whom are operating in exile: Harn Lay, a Shan artist in Thailand who works as a staff cartoonist for *Irrawaddy* Magazine; and Win Tun, also known as "Mr. Burma," who has contributed to the Bangkok Post and now posts his satirical cartoons online from New York.

DECEMBER

InSIGHT Out! Exhibition: InSIGHT Out! is a creative workshop established to help victims of the 2004 tsunami – especially children – rebuild their lives through the power of art, photography and the written word. Participants in the program work with professional photographers to produce visual and written images about their experiences and continue their healing process. The results – including an array of compelling photographs – will be on display at FCCT in December.

CLUB NEWS

FCCT Turns 50

The Foreign Correspondents Club of Thailand turns 50, and it needs your help to celebrate. To commemorate the occasion, the club will be producing a special, 50th anniversary edition of Dateline magazine. To do so, we'll need contributions from members, past and present, from across the globe. If you have a story to tell, a memory to share, or a photo to pass along, please contact Patrick Barta at patrick.barta@wsj.com. We're looking for any and every tidbit of FCCT history to compile this blockbuster edition– so don't be shy.

Pack your bags

FCCT is working with the Tourism Authority Thailand to plan a series of special Thailand-based journeys exclusively for FCCT members. The entire Kingdom is waiting to be explored: If you have ideas of places you'd like to visit under the auspices of TAT, please let us know. Email Patrick Barta at patrick.barta@wsj.com.

The Scoop on FCCT Ice Cream

FCCT has responded to the many requests to add something sweet to the menu – ice cream. Flavors include chocolate, strawberry and rum raisin, just to name a few. Ask for FCCT ice cream next time you stop in.

LETTERS

As Dateline goes to press 354 Hmong women, children and elderly have announced plans to surrender to Lao authorities from their hidden jungle camp near the tourist town, Vang Vieng, Laos. I spent two weeks with the group in June/July this year. I witnessed incredible suffering and saw only small arms with little ammunition.

The Hmong group leader, Blia Shoua Her, told me in July his group is not part of the Hmong resistance, just civilians that defend themselves when attacked by their own government. His group really wants to surrender to the UN, not the Lao Government. Safety for these refugees is essential, however, it does not solve the main problem- the leaders, and men that will remain. It just continues the cycle. They will stay and die or find new wives and make more babies. Further, the Lao secret police will continue persecuting the Hmong majority not hidden in the jungle, suspecting them of helping those in the mountains above, causing more Hmong flight to the jungle or Thailand.

Reliable sources tell me there may be no real intent to end this among some influential Hmong Americans and Hmong Thai, who may be lying to the people in the jungle, convincing them to stay. Covering this issue you may find many Hmong activist groups rightfully complaining about persecution, but unwilling to have serious discussion or follow through on getting the jungle leaders and men out safely.

Roger Arnold
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- Tesco Lotus Superstores, Star Alliance, and Natural Ville Bangkok for support of the FCCT Hackers Golf Team

SOI WHISPERS


Photo: Michael Elmore

Did Simon Montlake Kill Jon Benet? When Thai police arrested a suspect in the internationally-notorious JonBenet Ramsay murder case, veteran Bangkok journalist Simon Montlake treated it like any other story. But then he became part of the story. While attending a Thai police press conference, one reporter asked what the killer looked like. The top cop surveyed the room, finally settling on our man Montlake. Pointing to the indefatigable scribe, he said "He looks like him!" Heads turned. Montlake's pen stopped. In the end, it turned out Montlake was not the criminal – or so we currently believe. Tough Love: AP bureau chief Denis Gray had many nice things to say during the recent FCCT 50th Anniversary luncheon at the Oriental hotel. But he wasn't very kind to the Oriental's "new" wing that opened in the 1970s, pronouncing it an eyesore that overshadowed the charm of the original hotel. The Oriental's gracious manager, Kurt Wachtveitl, had his own story to tell about the new wing, conceding that it ran into trouble from the time it opened. The first big tour group canceled suddenly, he said, after an unexpected event threw Bangkok into temporary crisis. Yes, you guessed right: It was a coup.

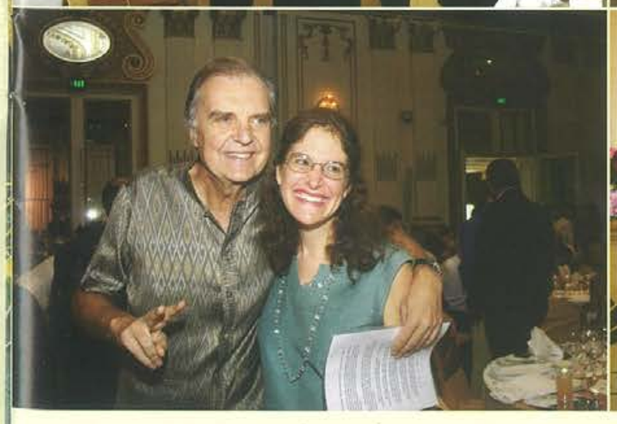
FCCT Turns 50

In 1956, Bangkok-based writer Jorges Orgibet co-founded the FCCT with a handful of friends so international correspondents could count on a congenial community of writers, intellectuals and insiders whenever they passed through Bangkok.

Fifty years later, FCCT has grown to become one of the most important foreign correspondents' clubs in Asia and by far the biggest in Southeast Asia. It has hosted ambassadors, prime ministers, Nobel Prize winners, and even the Dalai Lama. It has also been the site of a number of long nights of drinking, debating, and trouble making.

The great Oriental Hotel, a one-time home to FCCT, graciously offered to host a celebratory luncheon for the club as a gesture of recognition for its contributions to a free and vibrant press in Thailand.

On hand were some of the biggest luminaries in the annals of Southeast Asian journalism, including Associated Press bureau chief Denis Pringle, Vietnam war correspondent James Pringle, and Emmy Award-winning cameraman Derek Williams. – *Photos courtesy of Roger Arnold, Roong Pukrabpetch and the Mandarin Oriental Hotel*



Congratulations

Ever wonder what Thai journalists have to say about the foreign press corps? In the days after FCCT's 50th Anniversary party at the Oriental, esteemed *Nation* columnist **Kavi Chongkittavorn** published this column in *Kom Chad Luek*, the Nation's Thai-language paper. We only hope we can repay the respect in the future.

This year is the fiftieth anniversary of the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Thailand (FCCT). In the first 30 years of its history, Thailand was a base for reporters who came to report on the news in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. The intense Cold War politics drew people's attention and Thailand was the most convenient base for observing and reporting on the region.

You could say that that was the "Golden Age" for foreign correspondents because there was a wealth of subject matter to write about. People in the U.S. were primarily interested in the Communist threat. After that, many reporters continued to use Thailand as their base for reporting on the war in Cambodia, which lasted 14 years.

Most of the journalists stationed in Bangkok are responsible for covering news in the entire Asian region. They are supposed to be ready to report immediately on any event that happens anywhere in Asia. Sometimes they don't make it on time, though. For instance, during the latest coup, the correspondent from the London Times arrived in Bangkok two days late from working on a story in East Timor.

Sometimes when a reporter is reporting on something in one Asian country, suddenly something more urgent or interesting will happen in another country, so the reporter has to pop over to the hot spot as quickly as possible.

The activities of the FCCT are rather like a measure of the freedom of the press in Thailand. The foreign press has always been given the right to freely report on events here, but at times the Thai government has put pressure on them. For instance, two reporters from Far Eastern Economic Review were threatened with expulsion from the country because they allegedly committed lese majeste.

Normally there is no problem because society at large realizes that free reporting is good for the country, even if the majority of the news is negative. I have to compliment the foreign reporters for doing a good job of reporting on the news here over the years. There have only been a few foreign reporters who were not very good.

The FCCT headquarters is the place where reporters and diplomats often come to find out about things, or sometimes to spread news for their own benefit or the benefit of their country.

