

Thai journal: Volume 22 – You're History, Baby!

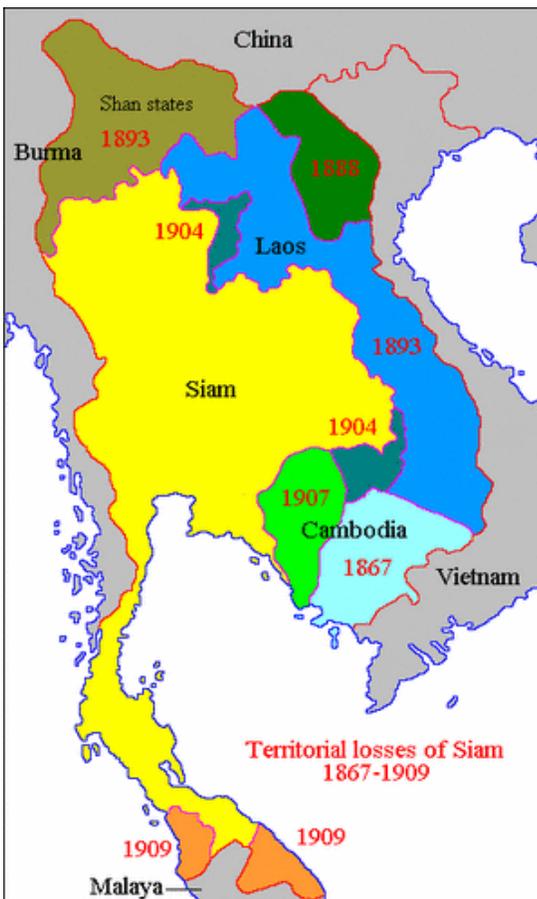
Thai History – At Long Last

It was inevitable. You had to know this was coming. Sooner or later we were going to have to talk about Thai history. I will be making references to periods of Thai history in the future, --- I have indeed already done so --- so you might as well have some idea of what I'm talking about. Whenever I ask Cindy something about Thai history, she just rolls her eyes and refers me to someone else for the answer. In her defense, the way she learned Thai history was as a litany of dates and kings (and there are a lot of them), rather dry stuff. So stick with me. I promise this won't be *too* painful.

So what I want to sketch out for you briefly are the main periods in Thai history. Here they are:

- Sukhothai (~1238 - 1438)
- Ayuthaya (~1350 -1767)
- Thonburi-Ratanakosin (~1782 – Present)

Note: the ~ means dates are approximate and there are gaps and overlaps, but they are adequate for our purposes. You should also notice that the map represents Thailand at it's zenith, at least as far as territory is concerned. The dates indicate when those areas were lost. Most of this territory was lost to European imperialism. Thailand was able to shed pieces of itself, almost like cutting off pieces of sausage, to assuage European colonial design and still maintain the essence of Thailand. By the time European powers were a threat to the central Thai homeland, the colonial period had ended. Though the Japanese occupied only a part of Thailand during WWII, it remained intact.



Prehistory

Of course, history doesn't conveniently start on some nice, tidy date. Like the Big Bang, past events affect present day realities in complex and often indecipherable ways. Thai history is no different. The early history of the region was influenced by India and by the 2nd and 3rd centuries Buddhism was flourishing in the area.

By the 11th century the 100 pound gorilla in the area was the Khmer empire, centered in modern day Cambodia and known for his architectural wonder, Angkor Wat. It also encompassed most of present day Thailand, as well as the southern parts of Viet Nam, Myanmar (Burma) and a good chunk of Laos. In the 13th century, a distinctly Thai ethnic stock, who had migrated into the area from southern China became increasingly restive. These principalities became stronger as the Khmer empire went into decline.

