

Rong Wongsawan's Gonzo Journey through California in 1976: A Thai Writer Looks at the Americans

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ABSTRACT—Rong Wongsawan (1932-2009) was a major Thai writer during the late 20th century. He wrote primarily about social life in his native Thailand, but one of his favorite subjects was California where he lived, wrote, and bartended in the 1960s. The story presented here is about his trip to California in 1976 to show his new wife Malee where he had spent so many happy years. Published in Thai in 1978, *On the Back of the Dog* is a description of how a Thai writer viewed California of that era. As he points out early in the book, behind his observations are questions: Why are the Americans the way they are? Why are issues such as father-son relationships so rancorous, race relations so poisonous, attitudes toward money so greed-focused, and advertising so preposterous, especially for Thai sensibilities? Thus, in writing about San Francisco in particular, Rong is also writing about Thai culture. This article introduces Rong Wongsawan's writing to an English-speaking audience. Rong spoke idiomatic English and was well versed in American literature. However, Rong's own writing was almost completely in Thai and addressed only a Thai audience. Yet, he highlights issues of American culture and society which are of enduring interest. Presented in this article are extended translations of his writing from *On the Back of the Dog*, including vignettes involving a chicken executive, the tensions between white and black, actor Peter Fonda, and even Jack London's views of the great San Francisco earthquake. President Kennedy and Linda Lovelace make appearances, too. The issues Rong raises are understood in the context of Thai Buddhism and karma, Thai views of family and race.

Rong Wongsawan (young man!) was an important Thai writer from the second half of the 20th century.¹ His published work began in the 1950s, with a photo-essay of the people living in Bangkok's garbage dumps, and continued until his death in 2009. Through it all, he signed his name as “young man!” in the belief that he had stopped aging at age twenty-eight.

As with all great writers, Rong's work dealt with the human condition as he

¹ There are few English language sources about Rong Wongsawan's life, except for an obituary in *The Guardian* newspaper in 2009, and an analysis of his early book *Soi sanim* (Unwilling to Endure) in Janit Feangfu's (2011) PhD dissertation. While Rong used this English spelling for his surname, his family now prefers Wong-Savun.



Figure 1. "Going to San Francisco in 1963, the era of the decline of the beatnik and the beginning of the hippy movement (flower power)."

encountered it, whether in Bangkok where he began his career as a writer and photographer, in San Francisco where he went as a correspondent for the *Siam Rath* newspaper in the 1960s, or later in northern Thailand where he closed out his career by writing in the local language, Khammuang. Oddly, he never wrote in English, although his Thai writing is sprinkled with idiomatic English expressions transliterated into Thai.

Rong's writing was reviewed as early as 1965 in the Thai language *Social Science Review*. He was known for the "creative use of language in his documentary, articles, short stories, and novels," which included "changing of the spellings of old words so that they delivered new meanings, coinage of new words," and "direct translation of English words into Thai" (Janit 2011: 124; see also Anderson 1985: 26-27). Further reviews appeared in the 1970s, and Rong became a figure in popular culture in the 1980s when he was featured in films, and television commercials for whisky. In 1995 he was declared a "National Artist," a highly prestigious award initiated in the late 1980s.

I often try to describe Rong's writing to my English-speaking friends, and the closest English phrase I can find is "Gonzo Journalism," a term that was used to describe the work of the American journalist Hunter S. Thompson, who developed an "energetic first person participatory style" in which the writer is both a third person narrator and a first person participant. Rong's writing meets both of these criteria, though I think he would prefer a comparison to Hemingway, whose portrait hung in his office outside Chiang Mai. In fact, even though Rong's style is peculiarly suited to the Gonzo description, he also uses an older Thai literary fashion in which dialog drives the story.

Rong's first publication was a book of photography, *Children of the Garbage Dump*, published in 1956. At that time, he also attracted the attention of newspaper editor (and future Prime Minister) Kukrit Pramoj, who hired him to work for the newspaper *Siam Rath*. This resulted in Rong being sent to California as a foreign correspondent in 1962. But Kukrit did not pay that well, and Rong ended up tending bar in San Francisco to make a living, while always observing people and looking for stories in what he christened the "Concrete Jungle." After being tempted to stay on in California, Rong headed back to his home in Bangkok in 1967. He then wrote in 1969 perhaps his best-known book in Thai, *The Smell of Ganja*, about San Francisco shifting from the age of the beatnik to the age of the hippie.