There are about 270 foreign correspondents stationed in Thailand, making it the third largest base after Hong Kong and Japan. The recent coup might even bring more journalists to Thailand. No one knows what will happen when we have the next elections in about a year from now.

In the past five years there has been more interaction between Thai and foreign journalists. Before this, the two groups didn't talk to each or cooperate much. Now they have begun to sympathize with each other and join together to fight against oppression under the Thaksin regime and to try to help each other improve the capabilities of the Thai media.

Congratulations to the FCCT and all its highly capable members.

Covering the Coup

On September 19, televisions around the world lit up with images of tanks rolling onto the streets of Bangkok. To many viewers, it could only mean one thing: A new cycle of bloodshed in Southeast Asia. It didn't turn out that way. But to many foreign correspondents in Bangkok that night, the outcome was far from clear. FCCT Dateline asked a handful of reporters how they handled one of the biggest stories in recent memory – and how they sorted fact from fiction.

Nirmal Ghosh, *The Straits Times*

I got the first call from a friend – a local journalist – at 5.30pm. He said, "this time it sounds real, check your sources." I was about to leave my apartment to catch the 6.30pm show of An Inconvenient Truth, and a friend was waiting for me at the theatre at Siam Square. I immediately called a political analyst and he confirmed that there were strong rumours, but there was also room for ambivalence because some troop movement could be explained as rotation of units for duty in the south.

I went to the theatre anyway, reaching it around 6.20, but decided that given the strength of the rumour, my friend and I should skip the movie and have dinner. Throughout dinner I networked with other sources, and the rumour kept solidifying. I

Photo: Roger Arnold

called my editor in Singapore at around 7.30pm and briefed him.

I sent an SMS to a friend in a senior position in Army Region 1 saying "Strong rumour tonight. ??" to which there was no reply – which deepened my conviction that something was on.

I got home at around 8 and wrote up a story based on the rumour, just in case. My editor opened up a front page space as standby. By then I had expanded the phone networking to include key contacts close to politicians and the military. One contact who has been through numerous coups told me "I have an uneasy feeling, this may be it."

Calls to Thai Rak Thai contacts got no reply. But another source close to Thai Rak Thai, who had met two ministers for a drink earlier that evening and spoken moments ago with Thaksin Shinawatra's people in New York, told me they were confident the rumour was a game of brinkmanship designed to provoke pro-Thaksin factions. Around 8.30pm he sent me an SMS saying "Confirmed no coup."

Famous last words indeed. I was hampered by having to stay at my workstation in my apartment because of the deadline pressure, so I couldn't go out to see for myself what was going on. But minutes later, contacts called me and said the tanks had appeared. Two sources with excellent and direct contacts told me Chidchai had been arrested. But suddenly Thaksin appeared on TV, spawning confusion. A friend in a small TV station that is anti-Thaksin called and said "I don't understand, I thought the 'good guys' had taken over, now the reports are all saying the opposite." I kept rewriting my story to reflect the reality as I knew it at the time, and kept my editor briefed every 10-15 minutes.

The confusion only lasted about 20 minutes. Soon it was clear that it was the anti-Thaksin elements who had taken over. Very reliable people said Chidchai was in custody, and it was "done." The first alerts had meanwhile started flashing out from the wires.

My editor kept the paper open as late as possible, eventually closing around 2am Bangkok time. I only got out around 3am, and took a quick trip down to Government House and saw the tanks. The next morning I went out early to get a better look. The yellow ribbons on the muzzles of the guns, and the flowers on the tanks and Humvees, reminded me of Cory Aquino. But the difference from the Philippines of the 1980s – not a single shot was fired in Bangkok – was striking. The "latte revolution" that a journalist friend quipped about – when Sondhi Limthongkul, Chamlong Srimuang et. al. turned up at the Emporium on a hot March afternoon interrupting the middle classes sipping lattes and eating trout at the Oriental's restaurant on the ground floor – had morphed into the silken coup d'etat.

> "I thought the 'good guys' had taken over, now the reports are all saying the opposite."

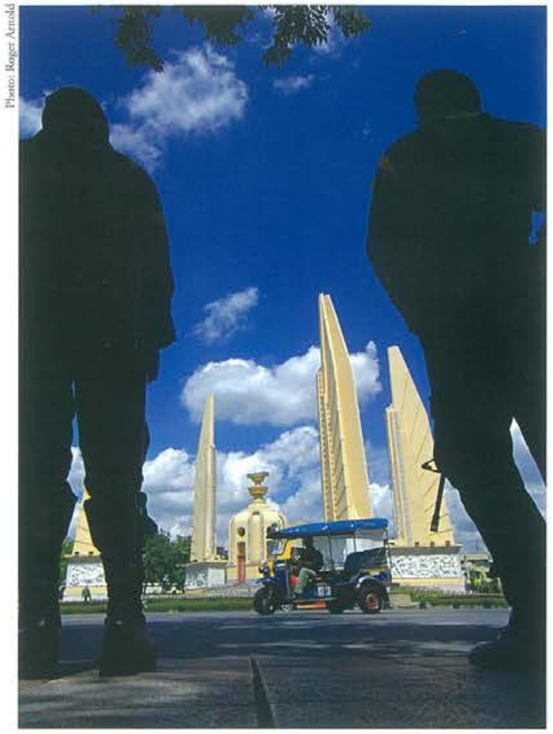


Photo: Roger Arnold

Sebastien Berger, *The Daily Telegraph*

We all know the feeling - it's late, the phone rings, there's no number on the display, and it's probably the desk. Most likely someone wants to talk about a story you've already filed, but just occasionally the wires are sending snap after snap after snap. Before you answer, there's always a hint of anticipation at the possibility of major breaking news and a pure adrenalin surge.

I was sitting on Boat Quay, on the bank of the Singapore river, making the acquaintance of a post-World Bank/IMF annual meetings vodka tonic, and believe me I needed it, when the no-number call came. "There are tanks on the streets of Bangkok," came the voice.

There was only one possible response. "Fuck," I thought, "I'm not there."

This is an occupational hazard for the regional correspondent – on one particularly memorable day two years ago the Daily Telegraph was at the crown prince of Brunei's wedding when two British backpackers were shot dead in Kanchanaburi AND the Australian embassy in Jakarta was bombed.

No, there were no more flights then in either direction.

Somehow it's even more frustrating when the story is in your home city. There were no more flights on Sept 19 either, so the next few hours were a series of phone calls, frantic efforts to get someone to the scene for some on-the-spot colour and their byline on the DT splash – thank you, Leon – and writing hard against multiple deadlines.

No sleep, straight to the airport for the first flight, and next to a flower-bedecked tank near Government House by late morning. The paper was happy, but let's face it, nothing beats being there.

Photo: Roger Arnold

Peter Collins, *The Economist*

The phone rang at about 9:15 p.m. and it was The Economist's Asia editor: "What's this on Reuters about tanks on the streets of Bangkok? You're not having a coup are you?" he asked, half-jokingly. I had to admit it was the first I had heard. I decided to dash straight over to Government House to see if there was anything to see. By the time I got there, the small numbers of soldiers and tanks outside the gates were already outnumbered by hacks and snappers. I am no military expert, but the tanks looked suspiciously clean and shiny, as though they had been brought out for a photo-opportunity rather than sent into battle.

My first hunch—soon proved wrong—was that it might not be a full-scale coup but some sort of test run, rather like the one in Paraguay in 2000, when I was covering South America for The Economist. In the Paraguayan case, junior army officers, probably egged on by senior ones, sent a few tanquetas to the parliament building, one of which blasted a hole in its facade. But impressively swift condemnations from Brazil, Argentina and the United States nipped the coup in the bud. Within hours, the army chiefs had rounded up what were now being labeled as a small band of "rebel" soldiers.

Just imagine if—as the coup rumors reached a crescendo on the evening of September 19th—the US, Indonesia and Malaysia had likewise issued firm statements asserting that coups were no longer acceptable in South-East Asia. Would at least some of the armed-forces chiefs have had second thoughts? Might that have been just enough to avert the coup? We may never know.