Sukhothai Period

In 1238 Sukhothai, which is considered to be the first Thai kingdom and literally means, "Rising of Happiness", declared its independence. It consisted of central and southern Thailand, including all of Malaysia, and virtually all of Laos. This is considered the "golden age" of Thai politics, religion and culture, a time when there was

enough to eat and the kingdom was unconquerable. A passage from a well known literary work of the time reads:

“This land of Sukhothai is thriving. There is fish in the water and rice in the fields The King has hung a bell in the opening of the gate over there; if any commoner has a grievance which sickens his belly and grips his heart, he goes and strikes the bell; King Ram Khamhaeng questions the man, examines the case and decides it justly for him.”

During this time the Thai writing system emerged as well as a Thai form of Theravada Buddhism. It is noteworthy that northern Thailand, including Chiang Mai, was not part of Sukhothai, but constituted a separate kingdom known simply as Lanna, which existed from roughly 1296 until it fell to the Burmese in 1558.

Ayuthaya Period

The Thai kings during the Ayuthaya period grew very powerful during the 14th and 15th centuries, gobbling up the remnants of the crumbling Khmer empire. The kingdom sustained an unbroken monarchical succession through 34 reigns over a period of 400 years. Imagine having to memorize all those kings and the dates of their reign. And this is just one historical period. No wonder Cindy didn't like history.

There was a lot of interest from European nations during this period, first from the Portuguese, who established an embassy in 1511, to be followed by the Dutch in 1605, the English in 1612, the Danes in 1621 and the French in 1662. In 1690, Londoner Engelbert Campfer, not to be confused with Engelbert Humperdinct, proclaimed, “Among the Asian nations, the Kingdom of Siam is the greatest. The magnificence of the Ayuthaya Court is incomparable.”

Thonburi-Ratangosin Period

The Burmese, those scoundrels, invaded Ayuthaya in 1765, and completely destroyed temples, religious articles and manuscripts. It wasn't until 1769 that a half-Chinese, half-Thai general by the name of Taksin, not to be confused with the former Thai Prime Minister, Thaksin Sinawatra, established a new kingdom in Thonburi, across the river from Bangkok and began reconstituting the country. He began to have delusions that he was the next Buddha and so his ministers deposed and then executed him in the custom reserved for royalty – by beating him to death in a velvet sack so that no royal blood touched the ground. There are plenty of intrigues and lots of blood and guts among the royals throughout Thai history. Not even the king was spared.



We visited Tak province and the monument named after the good King Taksin a while ago. There were the usual menagerie of characters, animal figurines of all sizes, of creatures he liked assembled off to one side. There were also many offerings, and yes, that is a real pig's head in the picture,

at the entrance to the shrine. It would be a shame to waste such a sumptuous piece of meat, so after the incense stick of the person who brought it burns down, the same person or another, may light another joss stick and ask for it on the theory that after the burning of the original incense stick, the spirit has consumed what it needs and is satisfied. It is then up for grabs.



People from all over come to show their respect when they are in the area or traveling through. We made a special stop. There's a lot of travel in Thailand done not so much to visit the scenery, but to visit religious or culture shrines such as this one.

Modern Times

This is the period of some of the great modernizers. It started with restoring much of the culture that was ravaged by the Burmese. Moving the capital to the Bangkok area also made it more difficult for the Burmese to continue their rampages. King Mongkut, whose portrayal in "The King and I" is still considered outrageous, studied western science, was shrewd in his dealing with European nations, and advanced education. He also offered two elephants to President Lincoln to help fight the US Civil War. King Mongkut's son, King Chulalongkorn (1868-1910), continued his father's reforms, established a civil service, built railways, restructured the legal code and abolished slavery.

In 1932 a group of Thai students living in Paris became so enamored of democracy that they mounted a successful coup d'etat, the first of 18 to the present day. So I suppose you can blame all this on the French. I once heard that the coup players justified their action as a way of relieving the king of many of the burdens that he was bearing in running the country. Now no one could blame the king anymore; They would have to blame them. How generous of them.

During WWII, the Japanese occupied portions of Thailand, but though the government collaborated a "Free Thai" movement also existed. When the Thai government declared war on the US in 1942, the Thai ambassador in Washington, Seni Pramoj, refused to deliver the declaration. This is one of the reasons the US was so magnanimous at the end of the war and refused to seek reparations. This act is part of what has sustained the very special relationship between the US and Thailand since that time.