Rong critiques whichever society he observes, although mostly his native Thailand. However, California is the setting for a number of his hundred-plus books, the most important being *On the Back of the Dog: The Golden Sunshine*, about Rong's second favorite city, San Francisco, a city in which the "writer from Bangkok" almost became



Figure 2. Covers of Rong Wongsawan, *Bon lang ma*.

a native. Rong lived in San Francisco from about 1962 for five years, experiencing the birth of hippie culture, a phenomenon about which he was ambivalent, before returning to Thailand to resume his writing career. There he married Sumalee, a girl from the Northeast, who in turn becomes the character Malee in *On the Back of the Dog*. In the first paragraph, Rong explains that the “Dog” means a Greyhound Bus.

Rong addresses a Thai audience, not an American one. In 1978 that audience was familiar with the America of Hollywood, as well as the US soldiers who had recently departed Thailand and were known for being free with their money, fascinated with Thai bar girls, and rather naïve about Thai understandings of propriety. His Thai audience wondered about how the Americans became that way? How could they be so rich, so focused on money, yet not see through the wiles of bar girls? Why were they so lonely? And again and again, why was money so important to the Americans, to the exclusion of all else, even respect for elders, and the cultivation of truly human relationships? Why were relations between black and white so strange, and where did Chinese fit in? Or Thai? And of course, what was this strange thing “hippie” all about? And the ultimate Thai question: Is Rong Wongsawan (young man!) a hippie, too?

Rong describes this strange world to his Thai readers by telling stories culled from newspapers, bars, and friendly gossip. Much is seen through the lens of Thai Buddhism with its emphasis on sin, suffering, death, and rebirth in the cosmic order. *On the Back of the Dog* is an attempt to explain this strange world to the most Thai woman of all, his wife Sumalee. Why do Americans have so much money, big motorcycles, and still need to “find myself,” as if it is ever possible to lose oneself? Why are the Americans never quite satisfied?

All the excerpts below are from Rong Wongsawan. *Bon lang ma: daed si thong* (On the Back of the Dog: The Golden Sun). The subheadings are present in the original.

Astride the Iron Greyhound

The last day in the last week of June, 1976

It was 102° F in Los Angeles. Your humble writer told Malee it was time to quickly escape from the hot weather. Not the kind of hot which came from lying soaked with sweat next to a Thai canal, but the kind of hot that challenged anyone to walk naked into the concrete jungle. So after two minutes of thinking, I chose to travel by the Greyhound bus. It was a charming and speedy iron horse that gave a smooth ride for so many years of roving around California. I did not love or hate it—like other vehicles.

“Just leave the driving to us” as the television jingle went....

This advertisement worked quiet well....

In the earlier paragraphs it seems like I hadn’t quite yet revived from my wine. After all, airplanes are the transportation that saves time and money; it takes only 50 or 55 minutes by air from Los Angeles to San Francisco. Most Americans usually use the plane due to the hurried nature of their lives, but there is really no scenery; we can see nothing except clouds and the underwear of stewardesses. Airline companies in this country compete with each other aggressively, and they try to attract customers in order to make more profit. Some companies, intentionally or not, design seductive uniforms for their stewardesses in this competition.

Americans in fact are accustomed to being naked, and even talking or discussing “sex” openly at dinnertime, or on the bed. But, for some strange reason, that little peek at the stewardess is still a provocative sensuality. The next reason your humble writer wanted to travel by bus is that I wanted Malee to see the western states of America through a pane of glass that has movement, not just clouds. So, I chose to ride the Greyhound.

I hope that the audience will not hate Malee when she becomes involved in this story. However, I will not let her appear on paper more than necessary. I guarantee that Malee will not interfere with the story in a fashion that the audience can blame her for ruining it. After all she’s just the wife of the writer, and not that of someone like the prime minister.

So already on the first pages, Rong has introduced four or maybe five of his key themes: the mysterious ways the Americans look at sex, the hurried nature of the culture, the role of alcohol, and the endless pursuit of status.