James Hookway, *The Wall Street Journal*

My laptop was in the repair shop. I didn't think it would matter. I was taking a few days off anyway to celebrate the birth of our second daughter, who came home from the hospital on Sept. 19, and spend some time with her older sister. It was also my wife's birthday. So, at short notice, a few friends and neighbours gathered at our apartment for a few drinks and snacks and lined up to make gurgling noises over the new baby.

The first telephone call from Maew our assistant came in the early evening. Her friends at Channel 9 had telephoned to say tanks were making their way into Bangkok. A quick flick through the television channels more or less confirmed it – lots of pictures of the royal family and martial music.

Without a laptop in hand, it was time to make my excuses and leave for the office. Some of our guests wondered why I was bailing the party. They were from the Philippines, where I had worked before and where coups and attempted coups chart their way across the country like weather systems. Still, without a computer at home I had little choice. I grabbed a plastic bag, filled it with cans of Coke and Sprite and a paper plate of nachos, and headed out to the office to file an initial story in time for our Asian deadline before preparing a longer version for the U.S. edition.

By the following morning, the nachos had turned to mush and the Coke had gone flat, and we had filed a longer story for the U.S. paper. With my ears ringing from a lack of sleep, I took the skytrain home. On the way, complete strangers stopped to say good morning to each other for the first time.

Joe Cochrane, *Newsweek*

Every Tuesday evening, I join friends at a little bar popular with the Jakarta foreign press corps. I was right in the middle of a sip of a draft beer when I got a call from a Canadian friend in Bangkok. "This is weird," he said as I walked outside to get a better reception. "All the state television stations suddenly went off the air, and there's a rumor about a military convoy in the streets – but I don't believe that."

Neither did I. Having covered Thailand's political crisis from 2005 until I moved my regional base back to Jakarta in July, I never thought a coup was a realistic possibility. In any event, I quickly sent out several text messages to journalist friends in Bangkok asking if anything was amiss. Then my Canadian friend called back, saying there were definitely tanks in the streets and the military was apparently taking over the capital.

I ran across the street to the Mandarin Oriental Hotel – after first finishing my beer at the bar – to check Internet reports in the business centre. I knew that Newsweek would be calling soon to ask for an audio Q & A about the coup and its impact to put on their website. After sprinting into the lobby, I received an SMS reply which assured me that it was really on. The message was from Jonathan Head of BBC, and simply read "COUP!"

I spent the next 90 minutes running between the business centre and hotel bar, doing phone interviews with Newsweek headquarters in New York, talking to my colleague in Hong Kong about which one of us was flying to Bangkok (he went), and telling hotel staff and guests what was happening in Thailand – in between sips of Corona beer. Some may wonder how I could even speculate about the situation on Bangkok's streets from 1,500 miles away, but my role was to provide background and analysis of the last 12 months there. I did that without hesitation. I implied quite strongly that Thaksin had it coming, and was obviously pleased no one got hurt. But the next day I was in the dumps because I wasn't in the streets of Bangkok with my colleagues, sleep-deprived and high on adrenaline.

Then a scary thought occurred: Is it time to consider a new career when you get depressed about missing a coup? No, I thought, it's not. Then I started smiling again.

Photos: Roger Arnold

Amy Kazmin, *Financial Times*

I was in Saigon and had just returned to my hotel room after dinner (soon after 9 p.m.) when I got a text message from my assistant on my mobile phone, saying "possible coup tonite." I rang her immediately, and she told me that there had been intense rumors of a coup throughout the day, and that finally, all TV channels had stopped playing the usual programming, and were showing old footage of King Bhumibol.

I was shocked and called a friend, who said, "yes, something is going down." I called my editors in London – it was just about two hours away from the FT Asian edition deadline - and told them there was possibly a military coup taking place. They immediately said, "400 word news story for the front, and 600-word analysis inside." Analysis??? I hardly knew what was going on myself.

The next few hours were mad – I had CNN on, I was checking the wires, and trying to write a rushed story. But the craziest part was my phone, which never stopped ringing. I heard from news agencies all around the world, all looking for people to analyze the coup on air. I got calls from al-Jazeera in the UK, CNN, National Public Radio, and other radio stations in the US that I hadn't heard of. I also got calls from the FT publicity department, asking if I could give interviews to other broadcast media outlets. It was as if everybody had discovered there was a country called Thailand.

I turned down all the requests for interviews because I was so frantically trying to keep pace with events and meet my own deadline for the Asian edition. I wondered also how the hell all these other media outlets had all gotten my mobile number.

Besides that, I was fielding calls from my own editors – at one point I had one editor on my mobile phone and another on my hotel room phone – and calls from friends – in Bangkok, and Vietnam, all wanting to talk about what was going on.

All the while, I was getting a series of text messages from my assistant with the latest developments. My colleague in Jakarta also kept sending me messages – some of which seemed to be fragments of info from Jonathan Head, routed through Joe Cochrane. Maybe he thought it was helpful. But I finally rang and said, 'stop texting me.'

Somehow, despite the phone either ringing or beeping with an SMS for what seemed like every two minutes, I managed to write a coherent news story, and analysis, though I kept revising, and trying to improve them, for different editions of the paper. I was still working until around 2 or 3 a.m. when I got a call from Vienna. It was an Austrian diplomat who I used to know in Delhi, asking whether I thought Austrian citizens should be evacuated.

Before I went to sleep, I called the Thai Airways 24-hour number to book myself on the first flight back to Bangkok, which was around midday. I collapsed at about 3 a.m. but was naturally too wired to sleep well. My restless sleep ended at about 6 a.m. with the beep of my phone. It was a text from a friend in Hanoi, who I had seen a couple of days before. "Crazy news about Thailand, isn't it?"

The Bloodless Coup

Few stories are as exciting as a military coup. But this time, the Thai coup yielded little drama – and a good measure of comedy – writes AsiaWorks Television producer **Craig Knowles**.

On Patong Beach in Phuket, bar owners celebrated the September 19 military overthrow by slashing drink prices and offering "coup cocktails" and "Thaksin tequilas." Tourists lined up in Bangkok to have their photos taken in front of tanks festooned with roses and yellow ribbons.

And one local newspaper even carried the headline "Coup, What Coup?"

Was anyone taking this seriously?

Well, the hordes of international TV correspondents flown in to cover the story were at least trying to. When news of the overthrow of Thaksin first broke at around 10 pm, there was one person in the AsiaWorks office. The next day there were more than 50 as network crews took up temporary residence – booking satellite feeds and going live from our balcony.

We would handle more than 200 transmissions and live feeds throughout the coup and its aftermath. Crews would arrive from Germany, Norway, Russia, Israel, Morocco, the U.S., Australia, the U.K. and elsewhere.

The office was pandemonium as correspondents on deadline scrambled to finish their scripts and queued up for their live shots as our staff struggled to keep up with all the satellite bookings being phoned in. (At one point Jeanne Hallacy appeared to be holding four telephones at once).

In fact there was probably more happening in the AsiaWorks office than on the streets of Bangkok. Bloodless coups, calm on the streets and constitutional reform do not make for good TV. The networks want riots, political chaos, looting.

Cameramen complained there was nothing to shoot aside from the friendly smiling troops on their tanks.

Correspondents scanned the wires in fruitless efforts to find a new angle on the story.

Some watched with barely disguised envy as TV screens showed the anti-government riots in Hungary; 40,000 demonstrators out on the streets, protesters clashing with police and at one point storming a television station. Now that's good TV.

But when the live shot has been booked, you have to talk about something. A reporter from one of the more tabloid networks had an interesting take on it.

"The streets of Bangkok are eerily quiet this morning. Apparently the call to revolution, the call to take up arms has gone out. The only question now is when?" This prompted a colleague to remark, "Is she at the same coup as us?"

Another correspondent urgently told the camera that businesses, shops and banks had all closed down, neglecting to mention that Sept. 20 had been declared a national holiday.

At some stage during the night, our office received a panic-stricken call from a European network asking for us to provide a producer/reporter for them.

