Media Review: Very Thai – Everyday Popular Culture

Today's media review is about *Very Thai: Everyday Popular Culture* by Philip Cornwel-Smith (text & photographs) and John C. Goss (photographs) (ISBN: 978-6167339375). The 2nd edition of this book was published in 2013 by River Books Co., Ltd. Bangkok, Thailand. Compared to the 1st edition from 2005, the 2nd edition has been expanded and fully updated comprising 209 new photos, 64 more pages and four extra chapters. The book is in English language, comprises 320 pages and 590 colour photos, hardcover. It costs 995 Bath, on Amazon the book is about 22 EUR.

Very Thai: Everyday Popular Culture by Philip Cornwel-Smith & John Goss (photographs) can be regarded as a very influential best-selling guide to Thai pop culture and street life. The 2nd edition has been revised to reflect the dramatic changes in Thailand.

The British author Philip Cornwel-Smith has been living in Bangkok since 1994. He is the founding editor of Bangkok’s first international-standard city listings magazine called ‘Bangkok Metro’. Furthermore, he has written for various international media concerning Thailand. A few examples of his works are guidebooks like ‘Eyewitness Thailand’, ‘Thailand: A Traveller’s Companion’, ‘Lonely Planet’s World Food: Thailand’ and ‘Time Out Bangkok’.

‘Very Thai’ can be described as a book reflecting modern Thai consciousness which may also be referred to as ‘Thainess’. In an amusing manner, the work gets to the bottom of what makes something ‘very Thai’. The books starts off with a preface by Alex Kerr who is also the author of ‘Bangkok Found’. Next follows an introduction addressing the central question of what makes something ‘very Thai’ and explaining how the 2nd edition differs from the 1st one. In this context, the author points out that the new edition records how Thailand has changed since ‘Very Thai’ was launched a decade ago.
What could be more Thai than a farang in a Tuk-Tuk? (photo credit: Very Thai, FB page)

Hence, ‘Very Thai’ has five chapters which are divided into several sections. The chapters are about ‘Street’, ‘Personal’, ‘Ritual’, ‘Sanuk’ and ‘Thainess’.

The chapter ‘Street’ is concerned with streetlife in Thailand. Thus, it covers topics like street food ranging from drinks in bags to insect snacks. It also deals with common sights on Thai streets like different kinds of vendors, soi animals, blind musicians, tangled wires and trash recyclers. What is more, ‘Street’ is also about the different and sometimes funny and amusing means of transportation on Thai streets ranging from Tuk-tuks to floral truck bolts and colourful bus art.
‘Personal’ reveals a lot about Thai mentality and lifestyle. For instance, this chapter addresses themes like male and female grooming habits, nicknames, high society (Hi So) and the delight in dressing alike in uniforms. What is more, there is also a section about the ‘Katoey, Gay & Tom-Dee’ community. However, it also addresses other topics like potted gardens, portable plants for luck and lifestyle, and the urban Thai dream in form of malls, theme parks and the suburb.
As the title of the chapter ‘Ritual’ suggests it is all about Thai traditional rituals and culture. For instance, the author explains the use and meaning of royal portraits in establishing the Thai sense of identity. He further explains that the days are colour coded in Thailand, and that lucky numbers dictate prices. The sections about ‘Amulet Collectors’, ‘Trade Talismans’, ‘Taxi Altars’, ‘Fortune Tellers’, ‘Ghosts Stories’ and ‘Mediums & Shamans’ are all concerned with superstition and animist beliefs in Thai culture. Thus, the author is also concerned with ‘Magical Tattoos’, which we know as Sak Yant, entrancing the wearer.
‘Sanuk’ (Fun) is very important in Thai culture. Thus, this chapter is about ‘sanuk’ activities like temple fairs, festivals, gambling and animal contests like cock fighting. In addition, there is also Muay Thai, different kinds of beauty contests, celebrities, comedy and soap operas that make Thai life fun. What is more, it also mentions the importance of Thai folk-blues (‘Songs for Life’), Thai country music (luuk thung) and the Thai independence music scene which produces ‘Songs for Lifestyle’.

The final section ‘Thainess’ is the new chapter in this book. It is about ‘Vernacular Design’, ‘Contemporary Thainess’, the rise of ‘Thai Thai’ retro culture and an afterword concerning the ‘Role of Very Thai’ by Pracha Suveeranont who is an expert on visual culture.
In my view, *Very Thai: Everyday Popular Culture* is an amazing and amusing read providing profound insight into Thai mentality, pop culture and street life. Mixed with presenting some oddities in Thai culture and tradition, this guide is truly fun and cool to read. In fact, the book itself is cult! I can highly recommend it to everyone interested in modern Thai culture and Thainess in particular.

Yours, Sirinya