

Thai journal – Volume 15

Bungalow Serendipity

I have been blessed with a lot of serendipities. The way we came to find this bungalow was just one of those. In Sept, we had come to Chiang Mai specifically to find a place to stay for a short term, 6 – 9 month basis. All the places we had seen, from condos to town homes, to houses were either in an unacceptable condition, too expensive, or not in the area we wanted to be right now.

After four days and the need to return to Bangkok, we were faced with either choosing something we were not very excited about or coming up empty yet again. We decided to go to a popular Vietnamese restaurant practically in the shadow of the hotel we were staying.

I had not really had Vietnamese food before and found it quite good. As we were walking back up the soi to the road which lead to the hotel, we noticed a hand lettered sign on a fence around a compound. It said, “House For Rent – A/C, Hot Shower.” We rang the bell and the servant said the landlady was out, but would call us when she returned.



We stopped back a couple of hours later and had a look at the place. It was occupied at the time by a Canadian girl who was attending Chiang Mai University on a work/study program. We checked out the place and there was no doubt in either of our



minds that this was it. And so here we are.

Our bungalow is located in the back of the compound. The first house is that of the mother of our landlady. She is 83 and very chipper. The one barely visible in the background is that of the landlady's family. You can't see our bungalow from the soi. On the other side of us are about 840 of our closest

neighbors. They live in a place called the Hillside Condotel (Condo & Hotel). That was one of the places on our short list, but on the expensive side.



Chiang Mai, which literally means “new city”, dates back to 1296 when it became the capital of the then Lannathai kingdom, which was not part of the existing Thai kingdom of Ayutthaya that lay to the south. King Mengrai constructed a moat and a wall around the city to protect it against raids from the Burmese. With the decline of the Lannathai kingdom, the city lost importance and often was occupied by either the Burmese or by the Thais from Ayutthaya. As a result of the Burmese wars that culminated in the fall of Ayutthaya in April 1767, Chiang Mai itself was so depopulated that the remaining inhabitants abandoned the city for fifteen years. Sometimes when the traffic is particularly bad, I think there may be similar forces at work today. Or perhaps it's a drill in case the Burmese get rambunctious again.

Chiang Mai formally became part of Siam in 1774 when King Taksin --- we'll learn more about him later --- captured the city from the Burmese. Chiang Mai rose in both cultural, trading and economic terms to gradually adopt its current status as the unofficial capital of the north of Thailand, second only in national importance to Bangkok. It ranks first with us.

“Pandamonium” at the Chiang Mai Zoo

First, a couple of definitions. A pandemic is a large number of pandas assembled in one place. “Pandamonium” is a stampede of pandas. The Chiang Mai zoo is home to two giant pandas on loan from China. Scientists disagree as to which family they belong, generally attributing the smaller red pandas to the raccoon family and the giant panda to the bear family. Then there's Andy

Panda, the cartoon character. No telling where he belongs. Some think that pandas should be in a family of their own.



While Cindy was in Dallas and I was in Chiang Mai, the two inhabitants here, a male and a female by the names of Linhui and Chuang Chuang, who are each 4 years old, and were living together in sin up to that time, were symbolically married. There was a big parade and much ado about

these nuptials. It was hoped that this would put them in a mating mood. If sitting in the back seat of a '52 Chevy can't get you in the mood, nothing can. When we visited them a couple of weeks after the ceremony, they were sleeping on opposite ends of their enclosure, like an old, married couple. The honeymoon was clearly over.



They live in a special enclosure that is hermetically sealed and temperature controlled. You even have to walk through some disinfectant upon entering their habitat. No flash pictures or loud noises are allowed so as not to disturb them. They are living the life of Riley. They are native to the cooler regions of southwest China and Tibet, so this is not a climate in which they are comfortable.

Unlike most plant-eating animals, pandas have inefficient digestive systems that cannot easily change plant food into energy. Pandas must eat large quantities of bamboo to get enough energy. For example, giant pandas eat as much as 85 pounds (39 kilograms) of bamboo shoots per day. That doesn't leave a lot of time for extracurricular activities, sports or courting. When they are not eating or working out (;>), they sleep. Hey, give them a TV remote and they

could be just like us. Check out those “Easy Panda” reclining rockers. They are awakened rather unceremoniously every two hours by one of the attendants yelling their names and banging on the back of the cage so they can be feed. Hey, maybe this has something to do with why it is so difficult to get pandas to breed in captivity. If someone woke me up every two hours, I'd hardly be in a romantic mood.

Huge tracks of bamboo forests in China have had to be reserved to keep the dwindling population, now less than 1,000, from starvation. Another strategy has been to ship them off the zoos and let someone else feed them. Here in Chiang Mai, it costs 75 cents just to get into the park and another \$1.25 to get into the panda exhibit. If you don't get there at feeding time or can't wait around, you'll have to be content to watch them sleep.

And since we are talking about the Chiang Mai zoo, don't get me started. In what will certainly go down as the stupidest idea in recorded history, the director of the Chiang Mai Night Safari Project, a guy by the name of Plodprasop Suraswadi, specially appointed by the Prime Minister, who hails from Chiang Mai, got the bright idea of offering rare animal meat, to include lion, tiger, zebra, giraffe and elephant, on the menu in the zoo cafeteria. Yes, there could be giraffe steaks and lion burgers sold at outrageous prices. Can't you just see it, you bring your kids to the zoo, point out the giraffe and then sit down only to tell them that that's what you're eating. What was he thinking?