When we pointed out that they already had a correspondent in Bangkok, the network person replied: "Yes, but he told us that

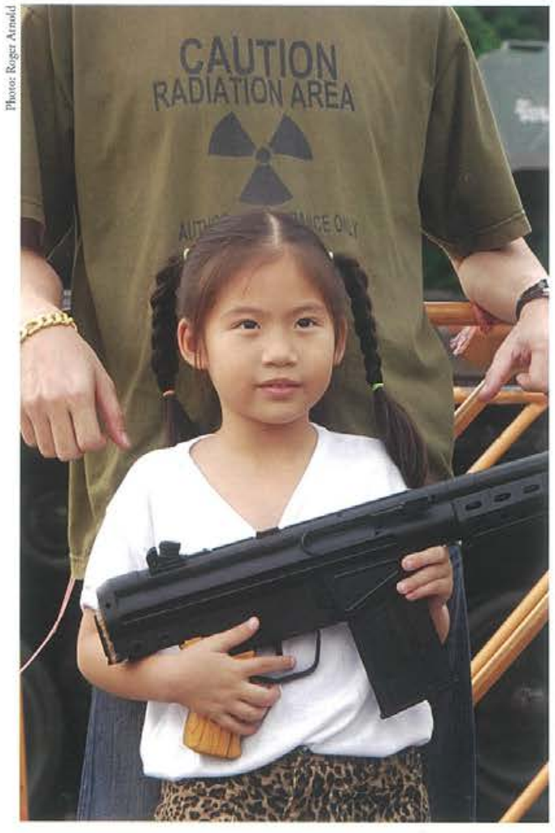


Photo: Roger Arnold

Photo: Roger Arnold

> The overthrow of the elected government by the military is being hailed as an important step forward for democracy...

because martial law is in place, he's not allowed to leave his house."

The complexities of Thailand's political system are difficult enough for those of us who live here to grasp, let alone visiting journalists, and some attempts to explain the situation verged on comical.

"The overthrow of the elected government of popular Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra by the military is being hailed as an important step forward for democracy," said one reporter.

Most visiting crews also didn't realize that confident, English-speaking people who can go live on television and provide analysis of the situation are thin on the ground in Thailand.

Subsequently, former Senator Kraisak Choonhavan, Senior Democrat Korn Chatikavanij and Chulalongkorn Professor Thitinan Pongsudhirak were in huge demand.

There was high excitement among the crews when Chulalongkorn lecturer Giles Ungpakorn announced a protest at Siam Paragon, but this quickly died down when it was realized that 200 of the 230 people there were actually journalists.

In desperation, tourism officials were hauled in front of cameras to explain that the political events would have no effect whatsoever on people visiting the Land of Smiles – do they ever say anything else? – and to urge holidaymakers not to cancel their trips.

Then there were the technical hitches: the hysterics in the Master Control Room over sound problems, the last-minute script that wouldn't print out because our system doesn't recognize Japanese characters, and my favourite – FCCT board member Dominic Faulder remaining cool and calm when parts of a lighting kit collapsed and fell on him during a live interview with CNN, though luckily not from our balcony.

To be fair, most of the visiting correspondents did an admirable and accurate job under intense pressure, but breaking TV news always has its lighter moments.

In the end, the crews left as quickly as they'd arrived, onto another story which hopefully would provide better pictures and more excitement.

The AsiaWork staff members, some of whom had been up for several days, headed home for a change of socks, some desperately needed sleep and maybe a post-coup cocktail or six. It already felt like yesterday's news.

Dinosaur Diorama

Thailand's new government says it advanced democracy by launching a military coup. But in many ways, the overthrow of an elected government turned back the clock by fifty years, writes **Chris Baker**, co-author of Thaksin: The Business of Politics in Thailand and one of Thailand's best-known political commentators.

Photo: Roger Arnold

The downward spiral towards a coup stretched over several months. The prime minister came under attack from many former supporters, yet the former leftists in his entourage stayed loyal. Though he had acquired a reputation as a ruthless authoritarian, he suddenly made a complete U-turn and began to present himself as the defender of democracy.

Opponents charged members of the government with being critical and offensive to the king to the point of lese majeste. In particular, one statement from a government leader seemed to accuse the palace of trying to overthrow the elected government. Critics also pointed to corruption scandals involving ministers and massive sums of money. As an extra complication, an American-authored work on the Thai monarchy ruffled royalist sensibilities.

In the middle of all this, elections were held and subsequently condemned as "the dirtiest" in Thai history. As the government's popularity sank, people joined angry demonstrations on the streets of Bangkok. While the army had a reputation for suppressing such demonstrations, in this case the soldiers seemed to offer protection, even encouragement. As the demonstrations called on the government to resign, fierce wrangling started over key appointments in the police and armed forces. Both sides seemed to be preparing for a coup.

Eventually the army moved. Tanks rolled on the streets. The soldiers wore coloured armbands to identify themselves to one another. In about one hour, they seized Government House, and the coup succeeded without a shot fired. A few hours later, the generals went for an audience with the king. Soon after, the king issued an order recognizing the new military government.

The coup makers promptly tore up the constitution, and assumed the right to appoint a new Cabinet. In justification they said they had been forced to carry out the coup because the former prime minister's intransigence left them with "no choice."

19 September 2006? No. Forty-nine years and three days before that. All the above is an account of the coup of 16 September 1957.

Many people have trotted out the data on the numbers of coups in Thailand, as if the coup was an everyday part of the country's politics. But the last occasion on which there was a successful coup involving tanks trundling through the capital was the Sarit coup almost half a century ago.

The coup of 1991 was a much more elegant affair, with the prime minister grabbed at gunpoint in the airport, away from public view. The tank-trundling coups of 1981 and 1985 were both failures. Tanks appeared on Bangkok streets in 1971, 1973, and 1976 but these actions were not classic coups in the sense of a military overthrow of the incumbent government. Kriangsak's successful coup of October 1977 was a quiet affair. The coup of 2006 takes us back not fifteen years, but almost fifty.

In 1957, the authoritarian prime minister who suddenly proclaimed himself as a democrat was Phibun Songkram. The coup-maker was Sarit Thanarat. The American-authored work which ruffled sensibilities was the film of The King and I. The big corruption scandal was over logs not airport scanners. The soldiers' armbands were white not yellow. But many aspects of these two incidents are eerily parallel.

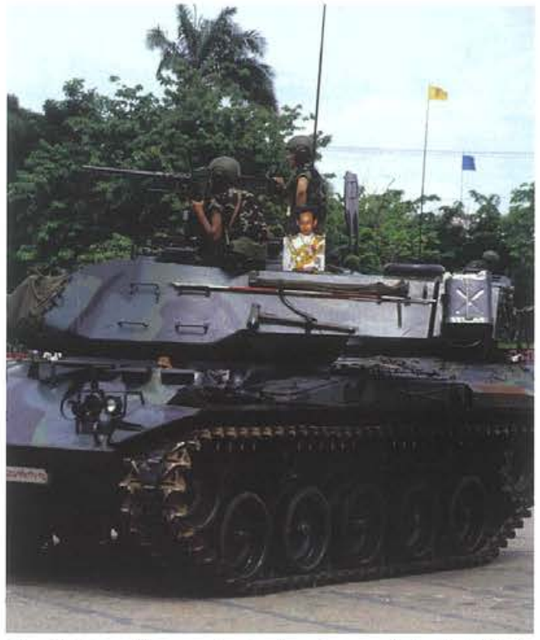
The events of September 2006 are a real classic, a piece of tradition, a throwback, a scratchy recording on technology thought obsolete, a dinosaur diorama. Thaksin, General Sonthi and all the others involved deserve congratulation for turning Thailand's political clock back by almost half a century.

One last touch. I was told that some tanks which trundled on the 19th September might be the same vehicles that made the coup in 1957. Probably they are not quite that old, more like early 1960s vintage, but have trundled on the Bangkok streets before. This is a tribute to the Royal Thai Army's maintenance section.

And in this Bangkok classic, that's the only tribute that's deserved.

