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CULTURE SHOCK!
THAILAND

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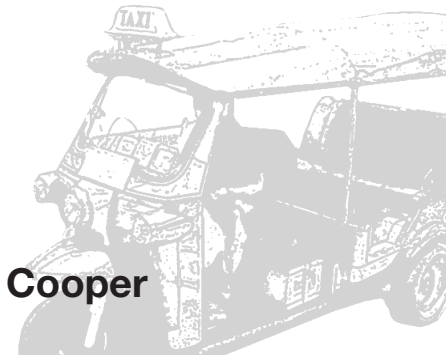


CULTURE SHOCK!

A Survival Guide to Customs and Etiquette

THAILAND

Robert Cooper



For Review only

CULTURE **SHOCK!**

A Survival Guide to Customs and Etiquette

THAILAND

Robert Cooper

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Culture shock is a state of disorientation that can come over anyone who has been thrust into unknown surroundings, away from one's comfort zone. *CultureShock!* is a series of trusted and reputed guides which has, for decades, been helping expatriates and long-term visitors to cushion the impact of culture shock whenever they move to a new country.

Written by people who have lived in the country and experienced culture shock themselves, these books provide all the information necessary for anyone to cope with these feelings of disorientation more effectively. The guides are written in a style that is easy to read and cover a range of topics that will give readers enough advice, hints and tips to make their lives as normal as possible again.

Each book is structured in the same manner. It begins with the first impressions that visitors will have of that city or country. To understand a culture, one must first understand the people – where they came from, who they are, the values and traditions they live by, as well as their customs and etiquette. This is covered in the first half of the book.

Then on with the practical aspects – how to settle in with the greatest of ease. Authors walk readers through topics such as how to find accommodation, get the utilities and telecommunications up and running, enrol the children in school and keep in the pink of health. But that's not all. Once the essentials are out of the way, venture out and try the food, enjoy more of the culture and travel to other areas. Then be immersed in the language of the country before discovering more about the business side of things.

To round off, snippets of basic information are offered before readers are 'tested' on customs and etiquette of the country. Useful words and phrases, a comprehensive resource guide and list of books for further research are also included for easy reference.

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*To my Thai daughters, Tintin (Tinagorn) and
Tessy (Tessini), who contributed a younger
generation's zing to this book.
And to my Lao son, Toby, the generation rising,
who gave me life as I gave him his.*

*The path towards understanding
is a million lives long
and so narrow in places
that each must pass alone.*

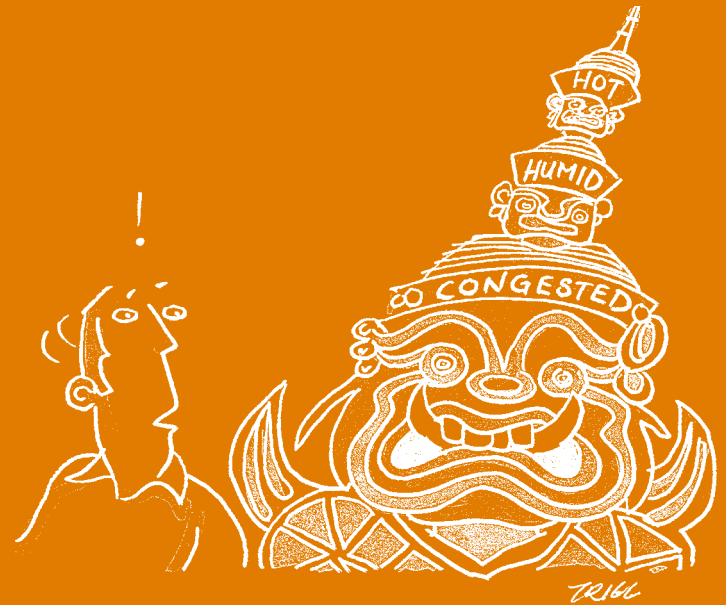
MAP OF THAILAND

For Review only



CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION



“The foot is not the proper appendage with which to point.”

