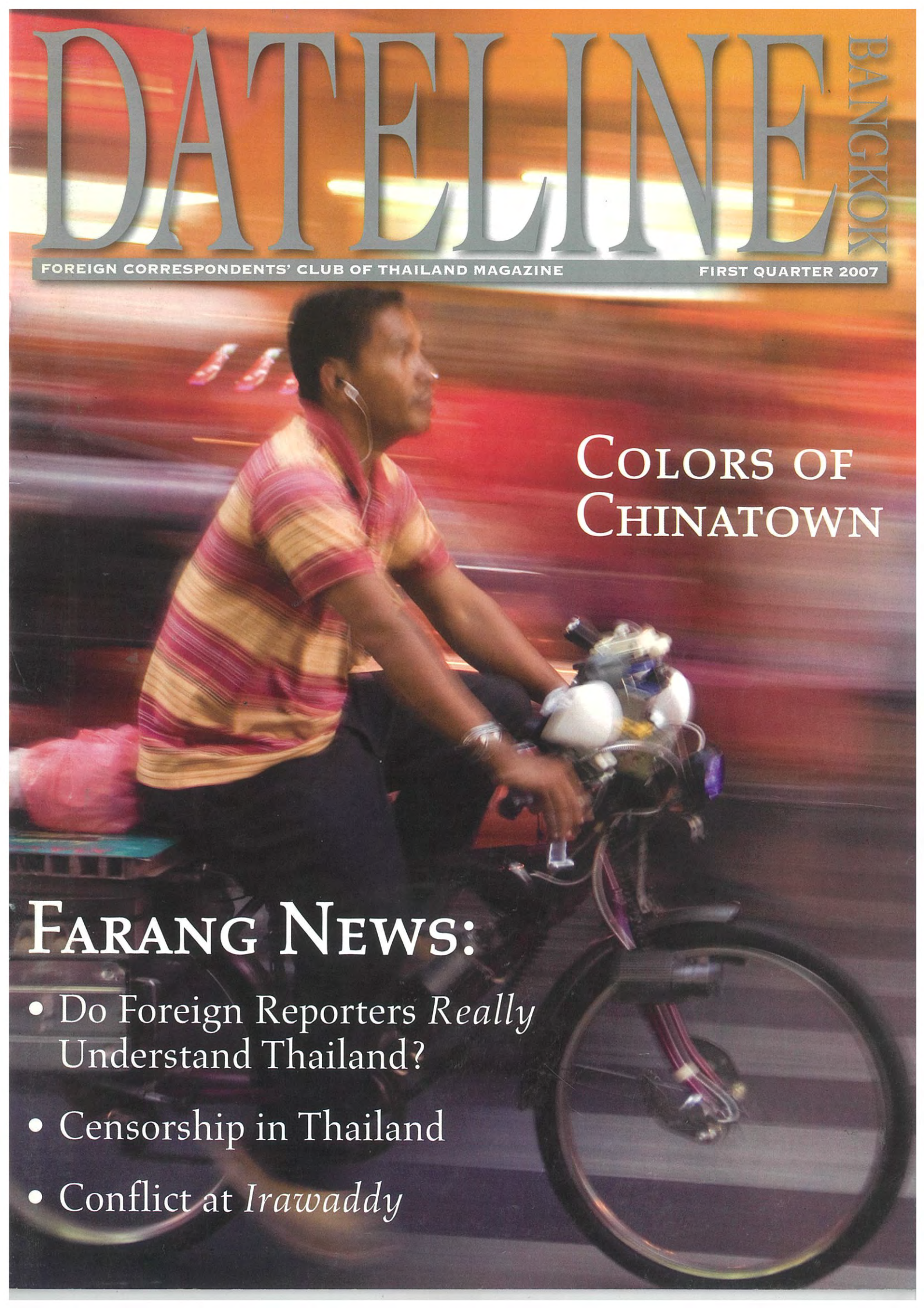


DATELINE

A man in a striped shirt is riding a motorcycle through a city street at night. The background is blurred with streaks of light, suggesting motion. The man is wearing earbuds and has a pink bag on the back of his seat. The motorcycle has a white fuel tank and a purple headlight.

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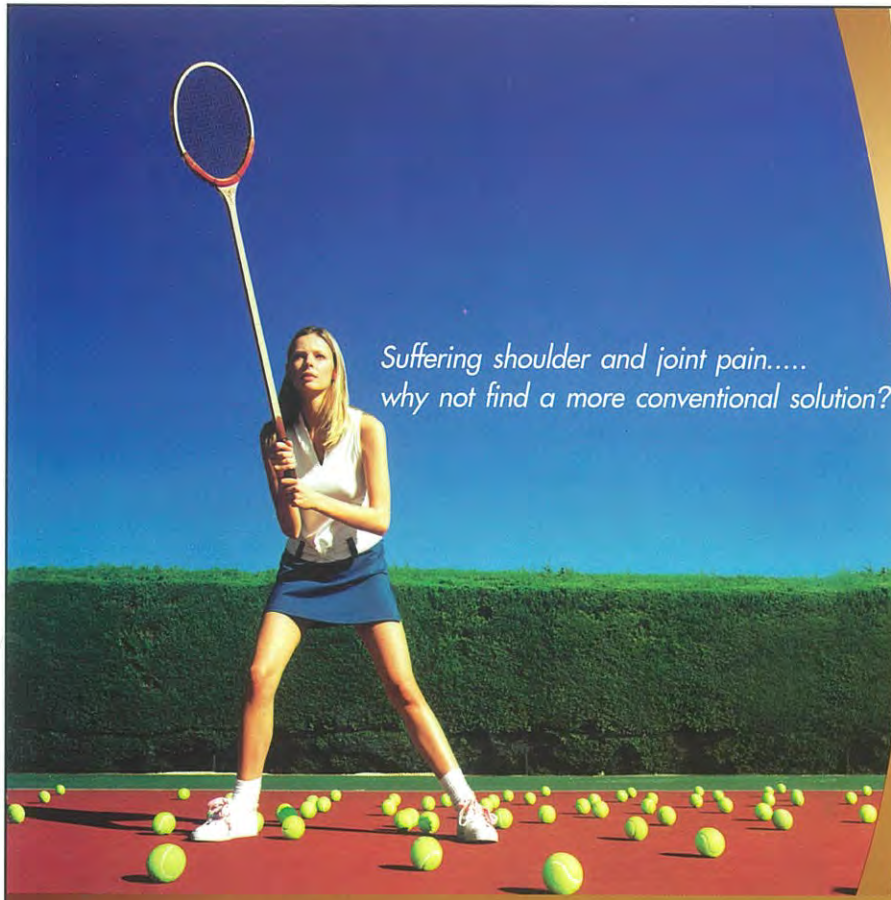
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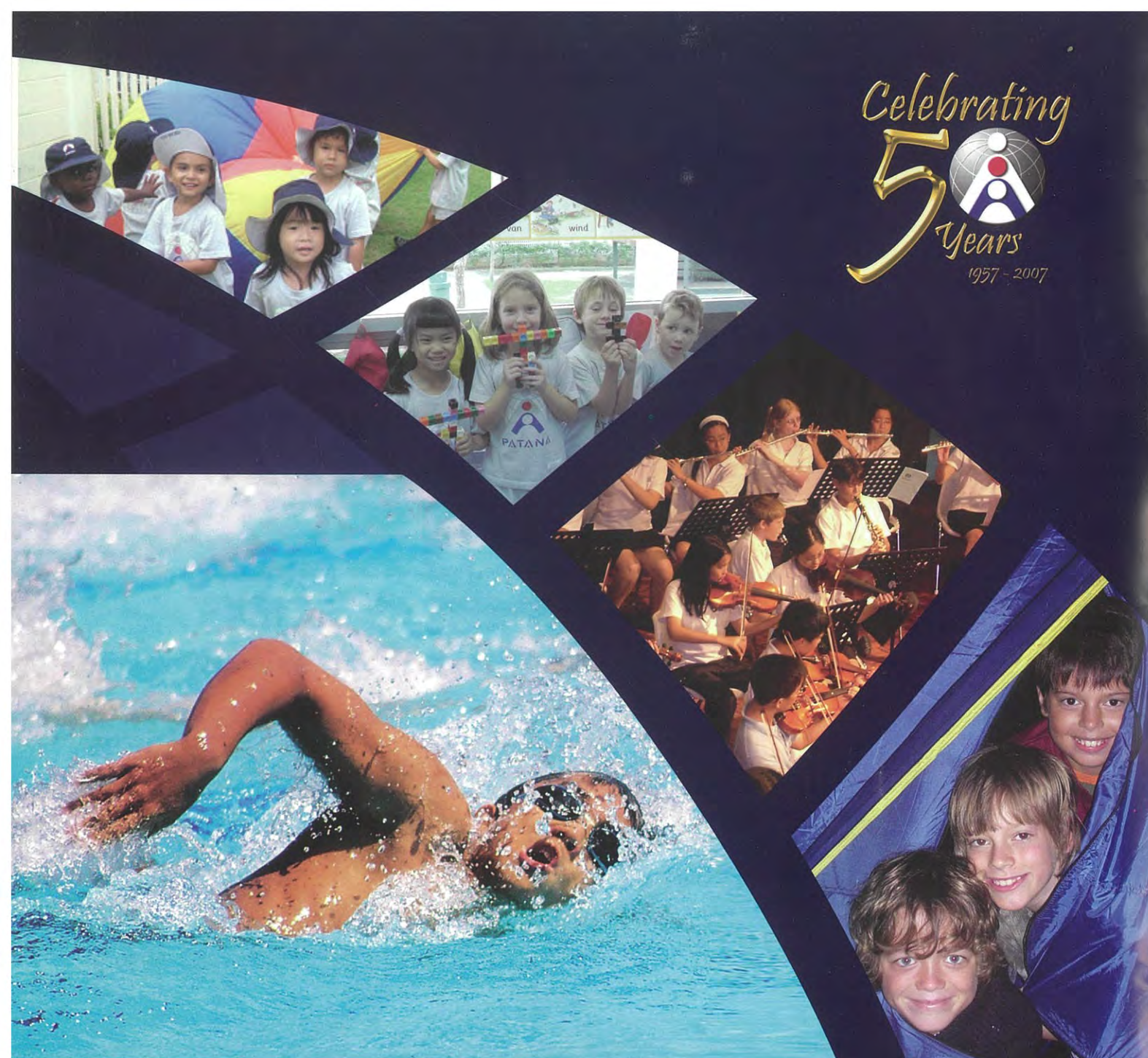
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FEEDING THE MACHINE

