

Bangkok Inside Out Outed

Politics got exciting at the end of last year when media baron Sondhi Limthongkul went head-to-head with Prime Minister Thaksin in a confrontation over press freedom. Thaksin levelled three massive defamation lawsuits against Sondhi and banned his weekly TV chat show. Sondhi responded by holding live shows, drawing crowds in the tens of thousands. Against this charged background the banning of an English-language book is illustrative of the state of freedom of speech.

Bangkok Inside Out (Equinox Publishing, 2005) hit the shelves ahead of two similar books, Phillip Cornwel-Smith's *Very Thai* and Jerry Hopkins' *Thailand Confidential*. *Bangkok Inside Out* takes a look at the best, worst and bizarre things that make Bangkok such an interesting and engaging metropolis. When it was published, the book received favourable reviews (including in the January 2005 edition of this periodical) and praise for its superlative photographs and cheeky but affectionate insights into Thai pop culture.

The authors are Daniel Ziv, who founded *Djakarta! – The City Life Magazine* and resident and fluent Thai speaker Guy Sharett who teamed up to produce the book. Both men are journalists and hold degrees in Asian studies.

After the book had been selling well for 10 months, they received front-page coverage in the Thai-language newspaper *Khom Chat Luek*. "Farang Book Ruins Thailand's Face" ran the headline, and the article claimed the book covers "negative subjects such as fake goods, gambling, gay performances, touts, scams, places such as Patpong, Nana and Khaosan Road."

Feeling the pang of civic duty, the editors of *Khom Chat Luek* sent the book to Ladda Tangsuphachai, director of the monitoring department at the Culture Ministry who was quoted as saying, "They

Local authors Daniel Ziv and Guy Sharett join Henry Miller, James Joyce, Wei Hui and D. H. Lawrence in sharing the dubious distinction of having their works banned. Cultural self-defence or media stitch-up? Daniel Cooper shoots his mouth off.

write about Thailand but condemn Thai people, which is like biting the hand that feeds you. This is not right". She added, "There are a great deal of books written by foreign authors that insult Thai people... we cannot control the publishers or prohibit them from printing this and that because, according to the Constitution, the press has freedom to publish. So all we can do is take the problematic books off the shelves," seemingly unaware of the contradiction.

They say there's no such thing as bad publicity, but as the book disappeared from Thai shops, Daniel and Guy may have thought differently.

Tangsuphachai has previously been in the news for condemning the song "Sexy, Naughty, Bitchy" by local singer Tata Young, the Thai franchise of *Big Brother* and spaghetti-strap tops on women during Songkran, and wanting to set up floodlights outside love hotels on Valentine's Day to discourage young couples from getting carried away with the spirit of the occasion and having their first shag. It would appear that she's a bit conservative.

The book does deal to some degree with Bangkok's underside in chapters on counterfeit goods, ladyboys (transsexuals), Khlong Toey (Bangkok's infamous slum), *Yaa Baa* (a poor man's speed) and Patpong (no introduction required). However, this is nicely balanced out by the chapters on Thai traditional music, worship, traditional massage and food, which the Thailand Tourism Authority spends millions promoting every year. Indeed, the Patpong chapter begins, "It's with great hesitation that we include Patpong in here, because this so-called red light district is hardly the 'Must See' attraction of guidebook hype, and is in any case covered ad nauseam in nearly every piece of literature on the city."

And this is what's mysterious about the book's banning. For 50 years foreigners have been writing about Bangkok's naughty side and there's enough sleaze-fiction, dirty phrasebooks and whoring travel guides to pave Pattaya's walking street, yet none of them have gotten on the Culture Department's shitlist.

Bangkok Inside Out probably cops it because it has large glossy photographs, perfect for a stitch-up on the front page of a tabloid. But it would seem that the newspaper's editors or Culture Ministry staff won't or can't read closely because the text is often complimentary to the city that the authors obviously love.

Dan and Guy's great sin is that the book is accurate. Everybody knows that Thailand has a prostitution, drug, gambling and counterfeiting problem, but the only people prosecuted are the ones who point this out. Crying out that 'the emperor has no clothes,' gets you a gag order and a lawsuit.

To be fair, nobody likes being told their shit stinks and Tangsuphachai seems to agree, "If the writers wanted to [provide] in-depth information on a city, they should have done it in their country because they would be the ones who know best about it. Just don't do it with our country."

Bangkok Inside Out has been heroically restored to the shelves of Bookazine but may be tough to find elsewhere.



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