– Thai official's advice to foreigners

I quoted the gem of wisdom above in the first edition of *Culture Shock! Thailand* back in 1982. It comes from a Thai civil servant advising foreigners visiting the kingdom on how to behave. Dozens of revisions later, I still can't tell you what *is* the proper appendage with which to point, but I now know it is not for me (and – my first words of advice – it is also not for you) to contradict a Thai official. The Thai official is right; never mind that since first coming to live in Thailand in 1973 the only people I have seen pointing with a foot are Thais – and only those practising *muay thai* (Thai boxing).

Do try to keep your appendages under control. But remember: the key ingredient of Thai culture is *tolerance* (just don't put your foot in it).

Tolerance has its limits but these are changing all the time from situation to situation (and from official to official), and most Thais will tolerate foreigners who don't know how to behave – they are, after all, foreign appendages to Thailand. You will probably never be Thai. That's okay. But ask yourself if you want to be a proper appendage. If so, this book should give you some short cuts.

You'll be glad to know you are tolerated by a "real" Thai to exactly the same level he or she tolerates the younger generation of Thais – so there's no discrimination involved (although you still have to pay double++ to enter



tourist attractions ... unless you happen to look just like a Thai and keep your mouth shut and your American passport out of sight). Exceptions are now made for younger Thais (who used to be under 20 and are now under 38) who really should know how to behave, since they are all obliged to read Sunthorn Phu at school (see Famous Thais at the back of this book), but don't always behave the way they know they should. They are exceptions – and the tolerance of exceptions is exceptional.

Globalisation has brought us all much closer together: foreigners and Thais, young and old, behave much the same in a more or less orderly queue for a Big Mac and Coke. Only if you occasionally step outside McDonald's do you need this book.

Can you imagine a country without McDonald's? That was Thailand before 1985, when the first McDonald's burger unwrapped in Bangkok (*Culture Shock! Thailand*, the first in the universal series, preceded it by three years); there are now some 400 outlets throughout the kingdom (and over four million copies of *Culture Shock* sold). Ronnie opened the gate. Tesco (Tesco Lotus) supermarkets followed, opening in Thailand in 1998, now with over 1,400 stores throughout the country. And in almost every Tesco Lotus you'll find both a traditional Thai food court and an untraditional "Thai" Pizza Company restaurant (which began in Thailand as a franchise of Pizza Hut, Thai-ised, and now has its own franchises in the Middle East and throughout East Asia) *and* you'll find a Kentucky Fried Chicken. Both Thai food courts and non-Thai fast food are equally popular with Thais. These and other foreign thingies are doing very well – just as well as Thai restaurants in other countries – so absolutely no reason *you* can't feel at home in Thailand.

NOW AND THEN

This book is not a statistical portrait of Thailand (you can get that online from *CIA Factbook Thailand*), but figures and trends cannot be ignored as they suggest Thais in 1982, who rarely

ate ice cream, are different from Thais in 2018, who take the kids regularly to Swenson's – which might have something to do with the 10 per cent obesity rate in the 2018 population of Thailand. (Obesity overtook malnutrition around 2010.) Substantive changes to Thai life and culture are not all due to McDonald's, Tesco and Western fast food, but these are the most visible symptoms of change. Less visible but equally important are:

- In 1980, 75 per cent of Thais lived and worked in agricultural areas – today some 60 per cent of the workforce is employed in *non*-agricultural sectors (but a huge 40 per cent remain in agriculture which still accounts for 8 per cent of GDP).
- The average age in 1980 was under 20 years, today it's 38 and rising.
- The average Thai 13-year-old female in 1980 could expect to have 3 children during her life; in 2018 she can expect 1.3 children – fertility rates in Thailand are now considered to be 30 per cent *below* replacement level.
- Fewer Thais are being born but the population has risen to the current 69 million. How come? People live longer; life expectancy is now 75 years and problems associated with aging populations are predicted.
- Thais are much better educated. Average school life in 1980 was 9 years, today it is 16 years – the same as France.
- The number of smart phones in the population above age 13 was zero in 1980 and is now one for every two adults.

To sum up: Thailand today is not Thailand 1982. So, what is Thailand and Thai culture today? That's what this book is about.