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 Marwaan Macan-Markar (marwaan@ips.org). Submissions are paid for with glory and bar coupons.

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On the night he was reluctantly sworn in as prime minister after the military coup that drove out Thaksin Shinawatra, Gen. Surayud Chulanont, the retired army chief, said just a few words to the waiting press about his intentions in office.

The country's new leader had just resigned from the privy council of King Bhumibol Adulyadej to take up his new post. And in his first public utterance as premier, Gen. Surayud declared his administration would be guided by the monarch's "sufficiency economy" theory, a statement intended to draw a clear line between his regime and Mr Thaksin, once famously preoccupied with growth figures. "We won't concentrate so much on GDP numbers," the newly installed premier declared. "We would rather look into indicators of people's happiness and prosperity."

But when a government attributes the underlying inspiration for its economic policy to a deeply-revered individual whose words or ideas cannot be questioned without threat of lengthy imprisonment, Thai academics, foreign correspondents and even, seemingly, policy-makers themselves, can find themselves tied up in knots.

Gen. Surayud's administration has presided over several economic fiascos. Draconian capital controls imposed shortly before Christmas triggered a 15 per cent, one-day plunge in the Stock Exchange, wiping \$22bn off the stock market, and forcing the central bank into a dramatic partial about-face in less than 24 hours.

The government has proposed significant changes to Thai foreign investment laws – changes that foreign companies say will force many existing investors to sell down their local holdings, and constrain future inflows of foreign capital, which have been a major engine of Thai growth for decades.

But for foreign correspondents, covering these controversial policies has posed unusual challenges. The question is: were the capital controls and proposed investment law changes inspired by King Bhumibol's sufficiency economy philosophy? If so, is critical coverage of these issues a crime under Thai lese-majeste laws, which prohibit anything potentially offensive to the dignity of the royal family? Or can you question the measures as long you don't explicitly link them to the sufficiency economy theory?

And if these specific policies – the government's most notable economic decisions so far – weren't inspired by the sufficiency theory, then what measures do reflect the theory?

None of these musings are in anyway intended to cast aspersions on the sufficiency theory, but merely to highlight the rocky terrain on which foreign correspondents covering Thailand – and indeed our Thai counterparts – now find themselves, as we all report on a military-installed government that has sought to wrap itself in the mantle of royalism.

It is a challenge that many of the contributions in the current issue of *Dateline* explore, as we consider whether foreign correspondents really understand Thailand, and we probe the widening gap between foreign and domestic media coverage of the country's on-going political crisis.

Thai lese-majeste laws, which have customarily deterred any public discussion on the role of the monarchy, partly account for these divergences. Yet the furore over foreign media organisations' interviews with Mr. Thaksin also reflects serious differences in how foreign and Thai journalists seem to see their roles in these turbulent, unsettled times.

The suggestion – propagated openly by many elite Thais – that foreign media would need to be paid to interview Mr Thaksin is ridiculous. As the longest surviving and most popular elected prime minister in Thai history before his ouster, Mr Thaksin has indisputable news value, even in exile. His actions, ideas and intentions remain of keen interest to people – not least to the military coup-

makers, who have admitted that they are monitoring all of his travels, speeches and activities.

Instead of accusing foreign media of taking money to interview Mr Thaksin, the more relevant and interesting question may be what pressures are being put on the Thai media to deter them from interviewing a figure who previously dominated the headlines – and still retains a potentially potent political force on the Thai scene.

Efforts to stir Thai public resentment against foreign media for their coverage could intensify in the coming months, if the current political tensions over the country's future escalate further. Such tactics can be a useful tool and warning for a government trying to keep the domestic media in check. Yet for foreign journalists, this is not entirely unfamiliar. Thaksin too frequently lashed out at the foreign media for its critical coverage of his administration. It suggests we might be doing something right.

Amy Kazmin
Bangkok, April 2007



Photo: Paula Bronstein





FCCT'S NEW BOARD

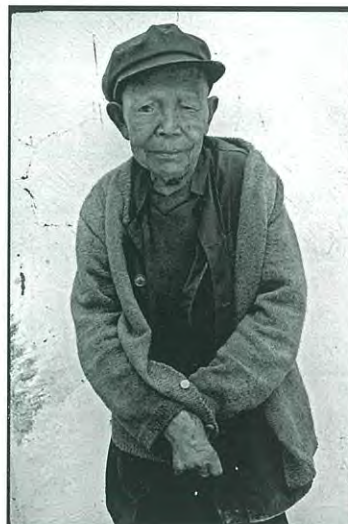
After two years under the steady guidance of president Ian Williams, the FCCT celebrated another solid year of growth at its annual meeting in January. As board treasurer Henry Silverman reported, the Club finished 2006 in excellent financial shape – with a healthy net profit – following a series of excellent programs over the year (including the hugely successful dinner with Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont in November). Membership remained steady at about 800 members, and efforts are underway to push that number higher in 2007. Members also elected a new board, led by Financial Times correspondent Amy Kazmin, the new FCCT president. As always, please feel free to contact anyone on the board if you have suggestions or complaints about the Club. Good luck to the new board!

April – Out of the Darkness: A Photo Exhibit by Mikel Flamm

Half a century ago, many leprosy-affected people in China had to leave their own communities and settle in remote villages with little or no outside contact. They lived in isolation and often faced threats from nearby villagers who feared they would catch the disease. By the mid-1950s, authorities at last began to deal with the rising cases of infection by sending doctors to the villages to provide medical care.

Although many people were cured after treatment, the social stigma remained. Upon their return to their own home villages, they were often not welcomed or even rejected by their families and neighbors. Through the eyes of

Bangkok-based photojournalist Mikel Flamm, FCCT members can take a look at the incredible lives of these people in the southern Chinese provinces of Yunnan, Guangxi and Guangdong.



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RECENT EVENTS

At a time of great political and economic uncertainty in Thailand, it should be no surprise that FCCT has had an exceptionally busy schedule in recent months. Recent speakers have included Thailand's commerce minister and Giles Ungakaporn, one of the highest-profile critics of the current government. Another highlight: An appearance by Anwar Ibrahim, former Malaysian deputy prime minister who may be poised to play an even bigger role after 2008, when he is set to return to Malaysian politics. Many thanks to the FCCT's programs committee for keeping FCCT at the center of the debates that are shaping Thailand and Southeast Asia.

SOI WHISPERS

Midnight's Children, The Bell Jar, and... Hello My Big, Big Honey? The latest news from **Richard S. Ehrlich**: London's Tate Modern museum recently discovered a woman who, wielding a sharp blade, obsessively cut more than 80 words from 123 books, including the nonfiction tome, "Hello My Big, Big Honey: Love Letters to Bangkok Bar Girls and Their Revealing Interviews." She mutilated the books, amputating words in a relentless surgery of slicing and dicing. When she finally laid down her tool, the slashed books' pages looked as if they were paper shrapnel, salvaged from a crime scene after a visit from a schizoid work-killer, armed with a Wanchai meat cleaver. Conceptual artist Simryn Gill's pile of meticulously plundered books ultimately became an installation at the Tate Modern called, perhaps ironically, "Untitled (2006)." What fate would next befall our beloved book? Would it be crucified and submerged in a glass of urine, similar to the "Piss Christ" by American photographer Andres Serrano? Or chopped and hoisted like one of Damien Hirst's dead sharks? • "Simryn Gill's 'Untitled (2006)' is made from over 100 books and pamphlets arranged into a specific order by the artist, and displayed so that viewers can leaf through them," the Tate says on its illustrated website. www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/gill/thebooks.shtm. The 123 books chosen by Ms. Gill for the Tate Modern's March 18 – May 7, 2006 exhibit also included books by or about Bob Dylan, Hunter S. Thompson, Salman Rushdie, Sylvia Plath, Richard Brautigan, George Bernard Shaw, R. D. Laing and others. After cutting into the 123 books, Ms. Gill placed the targeted words in separate, clear plastic bags, as if they were evidence. Ranging from pulp fiction to academic writings, the publications provide the raw material which Gill then uses to tease out a supposedly 'neutral' set of words, the Tate says. • I was ecstatic that "Hello My Big, Big Honey" – which I co-edited – was exhibited in the rarified Tate. Ms. Gill is now hailed as, "My Big Big Gill With Delightful Membrane!" at a small shrine honoring her – decked with purple incense, wooden doll heads, a spherical prism, and fake currency to be burned if she ever dies – all wedged into a Shiva altar near my desk here in Bangkok. • **On other fronts:** the FCCT's annual meeting had its usual share of, um, drama. Unlike past years, more than five people showed up. Sam Wright was on hand to raise tough questions about the board's financial report, while Jeanne Hallacy was spotted sporting hand-made "Girl Power" signs. It wasn't long before the meeting wrapped up so that FCCT members could once again drink in peace.

