

Book Review

Very Thai: Everyday Popular Culture

Kjell Skylstad⁺ Editor in Chief

No need to wait any longer. Here it is the Second edition of the most informative magnifying glass observation of one of the most fascinating cultures on this globe -Thailand in an urban perspective. After five annual reprints of the original 2010 edition Philip Cornwel-Smith, the eminent British author who has observed Thai life closely as an expat since arriving in 1994 and his artist cum photographer John C. Goss traveling between Asia and Palm Beach and most other places in between decided that the rapid cultural and social changes occurring all over Asia could no longer wait to be documented. The result: 209 new photos, 64 more pages and 4 extra chapters all presented with an acute sense of observation seldom if at all encountered in any work of this kind.

Alex Kerr in his opening chapter describes it as “Looking deeply into simple things of life” meaning the inner structure of what has been called the Thai way of life, the internal logic of an informal culture hidden from the view of even the most discerning visitor and totally escaping the filters of TOT together with the whole armada of guidebooks of all sizes and even the attempts at explanations from anthropologists as the author so correctly observes.

Yes, it keeps his promise of being a report on the day to day life of the average Thai citizen outside the dictates of tastes and accepted social rules of behavior. As such it falls miles away from the scope of any guidebook on Thailand ever published and even further away from the Truly Asia TV advertisements intended to sell a neighboring ASEAN country with no effects barred.

⁺ Dr. Kjell Skylstad, Professor Emeritus, University of Oslo, Department of Musicology, Norway.

Oh yes, popular culture in Asia is rapidly becoming first and foremost an urban or suburban phenomenon. but with deep historical roots in the spiritual and religious heritage of a country with its richly diversified population. And the central place of the arts in all its genres, forms and functions is reflected in a way that breaks the barriers to true understanding and the imprisonment imposed by a western autonomous art view.

So here it is all for you to read, see, and enjoy - the masterly urban forms and genres of truck and bus art, the neon fairylands of dazzling living displays, the world of tattoos, the TV Likay performances, and the festivals uniting all art expressions into one overarching concept - Sanook.

Philip Cornwel-Smith and John Goss: Very Thai: Everyday Popular Culture
Bangkok, River Books Ltd., 2nd edition 2013, 320pp.
ISBN 078-616-7339-37-3