The Art of Being Tolerable

If your objective is to understand Thailand and integrate to a point some way below assimilation but a bit above extra-terrestrial

– somewhere where you can feel at ease with Thais and have some of them feel at ease with you – it might be easier today than forty years ago (or it might be more demanding!). Easier because the culture gap has closed and you can now "get by" from day one without too much pain; more difficult because there are now (at least) two Thai cultures to accommodate, and perhaps a third "fusion" culture, of which you are already part, which will seem in some ways familiar, in other ways alien.

The merging of outward appearances and behaviour patterns, the increase in English language capacity and the abundance of visitors from the West and East means you don't stand out quite as much as foreigners once did. Of course, you probably look different, speak differently and, if you are from Europe, like to burn in the sun at times when Thais go to lengths to cover themselves up. But you don't have as much scarcity value as culture shock sufferers of yore; you can now wear a mini-skirt if you wish and turn heads in appreciation rather than antipathy (if you have nice legs), because fashion-norms have changed – but if you're a man, you can wear it because of a traditional *tolerance* that has not changed (just don't try entering a Royal Wat in one).

If you want to do more than just be tolerated in your new social environment, you need to be sensitive to the new limits of tolerance, and these are not as clear cut as they were even a decade ago. Today, it may be difficult to find a young Thai lady without a tattoo somewhere, but if waiting tables she is likely to have a sticking plaster over any publicly visible tattoo – that she has the tattoo is new culture, the patch covering it is the culture of her older customers. If you are into the arts, you'll be happy to view Apichatpong Weerasethakul's film, *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*, which won a Palme d'Or in 2010 in Cannes and is lauded in Thailand, but you won't be able to see (in Thailand) that same director's surreal *Cemetery of Splendour* – because it is banned. The situation is *not* one of anything goes.

The Oldies

Don't get the idea that "culture clash" is simply a question of age – being past it or being with it. The two best known contemporary Thai artists both had traditional, conservative starts; only in their sixties with long white beards did they create the White Temple and the Black Temple, now two of Thailand's more bizarre tourist attractions. Pichet Klunchun was a conservative Thai classical dancer before he formed his exciting dance company and contemporised *Khon* (traditional dance). And Thai artist Pannaphan Yodmanee was a restorer of traditional temple art before she won the Benesse Prize at the Singapore Biennale of 2016 with a pile of rubble on miniature Thai temples and stupas. Those visitors who wish to follow the ultimate in controversial art can now do so in contemporary Thailand, no problem, but the Thai artists they meet are all likely to have emerged from Thai traditions; they have built on those traditions, not replaced them.

You should be aware that the older generation of Thais is still around, even if you don't see much of them on fashion photo-shoots or the Thai Music Channel. It is *their* culture which is the influential or "dominant" one (even if they don't post many selfies on Facebook) and their culture – considered more traditional (or old fashioned) by the younger generation – is more specifically Thai. Life expectancy increase plus reduced fertility means there are a lot more oldies around than a generation back.

Oldie-culture might appear on the surface to be somewhat at odds with the culture you see all around you in today's Thailand and in some ways it is, but in other ways it is not – so hedge your bets. It pays social and sometimes economic dividends to understand traditional culture, which has lost some of the exoticism it had for Western visitors but which every Thai of any age, gender or ethnicity, knows is the binding factor that makes Thais *Thai* – along with the most important element of tolerance of differences ... within limits.

Things have changed greatly but by addition rather than replacement; modernity now lies like a shroud over tradition – but it is also a cover protecting its foundations.

The Good Old Days

And now for a splash of nostalgia for the bad old days, which might as well have been yesterday. Person-directed values and practices where the voices of elders and those working most closely with them are respected and honoured still have their place. The young might be protesting in the streets, but they are likely to be carrying pictures of the king.

When I first arrived in Thailand as a student it was 1973, an exceptional year. I couldn't wait to get out in the heat to look at the demonstrations against the military rule of the two generals in command at that time. I went to the huge open air gathering in Democracy Square and I remember thinking that surely military rule could not be that bad, as no troops were blocking the demonstration and young people were all carrying pictures of their king and the country flag – and they had set up mobile toilets in the square to keep democracy clean.