Do Foreign Reporters Really Understand Thailand?

"I HATE NEWSPAPERMEN. THEY COME INTO CAMP AND PICK UP THEIR CAMP RUMORS AND PRINT THEM AS FACTS. I REGARD THEM AS SPIES, WHICH, IN TRUTH, THEY ARE. IF I KILLED THEM ALL THERE WOULD BE NEWS FROM HELL BEFORE BREAKFAST." – William Tecumseh Sherman

Back in the days of Thaksin Shinawatra, local and foreign reporters seemed to agree on the problems and challenges facing Thailand. Both were critical of Mr. Thaksin, his economic policies, and the various allegations of corruption and human rights abuse that dogged his administration. Since the coup, however, all that has changed. Indeed, relations between the Thai and foreign media have turned decidedly testy in recent months, with some Thai commentators alleging that international reporters don't appreciate the many complexities in Thailand's murky political world. Some have even charged that foreign reporters are on the take. All this raises a difficult question: Does the foreign press REALLY understand Thailand? **Dateline** reports..

In the weeks and months following last September's coup, the international media came in for some harsh criticism from the Thai public and Thai press.

The Bangkok Post chided foreign reporters for challenging Thailand's military-installed government, citing a "lack of confidence and understanding by foreign commentators." The Nation went after specific publications, asking "What is going on with the Asian Wall Street Journal, Newsweek and The Economist?" Readers of the online Asian Sentinel charged that its articles were "lies" and "hatchet" jobs written by foreigners who know "nothing about Thailand."

Thai-language publications hit even harder, alleging that foreign publications received payments from Thaksin Shinawatra in return for the right to interview him.

To many members of the foreign media, all this criticism seemed grossly unfair. Some of the published attacks – like the allegations of payoffs from Mr. Thaksin – were wildly

inaccurate, with little or no effort made by Thai reporters to investigate their authenticity or seek comment. Some foreign journalists suspected Thai commentators were afraid to accept hard truths about the coup.

But is it possible that some of the attacks contained kernels of truth?

It certainly is the case that foreign journalists in Thailand struggle to get accurate, complete information about the country they're covering. Partly this is because Thailand has a complex and often closed political culture that doesn't always foster open debate about public issues. It's also because many foreign journalists don't speak the language. Many – if not most – rely on fixers, translators, English-speaking academics and mass-market history books that summarize the nation's political, economic and cultural history – all with a Western audience in mind.

Of course, this is what foreign correspondents do everywhere. Their job is to parachute into unfamiliar surroundings and distill the many complexities of a host nation into digestible



prose for a Western audience. The best foreign correspondents are able to leverage their curiosity and reporting skill to dig even deeper – and reveal more – than their local comrades-in-arms. Sometimes, they can see and write truths that local residents don't discuss, either because they don't see them – or are too afraid to confront them.

Still, Thailand can present a particularly difficult case. Its political institutions are unusually complicated, influenced by Thai-specific interpretations of Buddhism and a monarchy whose claim on spiritual and political authority is not always fully appreciated or understood by foreign visitors. Unlike certain countries where sources tend to speak openly about political debates, such as the Philippines, some informed Thai sources tend to shy away from direct discussions about the most pressing topics of the day. Much of what goes on behind closed doors is not discussed widely, or at least not with foreigners.

It's more common for full-time staff correspondents to speak the local language in other parts of the world, including Latin America and Europe – an obvious advantage when it comes to getting the full story. Even in China – by many rights a more complex place to grasp than Thailand – most major news organizations wouldn't think of sending a staff reporter out on an extended tour of duty without ensuring he or she speaks Mandarin.

There is also the issue of who the various publications are writing for – and whether certain biases, even unintended ones, can creep into the reporting. Foreign publications like The Wall Street Journal, Financial Times, The International Herald Tribune and The Economist reflect the interests and concerns of a largely foreign readership, including business people, many of whom distrust policies that don't gibe with Western norms. It should hardly be a surprise that these publications find fault in economic policies that don't seem to faze many Thais, especially when those economic policies are at odds with the prevailing wisdom in Western countries.

The debate over Thailand's "sufficiency economy" is a case in point. To some foreign journalists, the concept is a vague mess. To many Thais, it makes perfect sense, not so much as a set of specific policies but rather as a broad philosophical framework to guide policymaking based on Buddhist notions of personal and public restraint.

Foreign publications are of course right to raise questions about any policies that seem ill-considered or vague. But is it possible that they jump too quickly to criticize or challenge policies or viewpoints simply because they don't fully understand them? The editors of Dateline hope the following commentaries encourage more debate on the topic.



Double Standard?

The foreign press plays an important role in Thailand. But when it sizes up the Kingdom, it doesn't always play fair, says **Thanong Khanthong**, Managing Editor of *The Nation*

In my 20-year experience as a staffer of *The Nation*, I have never witnessed any time that the foreign media and their Thai counterparts were so profoundly different in their reporting of Thailand than the period leading up to the military coup till now. I have a feeling that the foreign media have a certain formula in mind when they report about Thailand. They care very much about racial, gender and human rights issues and set a very high standard for their public figures in their home countries. But when they come over here, they appear to have a much simpler mind-set.

It is now very convenient to bash Thailand because of the recent coup and other so-called missteps. The same kind of criticism would probably get them kicked out of a country like Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam or China. Perhaps the Thais are just too kind.

With the exception of the Thaksin government, I have not been aware of any Thai government going after the foreign media, no matter how critical they are.

Strangely enough, the foreign media, which did not have a good time with Thaksin Shinawatra during his six-year reign, now has turned out to become a convenient forum for Thaksin to basically say whatever he wants to say. What happened to all those unthinkable events that took place during his term in office? The interference with the press, his abuse of power, the death of some 3,000 people in three months' time in the name of a drug war? And yet, radio talk show host Don Imus in the U.S. was just suspended after he called the Rutgers University women's basketball team "nappy-headed ho's". The press was right to give him hell. Let's hope they have the same passion for those Isaan boys and girls whose cheap labour

enable many of us to enjoy the kind of life we live and the cheap beer we drink.

Let's also not forget Larry Summers, the former president of Harvard University, who got himself into hot water when he remarked that women were genetically inferior to men when it comes to scientific excellence. He could hardly hang on to his job from that stormy episode. His reputation was destroyed. The media also went after him with this remark.

When somebody posted a video clip on youtube to degrade the King of Thailand, the Thai government requested that youtube take down that clip. But youtube would not do it, saying that this would go against its policy. Since youtube did not back down, the Thai government felt it had no choice but to block the web site. If the Thai government did not do so, there would be public pressure against the government. Heads would roll. True, the government could have handled it better. Like *The Guardian* said, you wrestle with a pig, you're gonna get dirty. But the pigs like it, you don't.

Foreign news outlets treated this incident as a case of freedom of expression. While that may be true, it is not the whole truth. Every society has their own taboos, do's and don'ts, etc... For the Americans, it appeared that calling a woman of African descent a "black ho" was taboo. When calling Isaan girls on Patpong the same thing, the most you'll get is the middle finger. For the Thai people, Thaksin had gone too far! Besides destroying the checks and balances in our young democracy, Thaksin was on the verge of consolidating enormous political power in his hands. On top of that, he swindled his way out of paying taxes on a sale that should have never take place in the first



Photo: The Nation

place. Even for business reporters, the sale of Shin Corp. was much more than a bad business transaction.

For the time being, Thailand has found itself stuck between the devil and the deep blue sea in the battle with youtube and the need to justify to the world the September 19 coup. Perhaps if the junta behaved like a junta (see our neighbour on the Western front), the country would move on. The Thaksin era has put Thailand in one of the most painful and bitter chapters of its recent history as brothers and sisters become enemies. The political crisis and a potential bloody confrontation felt so real for so many people. This explains why so many people were relieved by the coup. They understand the ramifications of unending confrontation.

We may not like the fact that the junta is unaccountable, but we also understand that we will have another crack at it. Strangely, we put so much credit in the fact that Thaksin was elected but overlook the damages he inflicted on Thai society. Surely our benchmark should be more than just whether a man is elected or not. Remember that famous quote in *Far Eastern*

Economic Review some years ago when a man said he doesn't give a hoot who gets elected. He was just waiting for the money from the candidates to reach his hand. Only he was honest; he seemed to show a better understanding of the Thai political system, or, at least how to benefit financially from it. Try telling a hungry stomach about democracy. Does this mean that everything will be fine and dandy when an elected government returns to Thailand? I'm sure that that Isaan man is still hungry.