As will become apparent later in the text, Rong is both a libertine and a prude. The idea that America’s first topless dancer from the 1960s, Carol Doda, could still “fling her boobs” (p. 144) at patrons in 1976 was in his mind befitting of a gracious Thai *wai*² of appreciation! But at the same time he marvels at the hard life of a prostitute who

² The *wai* is the Thai formal greeting, thatd involves placing the palms of the hands together in front of the face, and bowing slightly.

calls herself “Linda Lovelace,” and whose life “is sad, and horrible...Some weeks she is thin like a zombie,” even as he espies the spark of life in her eye, and concludes that “somehow she is still worth more than the Buddhist nun who does not keep her strict precepts, and who uses religion as a mask to cover her face...”

While “Linda” is perhaps Rong’s most dramatic character, much more is included too, as he his keen eye peruses the corners of American life where money and business are so central to human relations, while the relationship between child and father is more mysterious. There are always those hippies and their marijuana, and the fact that underneath his critical descriptions of them, in fact, Rong himself is perhaps a member of that subculture, too.

Do you really know today? So why do you ask about tomorrow?

Peter Fonda tried to explain America by making the movie *Easy Rider*, which is about two men who ride motorcycles across the country using drugs to empower themselves. In particular they reject the settled happy life other Americans believe is meant to be.

And so Peter Fonda is blamed by the older generation for being the source of the confusion in the country...

Who and what is Peter Fonda?

A skinny man aged thirty, standing 6 foot 2 inches and 140 pounds. His life is crazier than any novel written by a sociologist or lunatic. It seems like he was punished by God for being human. The world knew him for many years as the son of America’s classic movie star Henry Fonda, who is a genius....

Peter Fonda was unruly like other millionaire heirs ... He got only one thing from school, which were called “experiences.”

However, he has also met an unbelievable amount of tragedy in his short life....

When he was ten years old, his mother committed suicide by cutting her own throat. A few months later, he tried to commit suicide by firing a gun into his stomach.

At the age of fourteen, he drank whisky like a person who really needed it!...

Then he had the chance to work on many “shit movies” (in his own opinion). But no one really admired his work as a movie star.

At the age of twenty-five while the hippies were setting up in San Francisco... Peter Fonda smoked ganja and used addictive drugs like LSD....

The first woman he loved—she was the daughter of his father’s first wife with her new husband—killed herself through an overdose of sleeping pills....

If the world were flat he would run to the edge and finally leap into the emptiness. But he is still alive with hardship, even after he took drugs and turned his back on that American life of luxury. His shoulder-length hair was a mess and he wore dirty blue jeans without caring about what others said. ... Still when he was twenty-nine years old, he was being paid around \$375,000 dollars per film. It was just small money....

However, success finally came with the *Easy Rider* civilization of the motorcycle! Motorcycles are a huge success in American movies. James Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause* and Marlon Brando in the *Wild One* were both eclipsed and are now completely forgotten....

Interviewers asked him if *Easy Rider* wasn't so successful, how would his life have been?

His answer: "Who knows?!" Maybe he would have just moved around the theater circuit. Maybe he would have made terrible movies in Europe or maybe have a marijuana farm in Madagascar where he would happily smoke until he died....

He responded: "If who will be the next John Wayne is the question, they are really asking who will be John Wayne the superstar? John Wayne is after all just a human being, and he doesn't brag about being a big actor. But his feelings always whisper that, yes he is, damn it! Then being just John Wayne is not possible since he has lost his own self."

Are you confused?

In Peter Fonda, Rong identifies the confusion that Thais find in how youthful Americans behave. How could they dishonor their parents and deny their culture? The "finding yourself" ethos of a Peter Fonda was foreign to the Thais who were then, and still today seek security in their identity as a responsible member of a family, locality, and the Thai nation. At least that is what my Thai students told me in 2017 when they helped to translate what was for them the ludicrously titled "Finding Myself Society" essay that Rong wrote while riding the Greyhound from Los Angeles to San Francisco, He used the essay to explain the peculiar world of America to Malee and his Thai audience.

Another confusion for me: The "Finding-Myself Society"

Some passengers in this area were youthful travelers, male and female. They pack some stuff: guitar, marijuana, and some raw poetry in their backpack or bag. Their eyes seem to be hiding something slightly naughty. This is another feature of American society.

It is a confused society trying to create a confusion of another kind.