When a military helicopter hovered overhead I presumed it was just monitoring the situation or taking film to show on TV news. I even waved to the pilot. When the helicopter's machine-guns opened fire on the defenceless crowd my views changed quicker than I could say *chuay-duay* (help). Running with the crowd I found myself on Rajdamnoen Avenue opposite the police station. Something told me the rows of sandbags outside it and behind the sandbags the armed police or military – I couldn't tell the difference then – were not there to protect an English student in Bangkok.

When the police opened fire, I hit the paving stones along with thousands of other people. I could not believe this was happening. I'd just posted a letter to my parents back home in England saying how delightfully peaceful and pleasant Thailand was: nothing to worry about here, Mum. Nearby, some among

the protestors were returning fire from behind parked cars. There were loud explosions and the wide road separating combatants filled with smoke and gas. The shooting seemed to continue forever. Then suddenly it stopped. I looked up. A pick-up truck was moving very, very slowly down the empty avenue between the guns; on its back stood a group of monks in saffron robes. Just stood there. God, talk about Culture Shock!

The firing stopped. I was helped through an open doorway into a shop and out the back. I moved with the crowd, no idea where I was going, just got to get away – with the image of the monks in my mind, where it has stayed for almost half a century.

I found myself at the open gates of Thammasat University and stumbled through grounds that were to become very familiar to me. Suddenly: the river. No way back. No way forward. Taken by a Thai hand and helped onto a military boat that crossed the Chao Phraya. Saved by the Royal Thai Navy from the Royal Thai Army.

In terms of culture shock, that was my baptism of fire; I had no idea what was going on. I could speak no Thai and none of those around me took time out to explain the agenda. I read about it in the English language *Bangkok Post* the next day. The king's advisors advised the constitutional monarch and the king advised the generals running the country and the generals fled to America. Peace returned. For three weeks there was not a policeman on Bangkok's streets. Boy Scouts directed the traffic and monks went on alms rounds among burned-out vehicles. Democracy was back. It lasted three years. Then the military returned to power and hanged students from those same gates at Thammasat University through which I had escaped ... and the cycle started all over again. That's when I began to think about writing the first edition of *Culture Shock! Thailand*.

The 1982 edition described an undeveloped subsistence economy where 75 per cent of the population lived in villages and grew rice. They had plenty of rice but in 1990 also had a malnutrition rate of 30 per cent of the population. The port area

of Bangkok festered with slums and everywhere the shacks of the very poor filled gaps between the palaces of the very rich. Thai men went to Saudi Arabia to find work, Thai women managed the farm and an unknown number worked in some form of prostitution. Into this comparatively undeveloped Thailand came thousands of refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. *The good old days*. Thankfully, some things have changed.

Yin Yang and Yo-yo

Throughout the 1980s the economy grew rapidly. There was an economic hiccup in 1987, remedied by readjusting the currency. In the 1990s a whole new generation of well-educated Thais grew up and moved into a wide variety of new urban jobs. Thailand became one of the new tigers within the growing economies of Asia.

Thais then went condo-crazy: normal, sensible young people, whose parents still ploughed with buffaloes and fed the *phra phum* every morning, borrowed money at high interest rates to pay for a condominium in Bangkok. Condominiums doubled in price over the year or so it took to build them. Everybody was buying to sell, borrowing to buy. Then in 1997 the bubble burst. Fortunately the Asian Crunch was restricted to Thailand and its immediate neighbours. The Thais picked themselves up, dusted themselves off and incredibly were back on the gravy train by 2000, a little wiser and a lot more aware that money comes from hard work, not from gambling on condos.

Then – blame it on the *farang* – the Great Recession of 2008-9 in America and Europe. Being export-oriented, Thailand was infected, although not mortally wounded, and the economic circle closed again. I hope the current younger generation in Thailand does not have to go through the same circular learning curve, but I suspect it might.

The country now has an excellent infrastructure, a highly educated population, a seemingly dependable if unexciting

growth rate (3-4 per cent) and is a leading member of the ASEAN community. Border conflicts with the old enemies (Laos, Cambodia and Burma) sporadically get dusted off, but within an atmosphere that recognises peace, trade and dialogue as good for all. Today's young graduates have never known hardship. Family households are much smaller – prosperity and insurance no longer require large families – and almost all now enjoy electricity, clean water, television, refrigerator, modern sanitation, transport and since 2006, a welfare-state type health service. All this is today taken for granted.