While I truly believe criticism is good for Thailand, as it forces the leaders and people to look at other points of view, it would be nice to see the same level of passion and criticism applied to countries like China and Vietnam. What kind of grilling did the foreign media give them when they applied for the membership in the World Trade Organisation?

Thailand may not have an elected leader but it doesn't mean that we are less free now. Take a quick glance at state-run media in Burma, China and Vietnam and one should get my point.



Desperately Seeking Debate

To one foreign reporter, BBC correspondent Jonathan Head, the latest criticism of the international media highlights the perils of reporting in Thailand in a time of confusion, and highlight why a tough, free and inquisitive press is vital.

What does it say about a country where a newspaper article that reports, and produces evidence of, growing anti-foreign sentiment (as a recent International Herald Tribune piece did), itself provokes a howl of protest, that foreign journalists are once again unfairly bashing Thailand? We are living through one of the most unsettled periods in recent Thai history, and the country is jittery. Thailand's self-image, as a country once admired for its tolerance, its democratic values and pragmatic embrace of globalisation, has been badly shaken over the past year, and everything the foreign media publishes about the country is being scrutinised as never before. It is becoming a difficult place to report, having long been one of the easiest in the region.

The coup that unseated Thaksin Shinawatra as Prime Minister last September threw up a host of important issues, both for the Thai people and the foreign media. Was the situation before the coup so irretrievable that the unconstitutional overthrow of the government could be justified? Was Mr. Thaksin, the most successful vote-winner in Thai history, actually undemocratic? Did he win his popularity largely through vote-rigging and unsustainable populist policies, as alleged by his critics, or was he a new kind of politician who threatened the old elite, and so was kicked out of office at gunpoint? Was all the apparent progress of the 1990s, the return of the soldiers to barracks, the flourishing of civil society, the drafting of a new, liberal constitution, just an illusion?

Never before have I reported from a country that has so lost its bearings. There seems to be no consensus at all on which direction Thailand should take. Public despair is palpable over the way the interim government has floundered,

failing to show any kind of vision that might lead the country to a different and happier place than it was in under Mr. Thaksin. So the one thing you might think is essential right now is a thorough debate, about what went so wrong, and how to fix it. This is surely the proper role of the media, both local and foreign.

Well, that isn't what the country wants, apparently. When Mr. Thaksin broke his self-imposed silence, and started giving interviews, there was an immediate backlash against anyone who dared give him column inches or airtime. Morning after morning, I listened to former Senator Jermsak Pintong repeating on his radio programme the claim that foreign broadcasters routinely accepted payments from politicians like Thaksin who wanted airtime, without ever providing a shred of evidence; this defamatory charge has been made by so many other commentators in Thailand it is now widely believed.

There was the strange suggestion in several local op. ed. pieces that Mr. Thaksin had played dirty in employing an American public relations firm, as though no other politician had ever done such a thing, and that this firm had somehow managed to guarantee that the former PM was subjected only to softball interviews. His successor, General Surayud Chulanont, refused all requests for interviews in his first four months in office, but then complained that Mr. Thaksin had an unfair advantage because he could afford a good PR firm, as though the resources of the Thai Government could not stretch to such an extravagance. Given the dismal ratings of General Surayud's government these days, hiring a good PR firm sounds like a pretty sensible investment.

Likewise, any foreign journalist who dares to question the soundness of the 'Sufficiency Economy' philosophy, is accused of wilfully misunderstanding it, of praising Thaksinomics and forgetting Mr. Thaksin's own hostility to the foreign press. We are accused of being cheerleaders for the unfettered market economy that Mr. Thaksin was supposedly inflicting on Thailand.

Being harangued for what you write is

a normal part of the job, and none of these attacks, whether justified or not, would really matter if they reflected a robust debate within the Thai media about the state of the country. But that does not appear to be the case. It is extraordinary that for all the condemnation of foreign media for the way they have given Mr. Thaksin an easy platform, the local media have shied away from interviewing him at all. After all, this man has arguably made a bigger impact on the country than any other politician in living memory. Whether you love him or hate him, he is hard to ignore, and local journalists are in a far better position to go after the former PM and challenge him over the way he ran the country.

Then there is the total absence of debate over the monarchy, still an immensely influential institution. We are all sensitive to the genuine affection and respect millions of Thais feel for King Bhumibol Adulyadej, but how is it possible to figure out what kind of political system is best for the country without discussing what role the monarchy plays now in the balance of political power, and what role it should play in the future?

It isn't just foreign journalists who should be asking these questions; they are surely of far greater importance to Thais, yet no-one dares ask because of the stifling blanket of the sweeping lese majeste laws. How does His Majesty's 'Sufficiency Economy' concept, emphasising, as I understand it, moderation and greater concern for the poor, fit in with the Crown Property Bureau's ambitious re-development plans for its extensive landholdings in Bangkok, which include closing down Suan Lum night market and replacing it with yet another massive shopping mall?

These apparent inconsistencies seem to me and my colleagues to be screaming out for discussion. What role, if any, did concern over managing the succession play in the decision to launch the coup? Just how much is proximity to royal prestige used to sustain the old bureaucratic and business elite, and with it one of the world's most unequal distributions of wealth? How much did resentment over that inequality play in giving Mr. Thaksin such a strong support base in the countryside? Our editors, our readers and viewers demand coverage of these important questions, as they would of any other country, yet that is hard to do if they are simply not being discussed at all by people in Thailand.

In the eleven years I have been working in



this region, this is the first time I have been confronted with such profound and intriguing questions, and yet have felt unable to pursue them. Even under the repressive media climate of Suharto's Indonesia it was a whole lot easier to report contentious issues there than it is to report anything but glowing praise for the Royal Family here.

One of the great privileges of covering countries going through periods of political upheaval is the opportunity to witness a great debate about where the nation will go; an uninhibited debate which should be led by the local media, by activists and academics, a debate over which the reporting of foreign journalists should have only marginal influence. As things stand in Thailand right now, there is a danger for all foreign journalists that they will inadvertently find themselves taking the lead in that debate, provoking hostility which will then distract people from the real issues that confront them.



View From the Thai Media

In a letter to the editors of Time Magazine in February, members of the Thai Journalists Association and the Thai Broadcast Journalists Association complained strongly about the foreign press. **Thakeang Somsab, President of the Thai Broadcast Journalist Association**, explains why.

I never had a chance to mingle with any foreign correspondents in Thailand because my work field is not related to them. However, I follow their work by watching their television reports and reading their articles.

Thai people admire foreign correspondents and foreign news agencies just like most Thais admire any "farang" no matter what their background is.

Why do we admire foreign correspondents? We have to blame a cultural inferiority complex that makes Thais think farangs are better than us, despite the fact that not all farangs are admirable.

In the past, the foreign media paid scant interest to Thailand and the region. Their attention was drawn to the country and this region only when something extraordinary or tragic happened, such as a disaster or a coup d'etat.

But in today's borderless world, foreign media now cover news about Thailand and the region in much more depth and on a regular basis. That's why there have been more news reports about this country. While we find foreign news reporting to be more professional than in the past, we believe there is still much to be desired.

What is most obvious is foreign

correspondents' lack of understanding of local cultures and social environments. Some foreign correspondents' understanding of Thai politics can also be superficial.

These shortcomings were best reflected in their coverage of the Thai politics in the aftermath of the coup last September. Many of their news reports echoed the views of foreign people more than the sentiments of Thai people. This was compounded by what many Thais see as a sympathetic tone in some of the foreign media reports about the former Thai leader. His series of interviews with some international media outlets reinforced the belief among many Thais that foreign media are not above political and financial influence.

Foreign media usually use an international standard or viewpoint to judge our political issues. Unfortunately they usually make mistakes. Most Thais look at the September 19 coup as a solution to the political conflict but the rest of the world thinks that it was bad for democracy. For example, during Thaksin's era, human rights were violated the most.

I was asked by foreign correspondents about press freedom under Surayud's government. I told them it's a lot better than under the Thaksin government – but it seems like they don't quite believe what I said.

One time, I was going to visit my hometown. Before I got on to the plane, I grabbed TIME magazine with Thaksin on the cover. That's when I first saw the interview and the part where he distorted the truth. In particular, when asked a question about interfering with the media, Thaksin denied he did so. It seems that TIME accepted this statement, with no follow-up. It allowed Thaksin to make excuses and lie to the whole world.

The Thai Broadcast Journalists Association is an organization that fought for press freedom during Thaksin's era. That's why we sent a letter to TIME magazine about the article highlighting media interference in Thaksin's time.

Foreigners only see Thailand as Chiang Mai, Phuket, Pattaya, Samui or Pat Pong but they never really see deep down to the real Thai society. But this could happen to almost every journalist who is based in a country which is not their motherland.

There is no question that foreign news agencies with a lot of experience in Thailand have been professional in covering the country. But the poor journalistic quality of many foreign correspondents raise doubts about their professional standard. Our hope is that

The recent letter to Time Magazine:

Dear Editor,

Shame on you (for your recent) interview with Thaksin Shinawatra. Time Magazine allowed Thaksin to tell lies. Thaksin has the audacity to say that the Thai press printed "groundless information" about him and that he never "intervened" in Thai media activities or closed them down. Let the truth be told. Before he came to power, the Thai press was considered one of the freest in the world, ranking 29th in the survey done by Freedom House in 2000. During his reign until the September 19, the Thai press fell to the depressing 107th position last year. Similar conclusions can be found on indexes reported by the Committee to Protect Journalists and Reporters Without Frontiers. Thaksin constantly interfered with the Thai print and broadcast media using advertising revenues and stock acquisitions as key strategies. He shut down community radios, websites and TV programs critical of him.

