

Thai Journal – Volume 34: A Change of Season

3-Dog Night

The ink is black, the page is white
Together we learn to read and write
A child is black, a child is white
The whole world looks upon the sight, a beautiful sight

No, we're not talking about the 1950s hit, "Black and White", by Three Dog Night, we're talking weather here. Though we are in the throws of a global warming, or is that climate change, you wouldn't know it around here. We've been in the cool season since mid November and it's been quite pleasant during the day, with light breezes and highs in the low 80s. The evenings, however, have been another thing. There have been stretches when the temp at night reached the low 50s. I can hear it now, you're all yelling, "creme puff!" As a Wisconsinite, I should be able to take this.



That wouldn't be a problem until you consider the fact that though we have A/C, we don't have any heating, other than body heat, that is. So when those temperatures plunge, you'd better have some warm nightwear and a good blanket. Break out the sweats! We brought a light, wool blanket, the yellow one, back with us on a previous trip to the US and have added another, the blue one, but even with those, it's a bit chilly. We've had a number of 2 and 3 dog nights. I understand that that expression originated in Australia and was meant to convey how many dogs shepherds would have to sleep

with at night to keep warm, a 5-dog night being the most severe. Short of rounding up some dogs from the neighbor, I'm going to have to do with a 1-woman night. Polygamy is not an option.

Cindy the Samaritan

When Cindy goes to her hometown down south you never know what she's going to bring back with her. Usually it's some honey that I use to sweeten my morning cereal. The honey we have found locally is nothing like Sue Bee honey; not even close to being as sweet. I've even purchased some imported honey from Australia and it was more expensive and equally disappointing. The great truth that I've learned is that it's all about the flowers that the bees collect their nectar from. It's the same with the tomatoes. Heinz catchup produced in Thailand does not taste like Heinz catsup produced in the US; It's the tomatoes, stupid!

The honey from the south, though not Sue Bee, is the best around. But this time it wasn't honey she brought back. When I picked her up at the bus station, she was standing around talking to a "farang" family. There were two, little, blonde girls about 5 and 10 years old. She told me that she had met them on the bus and they had not yet made any arrangements for their stay in Chiang Mai. Since Cindy is on very good terms with the manager of the housing estate in which we live, she knew that the owner of a house down the street from us was in the US for an extended period of time and had let the manager know that the place was available for rent during their absence.

This was great news for this family from Denmark, who had been knocking around Thailand for the last six months. The previous places they had rented in some of the beach communities in the south were quite expensive and not all that nice. They were thrilled when they saw the place and excited about moving into a fully furnished two-story house. Their two little girls could be seen leading one of the dogs in the neighborhood around on a lease and were having a great time with the other kids.

But then a scant month after moving in, Kim received a late night phone call from the police in Denmark saying that his cousin, with whom he was very close, had been brutally killed by her husband and he needed to return home to help sort things out. And just like that they had to pull up stakes and were gone. Despite the fact that this didn't work out, I have to give Cindy a lot of credit for befriending these folks on a bus, getting to know them well enough to know of their need and then acting to meet that need.

Linguistic Bane

One of the problems with languages other than one's own, is how to represent the sounds in one's own alphabet. We found out just how problematical this could be during our recent escapade in Russia, where the use of the cyrillic alphabet confounded us because it contains Roman style characters, which represent sounds completely different than those we would associate with them.

When learning Thai during my Peace Corp days, we did make use of a phonetic alphabet to represent the sounds of Thai. This represented, we were told, an international phonetic pronunciation standard. There were some quirks in this system that only a linguist could comprehend, such as the use of aspirated and non aspirated sounds. We were not linguists. To me those were just sounds one made, or didn't make, when taking an aspirin. One example of this is the difference between a sound represented with a "p" and one with a "ph". One is aspirated, the other isn't. Don't ask me which is which.

So when we arrived in Thailand, we were somewhat amused and amazed that the English signage for Thai place names such as cities pretty much conformed to this standard. For example, the name of a town about three hours southwest of Bangkok is called Petburi, if one sounded it out, was spelled Phetburi. Somewhere along the line the standard got eroded, changed or evolved. Now the place is spelled Petchaburi though the sound has not changed. It is worthy of note that at no time has the Thai spelling changed. The "ch" sound was always silent in Thai.