When Shove Comes to Putsch

Bangkok has seen many coups, many of them formulaic at the outset, but all with different endings. What really counts is what follows, reminds former FCCT president **Dominic Faulder**.



One risk in trundling an antique tank out for a coup is that it will break down leaving 25 tons of camouflaged steel embarrassingly embedded in the tarmac. Motorists encountering such a problem are advised to treat it as a roundabout.

I spent most of 1977 traveling in South America. It was a time when juntas ruled virtually every country there, and the tension was sometimes palpable. In Argentina, I was nearly machine-gunned outside a police station and later narrowly missed being blown up by a small bomb at a bus station. In Paraguay, I had a bayonet stuck up my left nostril, and in Colombia I was dragged up an alley by a military snatch squad during a general strike in Bogota, the capital, that left an estimated 60 dead. And I wasn't even looking for trouble.

Such experiences bred in me a certain wary respect for tin hats, and were useful for spicing up essays on the "politics of the developing world" at university. But it was not until I reached Thailand that I actually 'witnessed' a coup d'etat, albeit a failed one. It was the so-called April Fool's Day Coup of 1981, and happened as I was leaving Bangkok for good. I loathed everything about the place and had packed my bags. I paid my hotel bill and prepared to leave for the bus station. It was only then that the receptionist asked me where I was going.

"We have had a revolution," she explained mysteriously. "There is no transport."

"Well you'd better check me back in then," I said in my most imperious tone, feeling a complete idiot. How on earth could one have been through a 'revolution' and not seen a thing?

In my defence, it was such a dismal little failed coup that one of its sponsors fled to Burma to save face. There may have been tanks involved, but all I ever saw close up was three soldiers slurping noodles near the Grand Palace, their guns resting against a nearby wall. I have no idea whose side they were on, but they were very polite. Normality soon returned and I went off to photograph Thingyan, the Burmese equivalent of Songkran, in Mandalay.

My farcical first encounter with a failed coup was the worst kind of preparation for my second. Having got stuck in the early-morning traffic, I arrived a little late at Royal Plaza on 'Black Monday', 9 September 1985, and started photographing the antique tanks arrayed there. I noticed their engines were running, but had no inkling of what had occurred just minutes before. No cell phones or SMS in those days.

An ashen Thai colleague suddenly grabbed me, and told me that Australian cameraman Neil Davis, a veteran of countless firefights in Cambodia and Vietnam, had been killed when tank fire was suddenly rained down on a nearby army radio station. His soundman, American Bill Latch, had been taken to hospital with critical wounds. Another Thai reporter told me later that he had entered the shattered radio station and seen at least eight corpses lying beneath curtains hastily pulled off their rails.

Forces loyal to the government were being deployed, and another round of fire soon followed despite civilian onlookers being everywhere. A woman in a taxi stuck in traffic on Samsen Road was killed by a round that went straight through a bus without hurting anybody else. She was one of at least four civilians killed that day. Others as far away as Nonthaburi market were wounded by stray rounds.

As I left the confrontation area, people were eating ice cream and queuing at banks, largely oblivious to the seriousness of the situation. Loyal generals were on television talking down the coup-makers, negotiating an exit from a possible tank battle in the administrative heart of the city. It was a dark, often surreal day for which nobody has ever been held to account.

> "Democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time..."

My third coup in Thailand was more in the vein of the first. After an excellent Malaysian curry, I was having a doze on a friend's sofa when a call came through from Cyprus. The BBC was reporting a coup in Thailand. On a Saturday? Ridiculous. I raced off to find that the few tanks briefly rolled out had already returned to barracks. Embarrassing shades of 1981 here. I feared another invisible Thai revolution under my nose.

There had indeed been a coup, accomplished by the simple expedient of hijacking most of the cabinet as its C130 aircraft taxied for a flight north to a royal audience. Some soldiers in rather flea-beaten combat fatigues had sealed off Government House as well as the streets surrounding ousted Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhavan's home. Apart from some strange anti-aircraft guns, no real military hardware was on display after this blood-free affair.

A very old royal portrait reminds that this picture was taken in 1985 and not 2006.

Soldiers outside government house wave to the press after Thailand's last successful coup in February 1991.

The story I filed that evening made a good splash as the foreign lead in London's Independent on Sunday. What made it truly remarkable was that a far bigger foreign story was going down in the Middle-East: the actual land invasion of Kuwait by allied forces in the first Gulf War. Since details were subject to a complete news embargo until after press time in Europe, Thailand's little bump along the road to democracy, far from being ignored as a trivial sideshow, ended up with maximum exposure. There was simply no bigger story to actually report on that historic day. Another 24 hours, and it would have been the coup that nobody abroad even noticed.

Having become something of a connoisseur of recent Thai coups, I have to say that the latest was probably the smoothest. It had some political gravitas in terms of not simply being about selfish military factions jostling for power; nobody was hurt; the new airport still opened, after a fashion, on time; and the yellow ribbons and roses were certainly nice touches. As coups go, I would rate it pretty warm and fuzzy.

But there is no room for complacency. The bloodiest confrontations in recent Thai history were in October of both 1973 and 1976 and May 1992. Hundreds died when the military here clashed with the very people it exists to protect. I covered the aftermath of the military takeover in Burma in September 1988, and the clash between forces loyal to Prince Norodom Ranariddh and Hun Sen in July 1997 when civilian-military relations also went seriously awry. It was all very ugly stuff.

"Democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time," remarked Winston Churchill. We all know the quote, but it doesn't allude directly to democracy's single greatest gift: a mechanism for the peaceful transfer of power whenever needed. We can only hope Thailand's generals leave as silkily as they came in.

Blast From the Past

The last time the military arrived in Bangkok, the scene on the streets – and the outcome – was much different, writes FCCT member Phil Ward.

The author, in much younger days.

What started as a trip to a local bar for a friendly Brazil-England football game ended with a rather loud, unexpected bang. On the way back to my apartment, the taxi driver was unable to return by the normal routes. Something was obviously wrong.

The following morning I turned on the radio (BBC World Service) as I prepared to go to work and heard about all the problems and that schools were shut.

I spent that day wandering around the area armed with a standard 35 mm point-and-shoot camera. People were in a state of shock. During the day, barricades appeared, restricting people's movements. People were talking to the soldiers, who were all from remote border areas, and as the day wore on, soldiers came and went and protesters gathered. Motorcyclists revved up to the barricades before roaring away.

Thais warned me not to be around at about 11 p.m. as this was when something might happen. I sat down on the lottery office steps and watched the two sides maneuvering – soldiers on the left, building a taller barbed-wire defense, and students on the right, waving Thai flags and pictures of His Majesty the King.

All of a sudden, buses began to arrive, which made the soldiers very nervous. I'm still not sure why, but shots were fired, and buses started going through the razor-wire barricades. As the wire wrapped itself around the wheels and axles, some buses were spinning their wheels to try to keep moving. Some drove in reverse.

The troops retreated back towards the Democracy Monument, but they kept shooting, some into the air, others, who knows where. A few buses had smashed into trees – obviously because of the gunfire. Thais were grabbing me to take photos, including pictures of people who had been shot near the Royal Hotel. It seemed people feared another Tianamen Square in which people outside of Thailand wouldn't know what had happened. There was a total news blackout.

Some protesters turned into vandals and looters. I wandered to Khao San Road, but everything was boarded up, so I made my way to Rajadamnoen towards the Democracy Monument. No protesters were in sight at that time – only snipers, whose bullets could be easily seen as they fired randomly along the sidewalk.

I made my way back to the lottery office; soon the tax office would be set on fire. I eventually laid down on a bag of cement near a destroyed police box and watched the flames dance into the night sky. The sound – and the heat—were amazing even from far away. Around dawn, a heavy-caliber machine gun started firing into the burning building. This was the start of the army's approach to capture the area. And it was time for me to make a very hasty retreat back to my apartment for a very welcome shower.