Political power was used to intimidate the media, particularly the broadcast media, which are largely owned by the state. Management of these outlets came under tremendous government pressure to put him in a positive light, while those who failed to conform or attempted to expose corruption faced the risk of being intimidated through various means, including the threat of staggering lawsuits. The legal battles between Shin Corp, which is owned by the Shinawatra family, and the Thai Post and media rights activist Supinya Klangnarong, are some of the cases in point. The Bangkok Post also faced the wrath of Thaksin after reporting about cracks in the runway at the Suvarnabhumi International Airport.

No Thai leaders have messed up the Thai media more than Thaksin.

5 February 2007
Thai Journalists Association
Thai Broadcast Journalists Association

as Thailand plays an increasingly important role in the region, we will see more foreign journalists with better knowledge and understanding of the country posted here.



Photo: Patrick Barra

Thailand's Self-Censoring Press

The inability to debate some aspects of Thailand's political scene make it difficult to assess and analyze the country's future, with potentially harmful consequences, writes Pravit Rojanaphruk, a senior journalist at The Nation newspaper.

"They won't run (the news) because they're afraid that it will affect the image of the King," Chairith Yonpiam, a political reporter for Post Today, a quality daily newspaper, told me when asked whether he thought most newspapers would run the latest news about the verdict of a Swiss man who defaced images of the King.

Chairith was right, and I couldn't find any news about 57-year-old Rudolf Jufer in the Thai Post. Nor did I find the news on Thai Rath, the Kingdom's largest circulated paper. Browsing through Matichon, the quality broadsheet trusted by the Thai intelligentsia for three decades yielded no result either.

Not even Manager Daily, a self-proclaimed royalist paper, included it, though its Internet version contained a small article on the matter. Prachatai.com, the Kingdom's independent on-line paper, made it a point to run the news as they felt that the mainstream mass media may not be willing to publicise such news, though they merely translated news items from the BBC and other foreign sources. "It's a matter of human rights," said Tatikarn Dechapong, of prachatai.com.

The Bangkok Post, Thailand's oldest English-language newspaper, ran the news as a small item on the lowest left corner of page 2 in its March 30 edition. The Nation, another English-language Thai daily, decided not to run the news a few months back when Jufer was first arrested after a surveillance camera caught him spray-painting a number of posters of His Majesty the King, reportedly while intoxicated. But it made a U-turn and ran the news of the verdict as a second lead on its front page.

No letters to the editors would ever be published by either the Bangkok Post or The Nation, however, though the news was definitely controversial and would have likely elicited some response, at least from the expatriate community.

There were no words from the less-

independent radio and television stations, at least as far as this writer could tell. What I heard on FM 95, a government-controlled radio station run by the Mass Communication Organization of Thailand, was that Thais should this year wear yellow dress in honour of the King's 80th birthday every day.

Beneath the few news items that got out to the public, some journalists themselves were reacting strongly but privately to the 10-year verdict (out of a maximum of 75) given to Jufer for merely spray-painting over five images of the Thai monarch. Some felt it didn't correspond with the public image of His Majesty the King as a 'benign' ruler.

But what observation can we make from how the verdict was portrayed, or not portrayed, by the Thai media?

First is the obvious reality of the existing culture of censorship and self-censorship over the public right to know or express its opinion about this institution. No such right is recognised under Thai law and this is backed by no less than the 1997 constitution (and certainly the new charter now being drafted under the sponsorship of the junta) which stated: "The King shall be enthroned in a position of revered worship and shall not be violated."

That may explain why most if not all of the few papers which dared to report about Jufer's case relied on news provided by international news agencies, to 'play it safe'. Their own reports, they fear, if written by the papers themselves, may put them at risk of landing themselves in a possible lese majeste case if words or some content were deemed "disrespectful" by the authorities.

The second point is that neither news items by the Associated Press, Agence France Presse, nor those reported by the Thai media, dwelt on the possible motives of Jufer. An AP reporter told this writer that the court proceedings which took place in Chiang Mai province were done while journalists were kept outside - a move that's highly unusual when compared to other cases where journalists, Thai and foreign, are allowed to observe the trial. The same AP reporter said the prosecutors were also not willing to speak and when the verdict was read, the first part in which the crime normally is spelled out, motives

or confessions are discussed, and adjudication is explained, was allegedly missing.

Jufer had been living in Thailand for 10 years and is married to a Thai. So it's assumed that he would very well know what cultural and political norm here dictates. So why did he do it? No 'intoxicated' foreign expat would be expected to deface the images of the Thai King after all. He lived in a society where public displays of veneration towards the King have become almost a daily ritual. And the few Thai media outlets that reported the news didn't bother to find out what possible motive may be behind such an act of vandalism.

In this society, where no freedom of public expression regarding the monarchy is guaranteed and in fact forbidden and made a criminal offense subject to a 15-year maximum imprisonment term, whatever critical talk there is about the institution is driven underground into the private realm of private talk, gossip, rumour and hearsay. This ironically seems to be more damaging to the institution because there's little or no way of verifying what is true or false, real or imagined. Readers please bear in mind that this writer, like all the rest of Thais, is not free to express himself without worries about the monarchy issue due to legal and extrajudicial constraint.

More frank discussion can be privately arranged, however, by directly contacting this writer.

What impact such publicly restrictive and yet privately proliferating discussion about the monarchy will have on the future of Thai society and the institution itself is up to anyone's guess.

My guess is that it won't and cannot be positive - for people's free thoughts are being restricted in public and thus no accurate and fair assessment of the institution can be done in public. It also hinders a democratic environment of free expression. In fact, many journalists fear that criticising the lese majeste law may itself be tantamount to criticising the institution, thus risking being landed in a lese majeste lawsuit.

The media may be concerned and contemplative about the monarchy and its future, but its records over the past few decades suggest that they will not be the force for positive reform on the issue. In fact they are playing the role of cannon fodder in maintaining the status quo about such restrictions - willingly or not. They may talk about the institution and offer endless analysis, exchanging rumours or even gossip, but all is done privately; they will never publish it. A most recent case involves the brief discussion by the Constitution Drafting Committee about the possibility of adjusting the rules governing the succession to the royal throne -- which was not mentioned by any media. Elsewhere, some brave souls, when discussing the issue in

Photo: Patrick Bartra



public, often rely on special pronouns, referring to the institution or the King as: "the sky", "the institution," "you known what I mean," "the person you know whom I'm referring to", "number 9" and so on. All this despite the fact that during the reign of Rama the VII, some eight decades ago, the last absolute monarch, Thai newspapers used to openly make criticisms of the King and the institution.

This shows how far the media have come, or rather, have gone backward.

Postscript: Only three Thai newspapers, The Nation, the Bangkok Post and Thai Rath, reported the eventual pardon granted by His Majesty the King to Jufer. Unlike Thai Rath, which ran a small report on an inside page, The Nation and Bangkok Post ran it quite prominently on the front page. If you read Post Today, Matichon, or watch only television or listen to radios, it would be as if the whole internationally-publicised incident had never taken place.

Of interest are the different nuances in the two English dailies. The Nation stated that Jufer will be "deported" while the Post mentioned no deportation, instead stating that Jufer will "leave" for Switzerland. No questions were raised about why such a "royal pardon" needed to be accompanied by a "deportation," and whether this could be considered a full pardon.

Also, while The Nation added a detail linking Jufer's case to the recent blocking of youtube, the Bangkok Post made no such mention.



The writer would like to thank Jiranan Hanthamrongwitt for her kind assistance in monitoring some of the media for the article.