On of rather hilarious note, the "g" sound is represented with a "k". There is a rather well known tourist destination in southwestern Thailand along the Andaman Sea, not far from Phuket (there's that meaningless "h" again) that sounds out to "Grabi" but is spelled "Krabi". All the foreigners dutifully pronounce it "Crabby". So you would have to call those perfectly delightful people who live there "Crabby" people. Those could be fighting words.

The point is that the country is not being visited by millions of linguists every year, but it is being visited by millions of tourists, a large portion of whom know English. So why shouldn't the signs, if they are going to be written in English at all, be spelled in a manner that corresponds to the normal rules of English pronunciation? So much for my rant for today. I'm going to take my meds now.

Initiation Day



On of the things my daily walk used to afford me when we still lived in the city was a chance to see what was happening at Chiang Mai University, which I passed every day on my way to the fitness park. One day I noticed an awful lot of activity for so early in the morning.

I found out that it was initiation day, a day for the new freshmen to show their enthusiasm for their faculty and they school, by engaging in rousing cheers and then marching the eight kilometers or so up nearby Doi Suthep. Instead of the usual hazing activities that might be visited upon freshmen, this was just one, good old, pep rally. It was a real festive atmosphere, most of the faculties arriving before dawn to line up and get ready for their turn. When I came upon one group, they were all so quiet I thought they were meditating. It didn't occur to me until later, that they had probably gotten up so early in the morning that they were just catching up on their sleep while they waited.



Each faculty lined up and marched toward the gate, which lead to the road to Doi Suthep. As they approach the gate, they yelled out their faculty name in English and in Thai. I must say I had a hard time understanding their English pronunciation. They then linked shoulders as they alternately shouted cheers in the air and at the ground. Finally they marched out the gate as they were being sprinkled with holy water from a monk.

Everyone seemed to be having a good time. Lots of upper classmen were there to cheer them on. No



one had to eat “worms”, drink large doses of alcohol or any of those other hazing pranks of which we are so familiar. This is not to say that the “freshies” don't take a little razing now and then. They have to wear those name tags around their necks with their school uniforms where ever they go for several weeks. I have seen them in a nearby shopping center wearing those name tags. If they get caught by an upper class-man without it, they will be called to account. The uniforms in the pictures are not their normal class attire.

Comedy of Errors

We closed on our house of Christmas Day. This is not a Thai holiday. If ever there was an auspicious day, that should have been it. I asked Cindy if there was anything I needed to do. She said, no. Foreigners cannot own land and since the house presumably came with land, this was in her ballpark. Condos are another story. Foreigners can and do own them.

In the early afternoon she came back and said that I needed to come with her because there were some documents that I had to sign. I asked her if I needed my passport and she said it wouldn't hurt to bring it along. Easier said than done. Normally there's a place I always keep it, but I had just been to immigration the week before and had misplaced it. Just try finding something when you're in a hurry. Eventually we decided to press on without it lest we not finish before the end of the day.

The land office is about 15 minutes from where we live. I signed the necessary papers and wouldn't you know it, they wanted to see my passport. I didn't have my passport, but I did have a color image of it on my iPod Touch, the iPhone without the phone. I showed that to the officials and they freaked out. They said that would not do as they needed a copy for the file. I offered to let them make a copy of the image on the iPod Touch. They were having none of that. We've got the internet, we've got cell phones, but this is pushing the envelope just a little too far.

So I decided to hurry back home and try to locate the passport. I was about a third of the way there when it dawned on me that I always keep a photocopy of my passport in the glove compartment of the car along with our auto registration and related documents. So I swung around and returned to the office where the officials were only too happy to accept the photocopy. Closing completed.

My Favorite Things: The Low Tech Solution



Sometimes the high tech solution, as much as we might like it to prevail, as in the previous topic, is not the best solution. Case in point, watering the flower beds in the median along the roads within Chiang Mai. I suppose automatic sprinklers could have been installed. What do you suppose the chances would be of those functioning properly over time? My guess is the plants would soon be history. Better to get a tanker truck, attach a fire hose and do it manually. Problem solved. You could also engage in some nice water fights at Songkran, the traditional Thai New Year in April.