Later in the day, I returned to the area of Rajadamnoen road. All approaches were blocked by roadblocks. They weren't letting people through but I told them I was staying on Khao San Road so they let me through. I was relatively free to roam around taking photographs.

That evening, I found myself in the only soi around that was selling food, so I sat there with friends listening to BBC World Service radio. There were many Thais in the soi — protesters, soldiers, and various groups of plain-clothes police. It was almost a neutral soi. All Thais were very interested in hearing any news whatsoever. Throughout the day and night there was more gunfire.

Early the following morning, after the King had ordered calm, I rode my motorcycle towards Ramkampheng University. The curfew was lifted at 4 a.m. and I was very nervous approaching road blocks in the darkness. I'm sure the soldiers were nervous, too, seeing motorcycles approaching them. Everywhere you looked, the roads were littered with anything that was government-owned. I even saw a post box still attached to a huge lump of concrete lying in the middle of the road. I didn't see any private property damage.

Obviously the more recent coup was much different – no bloodshed, no violence in the streets. But the events of 1992 serve as a reminder that bad things can, indeed, happen in Thailand. During those nervous days, I witnessed Thai people using extreme violence. But I also witnessed extreme patience, kindness, tolerance -- and a deep feeling of love and respect for the King.

It Wasn't So Long Ago…

Unhappy Returns

FCCT member **Robert Kinnear** recently returned to visit the Thai-Burma border, a place where he once worked in one of Asia's most challenging refugee camps – Mae La. Unfortunately, it wasn't a happy reunion.

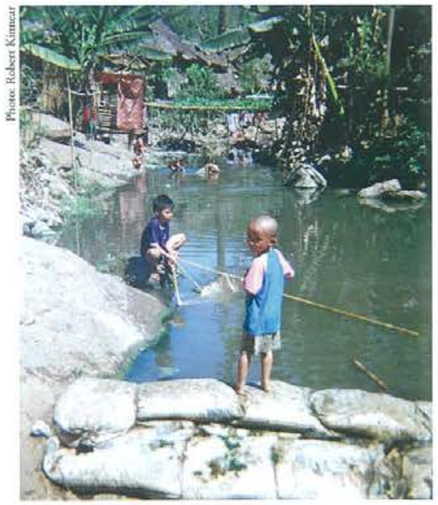


Photo: Robert Kinnear

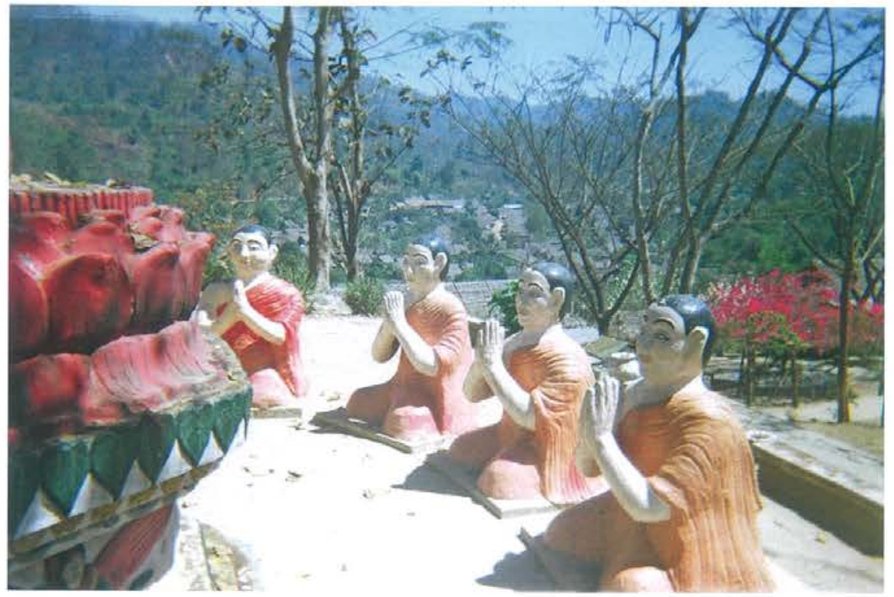
On the road of life you need to keep concentrating on the jungle and potholes ahead. But it is interesting occasionally to look over your shoulder when there is a pause in the game. Or is it "paws" of the wild ones trying to tear your heart out? Is that a low shadow I see moving behind the variegated foliage? Of course not, it's just the schizophrenic ranting of a man who has spent 26 years too long in the noonday global warming rays. Ha. May your throwaway water bottle disintegrate before I do.

In 1982 I had my first taste, actually, my first smell, of refugee camps on the Laos and Kampuchea borders while accompanying a Canadian immigration official in Southeast Asia. This is when I learned not to be a spectator to others people's misfortune – but instead to try to do something about it. A monk in one of the camps asked sadly, "when will we be going home?" Well, that's just about as leveling as you can get when all I wanted to do at the time was have a wee touristy peak inside a refugee camp. How would I know when they could leave – I was heading off to Angola in a few weeks for some serious oil business.

But balding Midge Ure – the man behind the microphone in the band Ultravox -- put on a pretty inspiring show back in '85 that touched all those whose hearts were still beating, including my own, and in the process helped me make a decision on the next phase of my life those two decadent decades ago. I duly got trained in Water Engineering for Developing Countries and off I went to save the world, auger and water testing kit in hand, well, in Toyota Land Cruiser actually. And believe or not, I was soon off to Kampuchea in 1987 to see if the monk was safely back in his bomb crater.

A couple of years later I was poking about the Thai-Burma border on a guided tour of the area's very own Karen Killing Fields, with scenes out of any Sylvester Stallone movie. In fact, they had a poster of him in glistening bare-body combat attire in one of the KNU guard huts, while wholesale logging left the surrounding landscape looking like the one in The Adventures of Rocky and Bullwinkle.

Back in London, when there was still a Fleet Street around, I plodded over the pre-Internet pavement without a care of having my eyes poked out or slipping down a water gully and decapitating myself on a low-slung electric wire and into offices of various rags. I achieved a great success by selling a grand total of one pic. Who cares about slimy waterholes, and busy Cambodia, as it was by then? No one was really interested in the Burma struggle, either. Not enough blood, I guess, or so they thought. Right on, I figured.



Back to water engineering for me, where another skill set could be put to use.

But the local militias kept coming over the hills, burning and looting the poorly-protected camps. So in 1995 the powers-that-be decided to centralize several camps at MaeLa, increasing its population from around 6,000 to nearly 30,000, and I returned. They needed more hand-dug wells, latrine pits and Cholera Camp hospital facilities complete with VIP toilets. Not your bus-to-Mae Sot variety, but Ventilated Improved Latrine Pits designed to keep the flies out and the smell in. These were my responsibility. I was to install them at the nearly-completed hospital and then have the design copied as the new refugees arrived.

Doing what I could in the time available, I then left plans for the protection and storage of the sweet water from the hills. The hand-dug wells took water from the less-than-pure river gravel beds and could only provide water for washing, or maybe cooking if very well-boiled. And then I departed, while the cholera season was still in full aromatic swing.

A recent visit to MaeLa, now with a population of 50,000 to 60,000, shows great stress on the environment – not to mention the refugees. The pit latrines are supported by crossed logs and left uncovered to give easy access to the feeding flies. The water sources, meanwhile, are heavily used and many needed upgrading, with drainage on one actually running uphill. Now, we all know water runs uphill in refugee camps – along with a certain sticky brown substance.

"Please come and teach us Water Engineering," beseeched the ever-so-soft refugee teacher, softer than those shadows creaking about in the undergrowth. The hospital is having cash thrown at it by NGOs and others so that it can increase its beds from 80 to 100, with a hot tin roof and concrete floors. But have you ever been in a tin can when it rains – never mind when you're sick? I lived in one in the Outer Hebrides, and the rain along the west coast of Scotland can hold its own against any tropical storm. At least, that's what we tell the English to stop them coming to spoil the scenery. Anyway, those tin roofs really do rattle. And what a lovely hue of green is the river that the refugee kids fish in.