The Colors of Chinatown

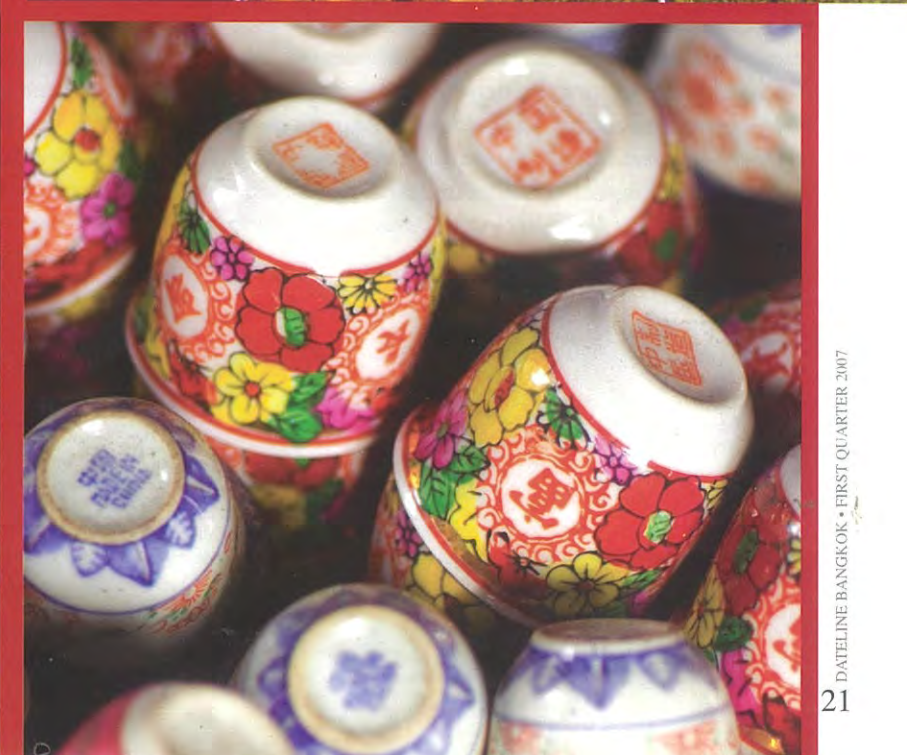
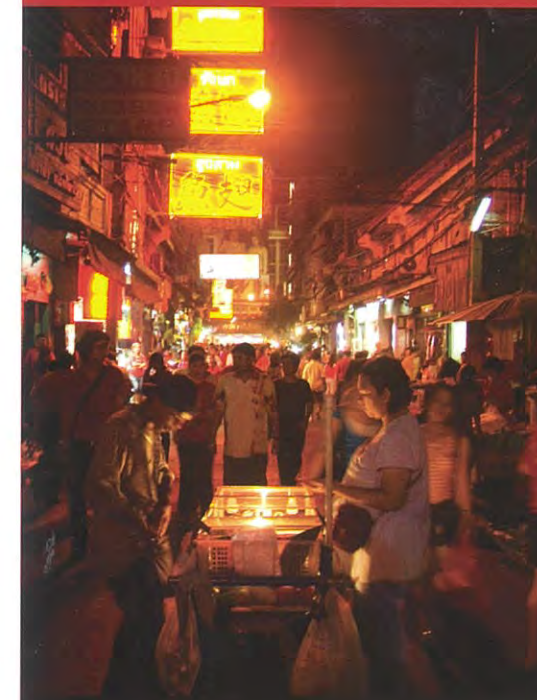
By Bangkok photographer Austin Bush



EVEN ON A NORMAL EVENING, YAOWARAT, BANGKOK'S CHINATOWN, IS A VIRTUAL RAINBOW. GREEN FLORESCENT LIGHTS MIX WITH THE ORANGE FLAMES OF COOKING FIRES TO ILLUMINATE THE AREA'S GOLD SHOPS, STREET SIDE FRUIT VENDORS AND COLONIAL-ERA BUILDINGS. GAUDY NEON SIGNS PROVIDE LIGHT FOR MUCH OF THE AREA, AND DIMMING STREET LAMPS OFTEN DON'T PROVIDE ENOUGH LIGHT AT ALL, EMPHASIZING THE AREA'S AGE AND DARKNESS. COME CHINESE NEW YEAR AND THE MOOD CHANGES COMPLETELY, AND YAOWARAT BECOMES AN EXPLOSION OF RED AND GOLD, COLOURS THE CHINESE ASSOCIATE WITH PROSPERITY.

IT WAS ONLY UNTIL RELATIVELY RECENTLY THAT I REALIZED WHAT A VALUABLE RESOURCE YAOWARAT IS, AND I HAVE BEEN COMING BACK VIRTUALLY EVERY WEEK IN AN EFFORT TO CAPTURE THESE COLOURS. IN THIS I HAVE BEEN INSPIRED BY PHOTOGRAPHERS SUCH AS DAVID ALAN HARVEY OR STEVE MCCURRY, PEOPLE WHO HAVE MADE THE MOST OF RICH, SATURATED COLOURS.

YAOWARAT IS ALSO RICH WITH LIFE, AND IN THIS RESPECT I HAVE ALSO EQUALLY BEEN INSPIRED BY THE INFORMAL 'STREET PHOTOGRAPHY' PERFECTED BY PHOTOGRAPHERS SUCH AS HENRI CARTIER-BRESSON OR ELLIOTT ERWITT. MUCH OF YAOWARAT'S LIFE REVOLVES AROUND THE MAKING AND SELLING OF FOOD, AND IN THE MORNINGS THE AREA'S HECTIC FRESH MARKETS SELL SOME OF BANGKOK'S BEST PRODUCE AND SEAFOOD. COME EVENINGS, THE MARKETS ARE CLOSED, BUT THE STREETS ARE LINED WITH VENDORS SELLING A VARIETY OF CHINESE-STYLE DISHES, AND YAOWARAT IS A DESTINATION FOR HUNGRY PEOPLE ACROSS THE CITY. THERE'S HARDLY A MOMENT WHEN BANGKOK'S CHINATOWN ISN'T BUZZING WITH LIFE OR COLOR, TWO IMPORTANT ELEMENTS OF ANY IMAGE, AND I HOPE MY IMAGES CAPTURE THIS.



With Friends Like These...

*For many followers of the Burma/Myanmar story, the one indispensable document to read is Irrawaddy Magazine, the well-known chronicle of Burmese affairs produced out of Chiang Mai. The magazine has never been afraid to attack the abuses of the current regime in Burma. But recently, Irrawaddy came under attack itself, from disgruntled staff members and others who feel the publication is moving in the wrong direction. The anonymous, mass-circulated email attacking Irrawaddy and its editor was both cowardly and unethical, writes **Craig Knowles of AsiaWorks**.*

The March 2007 edition of Irrawaddy Magazine blasts India for cozying up to Burma's generals, investigates the exploitation of migrant workers in Malaysia and reports on Karen infighting in a story headlined "A House Divided."

In fact, the respected publication at the time also faced reports of infighting that apparently had left its own house far from united.

These were highlighted in a scathing, but anonymous email which was widely distributed, alleging the magazine had become irrelevant, that its editor Aung Zaw lacked "people management skills" and that staff departures had been "rancorous."

"Rancorous" doesn't begin to describe the tone of the email by a group claiming to be "Friends of the Irrawaddy."

News publications the world over face criticism over their management styles and editorial policies – it comes with the territory.

But the fact that the email was sent anonymously and addressed to donors, but widely copied to foreign correspondents (part of our own mailing list was obviously used) and NGO and agency workers, among others, has sidelined any reasonable debate about possible editorial problems at Irrawaddy and raised serious questions about the ethics of the email's authors.

"I think the authors are totally disingenuous to term

themselves "friends" of Irrawaddy when they've put together such a vituperative and cowardly letter," said Sarah Rooney, freelance journalist, author and occasional Irrawaddy contributor.

"Refusing to put their names on this letter seems to me to negate everything in it," she said.

Among other things, the email alleged Aung Zaw was anti-American and anti-Christian. Most damningly, though, it accused him of misusing donor funds, an outrageous and unsubstantiated allegation that was totally dismissed by everyone contacted for this article.

Irrawaddy Chief Copy Editor Jim Andrews labeled the personal accusations against Aung Zaw "venomous, made even more pernicious by being anonymous."

"An irrelevant, personal attack like this undermines the purpose of the open letter ... this is pure character assassination," he wrote in response.

As working journalists, we recognize the damage that such unethical and inaccurate missives can inflict, which is why we are careful about when we decide to publish them.

Also, we are bound by a code of ethics, and laws and mechanisms put in place to prevent character attacks such as the one on Aung Zaw.

But in the era of inboxes and blogs, where people can write what they like and enjoy virtual impunity, there is little recourse for the victims of these campaigns.

Aung Zaw Adds:

We doubt it will have any negative impact on our credibility and reputation, but some people may take junk mail seriously.

Look at our products and you can make your own judgment. We have both daily updates online and a print version which comes out every month. Our web site hits have now reached around 12 million. We receive regular feedback from readers both positive and critical. We publish them in our letters section.

My staff and I receive threats, intimidation and abusive phone calls ... including serious threats that our lives may be in danger

... but we have the courage to continue to tell the truth.

General Than Shwe and the regime may want to give an honorable award to this person/persons (the email authors) as he or she had provided a great propaganda service for the regime. There might be an opening at the New Light of Myanmar (newspaper) for such imaginative and fictional writing.

We have expanded our coverage over the past years and it has been critical in many areas, not just of the military leaders in Burma, so we have made friends and foes.

Excerpts from the email:

Dear Irrawaddy Donor,

Whilst it pains us to describe the situation at The Irrawaddy magazine (and getting personal about it is distasteful), that situation has deteriorated so much that it now behooves us to speak.

The magazine needs new leadership. It has become anemic, largely because it is divided internally. Its esprit de corps has evaporated. Though it still produces some worthy material, it has lost its bite as a critic of one of the world's most terrible regimes.

Through 2006, and long before, there have been regular staff and editorial departures - most of them rancorous - many involving journalists of a high caliber. We believe this will continue through 2007, as the erratic behavior of the Editor, Aung Zaw, has made the magazine unworkable. The Irrawaddy is now wistfully referred to by some of its own senior staff as 'The Irrelevant'.

The Editor's people-management skills (donors aside) are problematic; as are his lack of editing and writing skills (mainstream press articles bearing his name are written by other staff), and lengthy absences from the job. But the following, whilst not being a complete catalog, are in our view more serious problems:

- Abhorrence of Christians. Whilst the actions of Christian missionaries in this part of the world have not always been blameless, Christian organizations, and individual Christians, now provide irreplaceable help to those made homeless by regime depredations in regional Burma. To attack these brave people as mere 'Bible-bashers' (which they mostly are not) is to misconstrue their work, and how deeply it is appreciated by the Karen, Shan and others.