The tsunami of 2004 devastated Phuket, but Thais rose to meet the destructive challenge of nature and things were back to normal within two years. Far more of a shock was the military tsunami again rolling its tanks into Bangkok in September 2006, ousting the elected prime minister. There was no shooting, at least not at first. Instead, soldiers in tanks were disarmed in a very Thai way, by flowers offered to them and babies held up for soldiers to cuddle. The images of soldiers with flowers in their gun barrels made the international media,



The very Thai coup of 2006

young things came out of their Bangkok coffee houses to be photographed among the tanks – critical reaction was, for a time, confused, both at home and abroad. The army bowed to various pressures and placed in position as PM a civilian who seemed equipped for the job (Abhisit: born in England, Eton-Oxford-educated, economist, *classmate of Boris Johnson*) but was not elected by the people. A political polarisation followed which led to a 'colour war' between shirts. 'Right-wing' yellow shirts occupied international airports and government offices in 2008, by their actions destroying a couple of tourist seasons and plunging the economy into recession in order to ensure Thaksin, the ousted but legitimate PM, left Thailand (he did). Then 'left-wing' red shirts supporting the ousted prime minister took to the streets in 2009–2010 to demand new elections, only to be routed by the military, with some 100 people shot dead – the same number as in the 1973 'people's revolution'. The elections were held, eventually, and the sister of the ousted prime minister, Yingluck Shinawatra, became the new prime minister, Thailand's first female premier and clearly a surrogate for her ousted brother. She was elected by the biggest landslide vote ever in Thailand in August 2011. It seemed the circle had turned and turned again. Yingluck was immediately faced with the biggest flood Thailand had experienced for three decades.

The recovery costs of those floods were high – some blamed Yingluck. Thailand had by then cut its development umbilical cord with the West and had a strong domestic economy. The skilled labour force, good facilities and services, cheaper costs and ease of doing business attracted foreign investment from West and East. The beauty of the country and its people also attracted more Western tourists and retirees to Thailand than to any other Asian country. Then, in 2014, Yingluck became the third prime minister to be removed from office by the Constitutional Court. She fled abroad. And then the much-loved King Bhumiphol the Great, the longest reigning

monarch in the world, died at age 88 in October 2016 and the nation went into mourning for a year. Elections were planned for 2019, with Prayut Chan-o-cha, Head of the National Council for Peace and Order, in charge until then.

Yes, the Thais and Thailand have changed incredibly, and changed again and again and again since the first edition of this book. Maybe it's just me, but I can't help but feel change is a bit of a yo-yo: things keep moving and keep coming back to where they were. The more it changes, the more it's the same thing. And what is that same thing? As a metaphor, let's say it's what it always was in Thailand: a rice field – which makes you the rice seedling.

THE HUMAN TRANSPLANT

One of the paradoxes of the modern world is that you can be uprooted, flown halfway around the globe, dropped down in another time, climate and culture, and expect to walk off the plane and function as usual. Like a rice seedling torn from its protected nursery and transplanted in a big, strange field, you the human transplant must either adapt and flourish or wither and perish. It's a tribute to the human species that most people in this position do manage to carry on. Indeed, many of them revel in the novelty of their situation. But all feel at least something of the disorientation of culture shock. The pavement you thought was for walking on is really for riding motorcycles on. The tuk-tuk driver asks you for \$100 and accepts 100 baht then asks if you want boom-boom. The chicken soup is a bowl of clear hot water with a chicken's foot lurking in it and you have a pair of chopsticks to eat it with.