VIP pit latrines and water sources are not expensive compared to, say, a UN administrator's salary of $75,000 unaccompanied or $80,000 accompanied, as recently advertised in the local press. They're also not expensive compared to the price of the odd Toyota Land Cruiser, for that matter. I, for one, like flushing my toilet every morning and not having to smell the stench of months of rotting excrement, or fighting the buzzing flies that have just come from off my face as I clean my toothbrush under the running tap. Hose all that down with liquid tile cleaner for a healthy chemical aroma. What shall I do today then? Ah, check my email first and then have another coffee.

So maybe it's better to not look back, especially after 11 years. You might be disappointed. And if you do go back for a bit of spectator sport, at least get out the blow pipe – and look for a target.

InSIGHT Out!

Mellysa, 13-year old girl, Barak Sibreh, a camp for families displaced by the tsunami in Banda Aceh, Indonesia.

The tsunami came to my village and destroyed my house; it is only a ruin now. So we moved into the barracks and we still live here now. Even though I live in the barracks, I feel happy because I have made lots of friends.

This is part of my community. There is a woman washing cooking utensils in front of her home and behind her there are some things, like drying clothes and bath soap. Our environment in the barracks is not so good because it is overcrowded, which makes it a noisy and uncomfortable place. There are still many people that need homes. Many people stay in the barracks because their homes have not been built yet.

In the months following the 2004 tsunami, journalists and victims joined together to deal with the aftermath. One result is InSIGHT Out!, a unique creative photography and storytelling project designed to give tsunami-affected youth a chance to turn the table on media coverage and document their communities with their own images and words.

During the past year, 144 children and teenagers ages 8 to 18 in Banda Aceh and southern Thailand teamed up with professional journalists and local NGO partners in a series of workshops inspiring creativity and leadership-building in the post-tsunami healing process.

The workshops in Khao Lak encouraged exchanges between youth from Buddhist, Muslim and indigenous Moken communities as well as children of migrant workers from Burma. The groups in Banda Aceh are living in temporary camps and the Al-Aziziyah school for orphans.

The project is supported by the Open Society Institute, UNICEF, local donors and funding from Steinfurt, Germany through the Germany Embassy in Bangkok. Local NGO partners include Children's Media Center, Banda Aceh, the Baan Ban Muang School, Grassroots Human Rights and Education, the Mercy Center/HDF, Foundation for Children and Duang Prateep Foundation.

Salahul Bain, 12-year old boy, Al-Aziziyah boarding school for children affected by the conflict and tsunami, Banda Aceh, Indonesia.

Join us to welcome a special delegation of Youth Ambassadors from Khao Lak who will visit Bangkok for the first time to share their compelling stories during the opening of the InSIGHT Out! exhibition on Friday, 8 December, 18.30 hrs at the FCCT, traditional Burmese and Thai food and refreshments will be served. Come along to support the youth! For more information, go to: www.insightout-project.org.

Prinya Varak, 12-year old boy, Tung Wah Village, indigenous Moken village that was entirely displaced by the tsunami, Phang-Nga, Thailand

My name is Tik. I live in Phan-Nga province. My home was destroyed by the tsunami but we did not lose as many people as in Aceh. I heard from someone that there are many fish in Indonesia, not like in Thailand. We don't have many fish here anymore. Can I go fishing in your country?

Excerpt from postcard send to InSIGHT Out! Aceh. This photo was featured in the Portfolio section of *New Arrivals* Magazine

Win Maw, 10-year old girl, Temporary Shelter behind Ban Nieng Market, Phang-Nga, Thailand

The teachers divided us into groups. I was in a group called Superstar. I chose to do a story about Burmese make up, it's called Tanatka. I love taking photos. I had a lot of fun doing it and the teachers were very kind. When I grow up I want to be a photographer.

This photo was the winner of a reader's competition in the Thai edition of The National Geographic magazine.

Kapkaew Leembumrung, 11-year old girl, Baan Nai Rai, Thai Muslim community destroyed by the tsunami, Phang-Nga, Thailand

Boat 813 was thrown on to dry land by the tsunami. Many visitors come to see the boat and wonder how a wave could wash such a big boat ashore. That's why they kept the boat where it landed.

Nurfata, 15-year old boy, Al-Aziziyah boarding school for children affected by the conflict and tsunami in Banda Aceh, Indonesia.

When my parents were alive I was very happy. After my parents died I became very sad. Now I live in a boarding school. I feel happy but sometimes I remember my past, and I become sad because there is nobody looking after me. Many of my friends hate me because I always forbid them from doing wrong things such as smoking. I do not like to see someone who breaks the rules. This is a boy in my boarding school. When students break the rules they get their head shaved.

Zulkarnaini, 13 years old, Al Aziziyah boarding school, Banda Aceh, Indonesia.

Zamzami, 15 years old, Al Aziziyah boarding school, Banda Aceh, Indonesia.

The Day *ThaiDay* Died

A little more than a year ago, the *International Herald Tribune* and Thai media magnate Sondhi Limthongkul shook up the local media scene when they announced plans to print a daily eight-page, English-language insert of Thailand news. *ThaiDay* promised to be a hard-hitting, independent new voice in the Thai press. But the paper's achievements were overshadowed by the escalating public battle between Sondhi and Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, and the paper's finances remained in doubt. In late August, *ThaiDay* finally bit the dust. A group of *ThaiDay* staffers – who asked to remain anonymous – offers an inside account of the Last Days of *ThaiDay*.

A week before ThaiDay died, staff members received a seemingly innocuous two-line email: "Pls be informed that there will be a meeting with K. Sondhi and ThaiDay team on Monday, August 28 at 11.00 a.m. The meeting place is Thai Day dept. (4th floor)."

Hmmm… what could this be about? Were we finally to receive the salary reviews we had been promised? Was the paper expanding to 12 pages? Or perhaps Sondhi finally wanted to offer the slightest bit of encouragement to his demoralized staff?"

Alas, we didn't have to wait a week to find out. We got to read the news the next day along with the rest of Thailand in the Bangkok Post, which carried an AP story headlined: "ThaiDay to close due to financial problems."

Ok, so nobody was surprised. But the lack of communication between management and staff characterized a start-up paper with much promise but no support from a company whose major decisions were all made by one man preoccupied with toppling the prime minister.

The problems rose to the surface on July 1 of this year, when nobody received a paycheck for June. To be fair, we did receive advance warning. On June 29, we received a one-line email from the anonymous "HR Dept" that said our salary would be transferred to our accounts "by next week." A week later, that became July 10. That day came and went with no cash. Finally, a meeting with K. Sondhi was scheduled for the 12th.

By this point, mind you, the staff was fully freaking out. Everyone knew what had happened to the folks at Asia Times, Sondhi's failed media vehicle of the 1990s. And most of us expected the paper to fold at some point due to the near comical management; we just didn't expect it to go under so quickly.

Those on staff who could afford to do so quickly submitted their resignations. Those utterly dependent on that cash began plotting revenge. Already we were assessing which computers would be the most valuable to steal, and concocted the best ways to haul out the heavy equipment. The winning plan, we concluded over large quantities of Sangsom, was to lower the massive laser printers off the 4th floor balcony via an intricate rope and pulley system into a waiting pick-up truck. Somehow that made the most sense, though we weren't sure if anyone knew how to tie a proper knot.

The meeting with Sondhi on July 12 proved strangely reassuring. In typical fashion, he stormed into the room and bluntly told us the bottom line: If Thaksin remained in power, the paper would fold by September. Even though unidentified assassins kept peppering his house with bullets, Sondhi told us, he would still find time out of his busy schedule to carry millions of baht in cash to local banks to make sure that we could still get paid. Gee, thanks.

After the meeting, everyone took a breath of fresh air. The paper was over. Most everyone knew that Thaksin would definitely still be around come September, unless he was assassinated – a prospect that suddenly seemed disgustingly plausible.

With the ship sinking so quickly, many clamored to get off. Time was spent writing cover letters and cleaning up resumes. The starting time, which had been 9:30 a.m. all those months ago, was now closer to mid-afternoon. Unemployment was looming. A typical day was characterized by a roller coaster of emotions.