There is no concise explanation, but they can't give the clear meaning it wants. Teenagers are too lazy to study in the university, and want to pay more attention to looking for themselves, or as they say in English "Finding Myself."

And of course, this is a big worry for parents, which makes them really tired....

"I already made a decision that I will travel around the country!"

"But Ronnie, the university has admitted you!" his father replied.

"It doesn't matter!"

"Why?"

"I must find myself first."

"You will find it?"

“No one knows the answer, but if there is no action—nothing will ever get started”

“I think you should start at the university.”

“Insane! The university is filled with fools and stupidity.”

“If you weren’t so stubborn you would trust me, Ronnie.”

“But I won’t change my mind. The university has nothing to teach me. America now deteriorates every day because of the universities, doesn’t it?”

“What do you want, my son?...”

(Dad sighs very loudly)

“All that ever happens is so far away.”

(Ronnie shrugs his shoulders.)...

“Your friend Fred ran away. He has been on the road now for three years, just because he wants to find himself. His parents only find out where he is when he calls home long distance and asks for money.”

“Some people take longer to find themselves than do other people.”

“Where are you going, Ronnie?”

“I will first take a bus to Nevada, John is there with many friends. Everyone is lovely and are real serious seekers. Perhaps after that I will go to Arizona where I know some people from the Navajo Indian tribe who weave blankets.”

“Why? You really think that weaving blankets with the Navajo will help you find yourself?”

“If I work with my hands it really might amount to something.”

“What?”

“It goes back to the inherent cruelty of the mechanistic modern society.”...

“So what’s next?”

“I will have time to think about goodness and the disappearance of capitalism.”

“Ronnie! Let us talk man to man. I always love your ideas a lot. You are not stupid, but you are not yet clever enough. Um, nothing is more important than the fact that I have saved enough money for your college. You know that the fees are increasing every day.”...

“No!”

“Don’t you feel sorry for me?”...

“But I need to use modern reasoning. I don’t want to miss the chance to travel the country, I also want to go to South America with Susan.”

“Susan? Does Susan also want to find herself just like you do?”

“No doubt...”

“Lord help me!”

“We are good friends and always together, but the most important thing is that Susan has a Volkswagen. And we can easily go wherever we want.”

“So what do Susan’s parents think about this?”

“Maybe I’m saying something crazy, but Susan feels she has no choices here. If she doesn’t leave home now, her life will stop at high school, she will get married, and then she will have children. Susan said that when she looks forward

from that perspective, she can't see a future."

"Future, The future of what?"

"Staying here means she will always be in this small orbit. A life which is always behind the times."...

"Dad, don't you see how necessary it is that our generation should protest?"...

"My son, you don't have to love me or maybe you want to hate me... I won't be angry with you. Call me when you need money."

"Thanks..."

"Can you allow me to ask you last question? If Susan gets pregnant in South America, what would the two of you do?"

"Crazy! My generation doesn't bed down like that. Don't forget that we travel to find ourselves! We are all familiar with such traps."

But if children are mysterious for our Thai sojourner, so is the relationship between food, marketing, and money. Sitting on the bus outside Paso Robles, Rong comes across a story of chickens, 3.3 billion of which are killed each year as the price of meat drops ever further. He relates a story of the great chicken farmer of Maryland, a caricature perhaps of Mr. Dhanin Clearavanont, today's (2019) richest Thai and leader of the CP conglomerate, who in 1976 was only just beginning to establish his fortune through the raising and marketing of massive flocks of chickens that today feed much of East Asia.

Afternoon musings while on the back of the Greyhound: The business that makes 110 billion baht per year!

The chicken business became a big industry for the United States, with a financial value of \$5.5 Billion, that is 110 billion THB. So, your humble writer was not surprised when he was sitting in the back of the Greyhound on the Santa Barbara - San Luis Obispo route, and found someone claiming in the newspaper that his chicken meat was the freshest!

The man in the ad was already an old man ... of fifty-six, thin, but healthy looking (like his chicken skin). He was bald and his big nose was hooked like a hawk's beak. This man challenged every woman to pinch his chicken meat in order to prove whether it was fresh or not.

"It is the only way to prove that the chicken meat was not preserved by the freezing process. When you pinch the meat, it should not be stiff..."

This meant gently kneading the meat—and letting the softness of it run through your fingers.