Suddenly all your education seems worthless – you are illiterate, surrounded by squiggles that might mean everything or nothing. Making phone calls, catching a bus, posting a letter and doing the shopping become expeditions. You don't know when to shake hands, when and how to make a *wai*, give tips, talk to strangers, make invitations, refuse invitations, arrive on

The Vet and the Mechanic

Roger had bought himself a beautiful little Golden Retriever puppy. The time came to vaccinate the puppy and Roger asked his Thai neighbour if he knew a vet. He did and called the vet to help Roger. Roger had also bought himself a beautiful little red jeep with a reconditioned engine that was totally overhauled and 'as good as new'. Roger was pleased with his bargain and showed it off to the neighbours. The next day, it refused to start. Roger angrily phoned the garage. They assured him they would send a mechanic to the house immediately. Ten minutes later, a man in overalls turned up on a motor bike, carrying a small tool bag. Roger's Thai was good enough for him to lash into the man. "I bought this only yesterday." Roger pushed the man into the driver's seat. "Start the bloody thing," he shouted. "I would if I could," replied the man in overalls timidly. "But I can't." "Ah, you see! Even you can't start it. Give me my money back." The man looked blankly at Roger. "Money?" he said, as if he had never heard of the word.

"Ngern, baht, tang-money, I want it back." Roger was quite angry by this time and getting angrier.

The man in overalls shrank into the seat. "I'm sorry I can't start your car," he said apologetically.

"Sorry, my arse," said Roger. "Why the hell can't you start it? Call yourself a mechanic?"

"No," said the man. "I call myself a vet."

With no trouble the dog was vaccinated and the vet pleasantly took leave as two mechanics arrived, got into the car and started it immediately. Roger was surprised. "But I've been trying to start it for hours."

The mechanics looked at the poor foreigner. "It's how you turn the key that counts."

They showed Roger how to turn the key and Roger started the car. He felt foolish and reached into his pocket for a good tip. "No, no," said both mechanics, giving Roger a *wai* and wishing him good luck.

time or arrive late. You have little idea what to say when you meet people, even if they speak your language. You don't know when Thais are joking. And you have no idea if the girl or boy who smiles and looks you in the eye is in love with you. Nothing seems to have a pattern and you find it almost impossible to predict what happens next and how you will be feeling from one hour to the next. You are a child again, with no mummy to

look out for you.

Any human being plucked from the world in which he functions and feels secure and plopped down into a different culture is certain to have a few strange first impressions. Some people cry, others walk around with a broad grin on their dazed faces. Some love Thailand, some hate it and many both love it and hate it. Few remain indifferent. These contradictory feelings are *culture shock*.

I would like to say that these are only first impressions: give things time and your second and third impressions will make sense of it all. But one thing I can say with confidence is that Thailand is not a boring country.

Don't rush into things Thai. Take things easy at first. Play it cool. Do not trust your first impressions. Enjoy them if you can; they are by nature spontaneous. They are also, to a large extent, superficial. They are uniquely yours. You will, of course, never have them again. Thank goodness, you might say.

The Thais are basically nice people (I think and they think) and they (almost) certainly won't mind you smiling, giggling and laughing when euphoria strikes; but cry and you cry alone.



CHAPTER 2

LAND, HISTORY AND RELIGION



For Review only

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Robert is a British subject who has lived overseas most of his life in Thailand and Laos. He received a PhD in Economic Anthropology after two years with Hmong villagers in Northern Thailand. Following publication of *Resource Scarcity and the Hmong Response*, he was elected Fellow of the Royal Anthropological Institute in 1979.

In 1980, Robert left an academic career in anthropology that included lectureships at Singapore, Chulalongkorn and Chiang Mai universities to join the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. He served with the UN in Laos, Geneva, Malawi, the Philippines, Bangkok, Chiang Kham in northern Thailand, Nepal, Bangladesh and Indonesia. In 2000, he became Head of the British Trade Office to Laos. He spent a year in Vietnam advising the government on poverty reduction, before returning in 2005 to live and write in Vientiane and Nongkhai. He owns the bookshop *Book-Café Vientiane*.

Robert has written two books on the Hmong: *Resource Scarcity and the Hmong Response* (Singapore University Press) and *The Hmong* (Times and Lao Insight). He is the author of *Culture Shock! Thailand's* companion volumes *Thais Mean Business*, *Thailand Beyond the Fringe*, and *Culture Shock! Laos*. He has also written cultural guides to Bahrain, Bhutan, Croatia, and Indonesia and three novels set in Asia and the UK – *Red Fox Goose Green*, *Waiting for Venus* and *Our Man in Laos*. He speaks French, Indonesian/Malay, Lao and Thai. He is pictured with his two Thai daughters Tintin and Tess who contributed greatly to this book.