A succession of rather benign military dictatorships ruled until October 1976, when student lead protests for democracy resulted in bloodshed. His Majesty the King virtually ordered the two top generals to leave the country and that ushered in the first faltering steps toward democracy, which was briefly halted in 1991 by another bloody coup. Finally there is the recently staged bloodless coup of September 19, 2006.

So there you have it, everything you need to know about Thai history. Is anyone still awake? Class is out, as far as history, that is.

When the Student is Ready the Teacher Will Appear

Speaking of class, between our trips to Australia and the US, we began doing a little English teaching at a school a friend of Cindy's runs in nearby Lamphun, about 45 minutes south of Chiang Mai. It's just a couple of hours on Saturday afternoon. I have split a class of 17 middle school students in half (by ability) and while I teach one group, Cindy teaches the other. Then we swap groups for the

next hour. I'm teaching "conversation", which consists of pronunciation, questions and answer practice, and dialogs while Cindy concentrates more on grammar and structure.



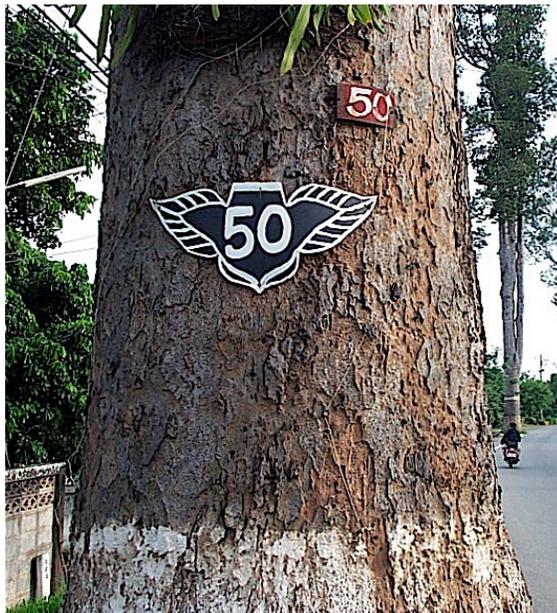
There is quite a range in their understanding and proficiency. So far it's been fun and because I keep reviewing the questions and answers, it appears to be sinking in. So if you should run into one of the students in the class pictured on the right, ask them about their favorite snack or whether they are a couch potato or not and what they usually do on Saturday. If you don't get a comprehensible answer, let me know.

I'm thinking, however, of introducing a couple to new tenses to cover some gaps, such as the present perfect humongous, the past ridiculous, the future combustible, the subversive mood, and my favorite, to replace the passive voice, the bogus voice. I'll let you know how this works out.

These Are a Few of My Favorite Things



Since I've mentioned Lamphun, let me tell you about the road that connects Chiang Mai to Lamphun, which I refer to as the "tree road" because of the huge trees that skirt its sides. These trees have been here for hundreds of years, and even before there was a modern road here, served to give some shade to travelers along this route. There used to be a lot more of them and over the years many have been felled, until, that is, the royal family became involved and pretty much put the kibosh on that. Now it would take a royal decree to take on of these guys down. You will also note the saffron sash around the trees. Even in a Buddhist country such as Thailand, there are still a lot of animist beliefs woven in. It is believed that spirits inhabit the trees so one needs to make offerings and try not to roll up the spirits.



There are 1,000 of these trees stretching from Chiang Mai to the outskirts of Lamphun and each one of them is numbered. This is as close as it gets to a consistent addressing scheme. Now, instead of looking for house number 348/2 --- often there is no house number at all --- if you live on this road you can just say, "I'm at tree 50". In the case of the picture you can see someone has made it even more obvious than the official red tag marking scheme. I understand that there are people along the road who wouldn't mind seeing some of them die so that that it could be removed to open up some much needed space. As it is, it's kind of like having a whole mouthful of teeth and loosing one at a time over hundreds of years.