That man killed 1.6 million chickens each week at his farm in Maryland (and many other farm branches). Wall Street looked at him with admiration because of the \$180 million sales each year. He was a chicken professional knowing everything from its droppings to its heart....

He had a blue Mercedes-Benz, wore a necktie designing by the Paris Fashion

Institute, loved to play tennis, and had more than 3000 workers.

He also spent \$1 million each year on advertising. Anyway, I thought such an amount quite humble.

“Nothing can push your spoiled products out onto the market as quickly as a good advertisement” he confided, in a way that helped the listener jump to the conclusion he wanted.

He also made speeches that motivated people. For example:

“Only strong people can make their chicken meat soft!” or

“Chickens in my farm consume better food than the food you eat!”

This last sentence might cause Thai people to feel angry and make them want to kick him in his mouth, but for Americans it was clever.

American people are very hard to understand.

But if Peter Fonda, the generation gap, and corporate chicken farmers are difficult to understand, imagine watching American race relations from a Thai perspective. This though is not an issue that Rong shies away from. Describing the weight of American history he depicts taking Malee for Happy Hour at Joe Chung’s Cocktail Lounge on Market Street.

In the space of a few pages, Rong describes the tensions of race, and particularly the quality that Thais often find most mystifying about America—that of loneliness and alcohol. At Joe Chung’s, Rong meets a thirty-five-year-old white woman, who is hungry and broke. In comes a twenty-three-year-old black man from New York with wealth in his pocket, and dressed in a fine suit. It is a situation that Rong uses to highlight the loneliness of California in general and San Francisco in particular. There are five people in the drama, Rong himself, a quiet Malee, a Chinese bartender who is eventually introduced as “Charlie,” the elegant young black man, and “Linda,” the 35 year-old woman who works the bars, and when that doesn’t work strolls down to sell blood on Mission Street. Out of the interaction Rong tells a story of how Thai eyes see the Chinese, American race relations, poverty, sexuality, and ultimately its relationship to sin, merit, and the karmic cycle.

Happy Hour, 5-7 p.m. at Joe Chung’s Cocktail Lounge, 891 Market Street

The young black man sat down on the left side of the counter. He is not more than twenty-three years old.

“Scotch whisky!” His manner indicated that he had little experience with the protocols of drinking.

He does not select the type of whisky, but trusts the judgment of the Chinese bartender. And in such a case he absolutely will get the cheapest whisky in the bar....

His face is so happy... He has just never learned how to love whisky. So, he hurries to drink it. He drinks it as if it were an enemy to be endured. I tell myself

that he still needs to learn about whisky, and how to befriend it.

Then whisky will be his very good friend....

He looks with excitement for a chance to flirt with the girl sitting next to him.

“The wind is mighty strong tonight!” he said.

It’s strong like it is every day in San Francisco. You must come from another place?”

“New York!”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“But you can say lots of things.”

“Well look. People from here don’t speak like that. They begin the conversation much more coyly.”

“I feel lonely.”...

“You wanna have someone to drink with?” she asks.

“What are you drinking...?” he asks rather than answering. ...

“Vodka Martini” she looked away ...

“Actually you may think I am annoying and look down on you. But I have never thought about the nature of skin color.”

“Vodka martini for her,” the young man with the ebony skin told the bartender.

“On the rocks!” she exclaimed....

That lady is over thirty-five years old, your humble writer guesses, but probably not forty....

She looks so hot, like the girls I saw in the bars in the brothel districts of Patpong in Bangkok or around the bars in Bang Lamphu. She would have been called ‘cougar’ or whatever.

But now that I meet her in Joe Chung’s Cocktail Lounge, she’s in this story at first sight.

“How long have you been here?” she asked.

“Two months.” ...

“Are you from here?” he asked.

“I was born in Oakland but I really love it here in San Francisco, so I moved across the bridge.”

She said this with a smooth and moderate tone.

“Have you ever visited New York?”

“Nope, I’ve never been further than Reno....”

“Did you go to play cards there?”

“If not to gamble, why would I have gone Reno?”

“Some go to get married there,” he pointed out.

“You’re right...” she said while sipping a Vodka Martini, “but I never got married in Reno....I played every table game there... Except I didn’t play the slots. I hate the slot machine: it is a bastard thief with one arm.”