On the one hand, most people were happy it was all about over. The six-day weeks, the power struggles in an office where incompetent people were never fired, the frustration of not having enough funds to report outside of Bangkok or even hire better journalists – as well as the constant speculation over how the company would screw us – all took an enormous toll.

On the other hand, it was depressing that such a promising venture was so mismanaged. In an age when newspapers everywhere are dying, to put in such a flawed effort is a shame.

For the first three months, the paper effectively had no editor. This and other problems were directed to Sondhi's secretary, who told the staff in an email that "nothing is perfect and nobody is either. If there is anything the company cannot satisfy you, please don't compare with other companies. Please take it as 'Thaiday's way' because this is a basic acceptance leading to respect instead of offending because the company can never reach all your expectation and it is not the company's mission."

Talented staff members, aware that readers needed a reason to pick up ThaiDay in addition to the Post and Nation, floated many ideas during the 15 months, including revamping the commentary page, getting rid of translations, hiring more qualified reporters, redesigning the website, offering a complete archive, developing an edgier, more uniform voice, and writing in-depth reports from outside Bangkok. But the product only changed marginally, and no reporters were hired during the past year. New ideas were ignored or shot down. Many nights were spent lamenting what could have been, and then becoming angry at Sondhi for wasting an opportunity.

As September neared, we all wondered how Sondhi would spin the paper's end. The ensuing news articles announcing ThaiDay's demise all made that clear. Sondhi was doing a favor for the New York Times Company, which owns the International Herald Tribune, he claimed. He selflessly decided to end the partnership in order to save the NYT and IHT any trouble that might come from his languishing campaign against Thaksin.

The David vs. Goliath storyline may make for good copy, but it's nowhere near the truth. If Sondhi cared at all about the IHT, why didn't he end the agreement at the peak of the protests six months ago, when he made a daily routine of saying crazy things to thousands of people? The reason is much simpler. Sondhi dropped the ball right from the start.

Most competent staff members gave the paper 18 months right from the paper's launch in June 2005, before Sondhi transformed from a publisher into a firebrand. The paper's end only came when he could no longer pay his employees, and the staff collectively started looking for new work.

To his credit, Sondhi never interfered in the paper's editorial content, aside from the bizarre commentaries on Page 4. But he took the hands-off concept just a little too far. Now most of the staff is either working new jobs, or looking for work. All wonder the same thing: Will we get paid compensation? There is some hope: everyone was paid for August, albeit a little late. At the time of writing, he still owes money to some staff members as much as three months in severance pay. We are supposed to get the las installment on January 1. But for most who worked at the Manager Group's scenic office at Baan Phra Arthit, seeing is believing.

Fungi Town

By Bangkok Chowhound

In December 2001, the Chinese government declared that a dusty ethnically Tibetan town in southwestern Yunnan province was the inspiration for British novelist James Hilton's Himalayan utopia in The Lost Horizon. Ignoring the fact that Hilton never visited the Himalayas and probably never climbed a mountain in his life, the Chinese authorities decided that Zhongdian would hence be called Shangri-la – or Xiangge lila in Mandarin.

Obviously, tourism – rather than feudal politics, dynastic changes and battling warlords – is what prompted the Chinese government to give Zhongdian (which the locals still use) a sexier name. A recent visit to Shangri-la, however, proved that it was anything but.

Yes, the surroundings were bucolic – majestic mountains ringed by swirling clouds, lush meadows cut through by clear streams, and white stupas festooned with prayer flags in primary colors. But Shangri-la's "Old Town" turned out to be a maze of souvenir shops hawking fake pashmina shawls, fake jade bracelets, fake ethnic clothing, and fluffy model yaks. Oh, and there were also giant yak brushes which my companion proposed that we buy as a cat toy. I declined.

When we first arrived, the manager at our hotel – an immaculately dressed native of Shanghai – urged us to visit the Old Town at night. "At seven o'clock, the Tibetans gather around the square and dance. It's their tradition," she said with almost wonder in her voice.

Indeed, they did dance, though probably not out of tradition. Trying to distract attention from the steamroller that is Han Chinese hegemony, the Chinese government seems to have developed a penchant for portraying its ethnic minorities as a bunch of dancing and singing savants dressed in ethnic costumes made of polyester satin and elastic trimming. At seven on the dot, music began blaring and a few old biddies hobbled into the square, assembling in a circle before commencing to shuffle and wave their arms. I did enjoy watching the town drunk – who mysteriously wore a pair of dingy yellow gloves – inadvertently smack a few tourists with his exaggerated arm movements.

So here's a modest proposal, in line with the Chinese tradition of assigning new names to towns and cities. Instead of Shangri-la, which it clearly is not, Zhongdian should be called Fungi Town. Trust me, it sounds better in Mandarin.

That's because we had our first taste of Yunnan's exquisite wild mushrooms in Zhongdian. During a lunch with the glamorous hotel manager, we were presented a dish composed of meaty chunks of a pale brown mushroom stir-fried with scallions and peppers. "Ah yes, Yunnan is very famous for its mushrooms," she said casually as I dug in.

Confession: I've had dried morels, porcinis and chanterelles, and sauce flecked with miniscule bits of truffle, but I've never had fresh wild mushrooms. The cult of wild fungi is a fascinating, underground existence with an impressive range of adherents, including stout Russian babushkas solemnly marching into white birch forests in summer, armed with buckets and generations-worth of knowledge of the best spots for crepes and saffron milk caps. It also includes aging American hippies and fanatical foodies in the Pacific Northwest fiercely protecting their spots for morsels. And of course, there's the venerable Italian or French farmer with his truffle-smelling hog (though dogs are often used these days because they don't try to gobble the truffles like pigs do).

So the first taste of Yunnan's famous fungi: surprisingly fragrant and delicately nutty, almost like toasted almonds. I realized I've been cheating my whole life, eating cultivated mushrooms, those perfectly shaped, plastic-wrapped imposters. In fact, cultivated and wild mushrooms have as much in common as a fine Bordeaux and wine-in-a-box. Watching me devour the mushroom dish pretty much single-handedly, the hotel manager commented with a mixture of amusement and faint disapproval of my gluttony: "I see you like mushrooms."

Like them I did. In fact, for the remainder of the trip, I tried to eat at least one mushroom dish at every meal. Sautéed as a side dish for my breakfast omelet; stir-fried with thick wheat noodles for lunch; and then stir-fried again for dinner, but with Yunnan's famous ham. And each time, they tasted different: smoky and earthy in one dish, elusively savory and elegant in another. My companion was a bit concerned about my newfound, almost religious zeal for mushrooms and began ushering me along whenever I spotted some woman squatting on the sidewalk next to a dingy cloth spread with the dirt-encrusted delights.

To be fair, Zhongdian is not the only place in Yunnan that has a fine array of fungi available. Of the world's 2,000 species of edible mushrooms, more than 600 grow in Yunnan, including the Matsutake, for which some Japanese would apparently be happy to hand over their first-born in exchange. In the schlocky tourist town of Lijiang, I tasted a dish composed of fiddleheads, Yunnan ham and wild mushrooms, and then silently forgave the town for its kitschy horrors.

To my regret, I never quite pinned down the names of all the mushrooms, probably because my mouth was stuffed with them whenever a waitress would come by. During a walk in the pine forests outside of Zhongdian, we encountered a man with a pail filled with mushrooms and I made a stab at finding out what they were called. Gesturing with a half-smoked cigarette, he said, "Why the red ones are called red, and the green ones are called green," and then sauntered off.

To pick some of the best mushrooms in Bangkok, go to the "Or Tor Kor" market across from JJ market on Kampangpet Rd. Take the subway to Kampangpet station; it's nearby. Or, go by BTS to the Sapan-kwai station, then walk along Paholyothin Rd to JJ market and turn left at the junction to Kampangpet Rd. The market will be on your left hand side. If you get lost, call: 02 279 2080 – 9.

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