It is especially cruel (and almost unbelievable from an Irrawaddy Editor) to say that, by virtue of their religion, Christian regime victims 'deserve their fate'.

- Anti-Americanism. In light of the US government's support for

Burmese democracy, and its financial generosity to The Irrawaddy, we regard it as impolitic and ungrateful, if nothing else, for the Editor to make frequent, hostile, public and semi-public remarks about that government. Notwithstanding its flaws, the United States is one of the few hopes the Burmese people have left.

- The magazine's proliferating factual errors. These are frequently brought to the Editor's attention by staff, to no avail, before publication. They are now impacting the magazine's reputation, most notably among those au fait with Burma issues.

We believe that The Irrawaddy's internal situation, now approaching the level of fiasco, is an expose-in-waiting for an Asian or international news outlet – especially in light of the prominence of the magazine's sponsors.

We also feel it is only a matter of time before it comes to the notice of the regime's mouthpiece publications (The New Light of Myanmar, The Myanmar Times, et al) – whose delight will probably be considerable.

As a voice for a free Burma, The Irrawaddy is all but paralyzed. As a consequence, it continues to hemorrhage good journalists, goodwill and money.

Some claims herein may appear to be exaggerated, or sour grapes arising from unrelated work issues, personality conflicts, etc. If we made our identities known at present, there would be repercussions we cannot afford. However the accuracy of what this email contains can be ascertained fairly simply – by questioning (away from the office, and in confidence) any past or current worker for The Irrawaddy – staff or casual; Burmese or Western; writer, editor or production person.

We are confident of the answers you will hear.

Friends of The Irrawaddy

"In a world where anyone can play at being journalist, editor, sub, and publisher all-in-one without ethical standards or attribution, the door is wide open for anything to be distributed," Christopher Warren, President of the International Federation of Journalists, said in a written response to Dateline.

Anonymous smear campaigns have always been around.

"However, in this digital age, where published work is only a mouse click away, these smear campaign really can, as Mark Twain put it, travel around the world before the truth has the chance to put its boots on," said Warren.

As indeed it did, to various parts of the world like Europe and North America where some of Irrawaddy's donors are located, and more locally where it was talked about for weeks amongst journalists and the NGO world, who frequent the FCCT.

The authors of the email justified their anonymity by saying "if we made our identities known at present, there would be repercussions we cannot afford." Rather ironic, given Irrawaddy's journalists, by the very nature of their work, routinely face repercussions including death threats.

Aung Zaw said that as journalists working in a politicized environment, Irrawaddy staff could be easy targets.

"This kind of poison letter is not the first and it won't be

the last," he said in both written responses and by telephone to Dateline.

"Today, I might shake hands with someone who greatly respects the magazine, but the next day he or she can declare us an enemy because he or she dislikes the news or editorials on our pages," he said. (See edited excerpts of Aung Zaw's response on the previous page.)

Perhaps the smear campaign was best summed up by Marwaan Macan-Markar, correspondent for news agency Inter Press Service and member of the FCCT Executive Committee, who said: "Since the lack of gratitude is a theme running through the email (regarding) Irrawaddy, it would have been appropriate for the authors to have added a postscript about how thankful they are to the publication in question for helping them to take up that art form common in Burmese Politics – the poison pen."

Dateline's Postscript: Dateline's emailed attempts to the address provided by the authors of the Irrawaddy missive to get them to go on the record met with no response.

Further investigations, though, did indeed provide us with a pretty good idea of their identities. We are unable to print them, of course, due to ethical considerations.





Dancing with Martial Law

The recent move by Thai authorities to block access to youtube.com highlighted what some critics believe is a longstanding (and growing) threat to free expression in Thailand: Online censorship. **C.J. Hinke, coordinator of Freedom Against Censorship Thailand (FACT), offers his own critique.**

The Thai government first raised the issue of an Internet law empowering censorship in 1997. At that time, the Foreign Correspondents Club of Thailand held a panel in which several local experts, including this writer, confronted Dr. Srisakdi Charmonman, president of the Internet Society of Thailand.

The bill died a quiet, natural death in the face of great opposition. However, by 1999, the Royal Thai Police began to block websites. Although the police released no real information about their censorship, the front page of their website gave some statistics until this was removed in November 2006. At that time, the police claimed to block 32,500 websites, 11% on the basis of national security.

When Thaksin Shinawatra was made prime minister in 2001, he soon formed a Ministry of Information and Communication Technology whose central function included Internet censorship. In January 2004, the first MICT block list, of 1,275 websites, was published on MICT's site for the first and only time.

MICT set up a CyberPatrol unit under the control of a CyberInspector to administer CyberClean and posted a webpage by which members of the public could easily and anonymously report websites to block. There was no mechanism established until much later for anyone to request unblocking. From this point on, no information leaked out from the ministry regarding the number of sites blocked, how they effected blocking or the criteria they used for censorship. Any computer user surfing to a blocked site would be directed to a green screen at MICT.

In 2005, the Prime Minister announced plans to block 800,000 websites and in 2006, the ICT ministry announced that it would block 10,000 obscene websites. MICT's stated intention was "to block all pornographic sites".

While pornography is strictly illegal in Thailand, there was no similar basis in Thai law to permit Internet censorship. In fact, the 1997 'People's Constitution' prohibited any interference with communication. It became apparent that MICT and the Police before them had been blocking the Internet illegally while sex DVDs were being sold in every shopping venue in the country. To give the reader a sense of scale, there are an estimated five to seven billion web pages of which between 100 million and two billion are currently active, including more than 120 million weblogs written

by Internet journalists. More than ten million websites are thought to be pornography.

This writer found that his legitimate academic research was being blocked by Internet censorship. While Thammasat University's contract with the Internet provider, Samart, specifically required free access, Samart had caved in to MICT pressure and violated the terms of that contract. Thammasat referred the writer to his broadband provider, True Internet.

The writer contacted True with one goal in mind—a copy of the blocklist. True refused this and referred the writer to MICT. However, at that point, we learned that MICT does not block websites directly but issues "informal requests" by email to Thailand's 54 ISPs. This appears to be MICT's means to avoid having to confront the absence of any law enabling censorship.

Thai ISPs are not required to accede to every government request. However, we believe that MICT made clear by using barely-veiled threats that noncompliance would result in punitive sanctions. When MICT also refused to provide this writer a copy of their block list, this began to raise many more questions. MICT refused to supply any details of their censorship. Obviously, at MICT there was no transparency or accountability in government.

At this point, the writer received anonymously what we believe to be an accurate and complete copy of the May 2006 block list, containing 2,328 websites. A careful analysis of this block list showed that while the great preponderance of sites were porn, MICT's blocking also concealed a hidden political agenda. In addition to blocking porn sites, MICT was blocking all political discussion regarding the Muslim South, including separatist calls for redress to the United Nations and the international community. Any sites perceived to be unofficial commentary on the monarchy were also banned.

The very next day following the September 19, 2006, military coup d'etat, General Sonthi Boonyaratglin issued Order No. 5 under martial law which appointed MICT "Official Censor of the Military Coup". However, MICT's October secret block list showed little rise.

On November 15, a newly-formed petition activist group of which I am a member, Freedom Against Censorship Thailand, filed a petition to the National Human Rights Commission of Thailand. On that same day, with timing that seemed hardly coincidental, the new military-appointed

ICT minister, Dr. Sithichai Pokaiyaudom, tabled a computer crimes bill before the National Legislative Assembly. Although the bill made no specific mention of censorship, all ISPs were made legally responsible for any data transiting their servers. The punishment meted out for some computer crimes was the death penalty or life imprisonment.

In December, Harvard University's Berkman Center for Internet and Society sent a team of human rights lawyers to investigate Internet censorship in Thailand. While the Commission considered the evidence, FACT received MICT's January block list which now contained 13,475 websites, an increase of more than 500%! Including police censorship, now Thailand was blocking more than 45,000 websites. Pages from international news websites, such as BBC and CNN, Camfrog, YouTube and Thai web discussion sites have all been blocked, as well as specifically anti-coup websites.

On February 9, FACT, now with more than 300 signers and the support of 59 international human rights and civil liberties organisations, submitted a formal request for data to MICT under the provisions of the Official Information Act. However, on March 8, MICT once again refused to provide specifics of its censorship, citing "national security" and "law enforcement" as two escape clauses of the Act and using martial law for its justification. FACT has now submitted a complaint to the Official Information Commission.

Many countries have condemned the coup's repeal of the 1997 Constitution. The U.S. State Department, Asian Human Rights Commission, Amnesty International and Reporters Without Borders have all issued reports condemning Thai censorship. Thailand's press freedom has declined from being one of the most free to one of the most censored countries.

Many fundamental liberties in Thailand are at stake over this issue: Freedoms of speech, media, communication and association, all of which were protected under the 1997 Constitution. FACT has submitted its recommendations against censorship to the Constitutional Drafting Committee and the NLA committee considering the 'cybercrime' bill.

Although the websites are blocked, FACT has made available circumvention software and access to anonymous proxy servers to the Thai public and posts MICT's secret block lists to its website. Is Thailand ready for a society without censors? Government conducted in secrecy does not bode well for future democracy. Everyone who cares about freedom should sign FACT's petition at <http://factthai.wordpress.com/sign> and http://thailand.ahrchk.net/fact_petition/sign.php.