This raised quite an outcry from local civic and conservation groups, who picketed the zoo for days lambasting the idea. An equally strong reaction was registered in Kenya where many of the animal for the Night Safari, but not the diner, were to come from. In the end, the idea was reconsidered. Score one for community outrage, which doesn't surface all that much around here.

It's Just Us Now

One evening in those first couple of days, we were looking at each other across the table and it suddenly it dawned of us. Here we are. It's pretty much just us. There's no family to be had any place near, though we do know some people in the area and are making new friends every day. We don't have a TV, but that's a low priority right now from my point of view. When we get tired of looking at each other, that situation could change. I can see you all running for the phones to call your bookies to place bets on just how long that will be. I promise to tell, so if you want to hazard a guess, feel free to shoot me an e-mail, Subject: TV Lottery. We'll bring back a gift for whoever gets the closest. Cindy has always said I watched too much TV, so I think I'll just let this be her call. I just heard a statistic that says, the more someone is on the net, the less likely that person is to watch TV. On that basis I could hold out for a long time.

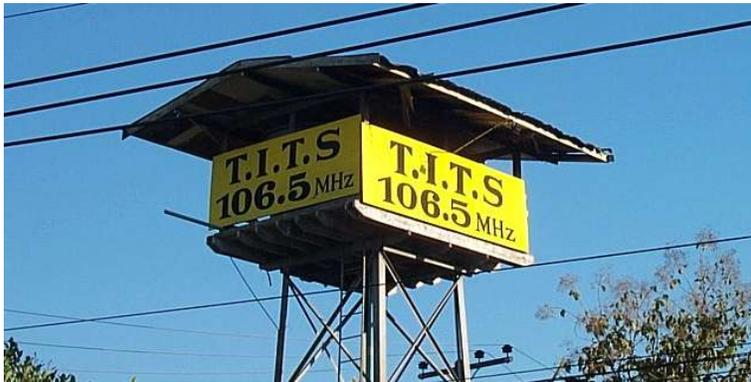


A Swiss woman that I meet one day while jogging, who has become our friend, has changed my paradigm somewhat about video entertainment. She has a TV and a DVD player. She doesn't understand Thai, and does not want to pay close to \$40/month for satellite channels that would provide a wide array of western content, so she just buys DVDs. They only run

about \$3.75 each. These don't appear to be something that someone is running off in a back room on cheap media. You get a case, the art work, which fits over the case, and a DVD that reflects the art work as well. I have usually looked at a movie as a one-time event, figuring there aren't many I would watch multiple times. But at \$3.75, they are just commodities and one person, let alone two, can't even attend a movie for that. So why not buy them? We have a small 13 inch portable DVD player that someone gave us as a gift and then there's my laptop, which plays DVDs as well. So right now, we don't even need a TV for that.

Please be aware that the following item is rated NC-17: NO ONE 17 AND UNDER ADMITTED.

TITS Radio



I'm afraid we got to Chiang Mai too late. The damage has already been done. I found the only all English, all-the-time radio station, a service of the Tourist Information and Travel Service. That's right, the call letters are TITS radio. What were they

thinking? Why not just Tourist Information Service (TIS)? Doesn't anyone screen this stuff? Given that most of the DJs are native English speakers, even a couple of women, how could such a thing happen? Apparently there has been enough adverse and snide comments about this that the station will change its call letters to BLISS in the future. Nevertheless, it didn't help matters, when a female DJ remarked that "TITS is BLISS".

As it is, the station doesn't play very good music, but they have an opening for

a DJ on their morning program from 8:00 – 10:00. This is something that I would love to do, and some day I might, but right now it would interfere with my other morning activities. Besides I don't think I could say the call letters.

This is not the only example of the language gone a muck. There is a car rental place called “Bomb Car Rental”. There is a very common Thai nickname, pronounced “Boom” that one hears a lot, so this may just be one of those transcription problems. Then there's the laundromat called the “Washy” laundromat. I would have suggested the “Wishy Washy” laundromat instead. Actually there could be some good consulting opportunities here if anyone would be willing to pay for them.

Tsunami Tribute



To commemorate the anniversary of the tsunami, which struck just over a year ago, the Thai government organized a commemorative event for family members of those who died as well as the survivors. The part I watched on TV was quite moving when it stayed with the participants and stayed away from the speeches. There was also a song, the refrain of which went like this:

“It's time to heal; It's time to smile, the waves of hope is coming on the way.”



Other than the obvious subject/verb agreement, the melody was quite nice. Here, again, they might have run this by a native English speaker.

A member of the royal family, HRH Princess Ubolratana lost her 20 something year old son, grandson to HM the King, to the tsunami, so it touched lives at all levels. This remembrance was her first public appearance in a year.

It ended with a massive lantern release, one for every person known dead. Keep in mind, there are still thousands, mostly Thai, either missing or unidentified still in the morgue.