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Very Thai—Everyday Popular Culture. By Philip Cornwel-Smith; photographs by John Goss. Bangkok: River Books. 2005. Bangkok: River Books. 256 pp. \$35.

The Thai Government's Office of the National Culture Commission (Ministry of Education) and also the National Office of National Identity (Office of the Prime Minister) has for years set policy standards for promoting a refined picture of Thai culture. *Very Thai* presents a complementary and refreshingly open view of a kaleidoscope of Thai cultural behaviors and products that stand in marked contrast to "Culture With a Capital C." The ex-pat American artist and photographer John Gross has used his camera to "record this unsung beauty, free from the posed and styled quality of many books and magazines on Thai culture." His co-author and fellow photographer, British-born Philip Cornwell-Smith, has contributed two-fifths of the book's "500 quirky photos" drawn mostly from festivals and performances. Some capture simple pleasures, like a boat vendor selling "drinks-in-a-bag." Others are a study in the excesses and the mostly bad taste of the unabashed "Hi-So" – "High Society" famous families and the nouveau riche.

Cornwell-Smith's credentials include writing for several Bangkok magazines and contributions to Discovery Channel. In the section on sources (pp. 250-256), it is evident that he consulted numerous experts on Thai culture and Thai media in particular. The archives of the Bangkok Post and The Nation provided sources that "veer between the plentiful, the rare, and the impossible-to-find." The book's Bibliography lends a dimension of scholarliness that recommends the work as a teaching tool. For language and culture teachers, the Index is exquisitely detailed and conveniently includes many terms in romanized Thai in italics along with their English definitions (e.g., *pin* -mandolin, *pak soi* - mouth of a lane, *palad khik* - phallic amulet), a boon to an advanced student of Thai and a valuable resource that a Thai teacher will want to use to induce conversations when used in combination with the stunning photos.

One important section enlightens the reader with the complexities of names—nicknames given at birth, auspicious names provided by elders, and the symbolic meanings behind surnames. A paragraph is even devoted to the serious import and etiquette of exchanging name cards and illustrates the ritual with a close-up photo of proper hand positions used in an actual exchange.

Very Thai has been largely shaped by the power of serendipitous color photography. While it has an “I am a camera” aspect to it, because of the research that has gone into the accompanying essays on Thai folk culture, it can be taken as a serious work, an excellent and authoritative text on what it is to be Thai and to be fluent in the cultural lexicon.

Reviewer:

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