The Letter of the Law

Expatriates often joke about Thailand's anything-goes culture. But for those who try to actually follow the law, it can be a real challenge, as former FCCCT President Ian Williams learned on a recent trip to the Emporium mall.

I recently decided to go straight – to buy a good, brand-name computer with genuine software from one of Bangkok's most reputable shopping malls. But I never imagined how difficult a task it would be to break free of Thailand's counterfeit culture.

I'd been under pressure from my increasingly computer literate children, who were losing patience with their old bug-ridden machine, a Pantip Plaza mongrel, packed with software of dubious pedigree. Every time my son's racing games froze or crashed it added to the moral pressure – "Daaaaaad!"

So off I went to the Emporium shopping mall, host to many a luxury brand of goods. I figured I couldn't go wrong at the Emporium, having spotted an Acer computer promotion in the stationary department.

I paid more than 33,000 Baht for a top-of-the-range PC, which was promptly delivered and set up in my apartment. That's when the problems started.

I had difficulty installing other devices on the computer, and after fiddling to no avail with the system preferences decided to logon to the Microsoft site to look for software upgrades, figuring that might sort it out. Imagine my surprise when that ubiquitous little message popped up informing me that the windows XP software installed on the computer wasn't genuine.

Back I went to the Emporium to confront the young woman who had sold it to me. Before long my complaint had attracted a group of sales people, who for the most part giggled uncomfortably at this awkward farang, while failing to give me any explanation as to why one of Bangkok's top end retailers had sold me a computer with pirated software. They didn't seem to appreciate there was a problem at all.

Eventually they phoned their supplier (the machines had not come directly from Acer), before telling me: "sorry, if you want licensed software it would cost another 7,000 Baht".

I was struggling to keep my cool by now, pointing out that if I'd wanted pirated software I'd have gone to Pantip Plaza and paid a fraction of the price. Instead I'd come to the Emporium and paid nearly US\$1,000, and for that sort of money – in one of Bangkok's leading stores – I expected genuine software. I also pointed out they were almost certainly breaking the law.

That provoked more huddling and giggling, but it did seem to concentrate minds. After further deliberation they agreed to give me my money back.

Perhaps I should have just left it there, but I was irritated and intrigued as to how this could have happened.

When I got home I fired off three emails. One to customer services at the Emporium, a second to Microsoft's piracy hotline and a third to Acer. A charming woman from Acer returned my call very promptly, telling me that only some of their machines were shipped with windows pre-installed. Others had the Linux operating system, and Acer had little control over what others installed on the computers before they were sold. "Frankly, this happens all the time," she said.

But at the Emporium? I sent a second email to them asking how this had happened, but have still had no reply.

Interestingly, Microsoft never got back to me either.

Meanwhile my children were still giving me a hard time. So I did what I felt I had to in the circumstances: went to the excellent i-studio on Sukhumvit Soi 55 and bought a Mac.

K-town in Bangkok

By Bangkok Chowhound

It's a bit embarrassing, especially for my long-suffering husband, but I always have to fight the urge to grab a microphone and belt out some karaoke favorites whenever I have Korean food.

That's probably because when I lived in New York in the mid-1990s, the best place to get in touch with your inner diva and shamelessly croon those Eighties hits that you secretly enjoyed (think "Sister Christian" in Boogie Nights) was Koreatown, or as we affectionately called it, K-town. A somewhat shabby neighborhood caught between Macy's and the Empire State Building, K-town was home to tiny, brightly lit nail salons, 24-hour karaoke joints complete with private rooms and dozens of cheap and cheerful Korean restaurants that served obscene quantities of top-notch beef at disturbingly low prices.

In other words, they were just the place for a penniless recent college graduate to take a break from the toasted-cheese-on-bagel diet and ingest her monthly requirement of protein all in one go. Best of all, after polishing off a pound or two of beef each, you could stagger next door into a private lounge furnished with black vinyl leather couches and tunelessly warble along to Boy, Madge or Frank without risking a punch-up with locals who took their karaoke seriously. It was the best entertainment for under \$25 a head, depending on how much Johnnie Walker you drank.

This was long before Momofuku Noodle Bar and other certifiably hip restaurants convinced fickle New York diners of the merits of Korean cuisine by serving its straightforward fiery, meaty dishes in more aesthetically pleasing settings. Still, recessed lighting, blonde wood accents and a lounge music-filled iPod can't disguise the fact that most Korean food—at least what's commonly

served in restaurants outside South Korea—is peasant food.

By no means am I belittling Korean cuisine by calling it peasant food. After spending eight years in the region, I've decided there are tried-and-true methods of judging an Asian cuisine. First, there's the quality of the rice. In Thailand, you will almost always get decent rice. It might not be served at the desired temperature, but you can tell costlier, unbroken grains have been used, and they've been washed and cooked properly. In the Philippines, I was once handed a plate of gummy, stone-cold rice dotted with small, black pebbles. This was to accompany a plate of seaweed, cooked but still covered in sand. Maybe all that grit constituted an indigenous form of colon cleansing, but it took a vigorous tooth-brushing session to excavate the grit from between my molars.

The second way of judging an Asian cuisine, and this probably holds true all over the world, is the quality of what the proletariat eat. Think about it: if you were a farmer in 19th-century Italy or France, you'd get to sup on great, great food every day. Cassoulet again? Oh go on, twist my arm. This rule definitely holds true in Asia. Proles in Thailand have som tam and laarb while those in China have mapo tofu and dumplings. Somewhere in the Philippines (yes, the region's culinary whipping boy), there's a village where they apparently like to take goat intestines, soak them in urine, and then grill them over an open fire until they're charred beyond recognition. Enough said.

Korean food is peasant food of the highest, most exalted order. There is nothing remotely effete about Korean cuisine. Its pillars are garlic, chili, fermented cabbage and meat. It's the ideal cuisine for the dissolute and dissipated. Even the most cigarette- and alcohol-numbed palate can savor the taste of kimchi, bibimbap and bulgogi.

Penny-pinching control freaks can also rejoice over the prospect of an evening at a Korean restaurant. Not only do you get to cook the meat dishes yourself, but you also get to nibble on half a dozen free dishes, including at least two different kinds of kimchi, seafood marinated in chili sauce, a slice or two of mung-bean pancake and a clutch of quails' eggs.

And for the carnivorous, Korean restaurants are safe havens from vegetarians. Indeed, pioneering NYC chef David Chang of Momofuku struck off nearly all the meatless options from his menu after an especially self-righteous vegetarian threatened to sue him for not serving veggie broths. "I got so pissed off," he told New York Magazine.

Thankfully, you don't need to travel to Seoul or K-town to experience this exuberantly ketosis and halitosis-inducing food. Officially, nearly 68,000 expatriate workers live in Bangkok, and judging by our neighborhood, Sukhumvit Soi 12, a sizeable chunk of them are Koreans. Conveniently, at the top of the soi is Sukhumvit Plaza, which houses a dozen or so Korean restaurants that are packed with families and reveling businessmen at night.

We've sampled a number of the Korean restaurants in Sukhumvit Plaza, and I have to admit, they're only really distinguishable by the décor, the size of their portions and the number of free dishes. And whether they give you a complimentary cup of cinnamon tea that's like liquid Big Red chewing gum. Still, some of them stand out as serious value for money.

But there's no karaoke lounge nearby. So after you've had your pound of beef, you can wander into one of the Korean grocery stores and stare at the vibrantly wacky packaging in the candy section. Until karaoke comes to Sukhumvit Plaza, that's all the after-dinner entertainment there is.



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The dental checkup

The dentist is your family's partner on the Bright Smiles pathway. Be sure to schedule regular dental appointments for the whole family. A child's first visit should take place before his or her third birthday. Dental checkups early in a child's life allow children to have a positive dental health experience.

TIP: Take your young toddler with you to your own appointment first. That way, the dental office becomes a familiar place.

Your dental checkup: what to expect Fluoride treatments:

Your dentist may treat your child's teeth with extra fluoride in the form of a gel to make teeth stronger. This gel goes in a tray that fits into the mouth that children wear for a few minutes to let the fluoride sink into their teeth. It comes in neat flavors for kids!

Dental sealants:

These are thin, protective plastic coatings applied by the dentist to the permanent back teeth (molars). They fill in the grooves on the chewing surfaces of the teeth where foods and bacteria can get stuck and cause cavities. Once applied, sealants can last for several years.

Preventing early childhood cavities (sometimes known as Baby Bottle Tooth Decay)

Early Childhood Cavities is a childhood disease that can be prevented. The following steps can help guard your baby against this painful condition-and ask your dentist or physician for more information.

It's best not to put a bottle in bed with your baby. But if you must put a bottle in bed with your baby, put only plain water in it. Any liquid except water, even milk and juice, can cause cavities.

You can use a bottle to feed your baby at regular feeding times, but allowing the bottle to be used as a pacifier can be a major cause of cavities.

- Hold your baby while feeding him/her. If your baby falls asleep, remove the bottle and put him/her in bed.
- Avoid putting your baby to sleep with a bottle.
- Avoid letting your toddler walk around with a bottle.

Dental Clinic: Samitivej Sukumvit Hospital Phone: 66(0) 2711-8989-90
Samitivej Srinakarin Hospital Phone: 66(0) 2378-9121-2



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