“Perhaps, next Friday I will ride that iron Greyhound to fight against that one-armed bandit.”

“Why don’t you invite me to go with you?”

“Would you mind....?”

“No! I don’t mind help from a pretty boy like you.”

“I’ll tell you once a woman shouted at me ‘Piece of shit!’ just because I am black.”

“I’m sorry for you, but that was not me.”

“You are a good girl.”

“No, I’m just a combination of good and bad.”

“People in the church say that I am bad, but the homeless living on the street say I am good.”

“I see what you mean.” ...

She went to the restroom behind the bar.

The bartender poked his face over a counter, and spoke to that young inexperienced black man.

“I don’t want to intrude on your business, but you must know some facts about life. Some women are O.K. to take out for dinner, to watch a movie together, and for making love, but they not suitable to ask for marriage. Some are even more terrible, they are not suitable for anything. Listen to me, that woman is a blood sucking leech; you should hurry back home, because it is better than dating her.”

At that moment, San Francisco heard a young black man cuss....

“Leeches! I have heard that Chinese people like to eat them, is it true?”

The end of that sentence sounded like he was scoffing at the Chinese bartender.

“Sorry, I just thought that we are friends...” the bartender mumbled.

“Thanks, Charlie! But I feel lonely.”

Americans, black or white, they prefer to call Chinese people “Charlie”, which is a reference perhaps to the old Charlie Chan movies, or the war in Vietnam. It seems like it has a contemptuous meaning, just like the word “Chink.”

Your humble writer does not have any reason to hate black people. The many black people I knew are wonderful friends. Some of them are doctors of high esteem. Some of them are musicians who create the world of jazz. Some are very charming bisexuals that your humble writer spent time with in gay bars without knowing whether it was night or day. Some black people are poets who like to explain about trash and flowers at the same time, as well as much else They are friends who help each other when in need...

Some novels refer to the goodness of black people and their yearning for freedom. It is the special condition that Americans admire equality for all before the law, and it is part of the constitution of the nation...

But race is also the conflict underpinning society.

That white “cougar” is back from the toilet....

“Shall we go together, honey?” She said it as if she had slept on the same pillow with him last night.

“Do you not wanna drink more?” he asked.

“Yes....”

“One for the road!” ...

It is the last shot at Joe Chung’s Cocktail Lounge.

But the drama is not over yet.

Black and white look deeply into each other’s eyes ... without even knowing each other’s names....

The bartender shrugs his shoulders.

A lonely horny guy and an alcoholic woman. She is hungry. What misfortune hit her? ...

So your humble writer drinks a cocktail called a Gibson. It is a mix of gin, dry vermouth, topped with a pearl onion.

Change is forty cents and it is better to leave that as a tip for him... and he thanks us again and again. Because of the money, he opens his mouth to speak to me, the man with the strange face.

“Linda is dangerous woman,” the bartender said.

“Linda!,” I responded.

“She named herself after Linda Lovelace the movie star. This woman calls herself Linda in her honor.”

“Blacks don’t want any pity, do they?” Your humble writer offered this thought.

“Everybody all over the country is the same. All throughout the country, whether they are black or white. It’s an American thing. But as for me, I am different. I do not have the feeling that I am a person unto himself. I am an Asian, so I empathize with others.”

“I understand your feeling, Charlie.”

“But think again. Tonight, that dirty slut Linda will surely have money for tomorrow.”

“Have you known her a long time?”

“Since her name was Marilyn,” he shrugged. “Marilyn on the sidewalk. Marilyn who never was the playful lover of a person like President Kennedy. But her ass is unbeatably beautiful.”

“Leech?”

“Yes, she is.” The bartender responded....

“She’s a beautiful woman. Hmm, I mean, she was,” I said.

“Many people have said the same as you. Let’s face it, her life is sad, and horrible.... Some weeks she is thin like a zombie.”

This was her destruction... After donating blood, the money she received was used just to buy a few glasses of whisky....

Along Mission Street is found the transcript for poverty.... The blood clinic is situated in this dejected atmosphere in order to suck blood from the poor to help the rich.

So, the poor have no choice, they sold their blood for food.

Blood in this way was turned into sausages, vegetables, and bread which is eaten. Some portion then turns to shit in the gut, some turned into energy and what was left turned back into blood. It is the infinite cycle, one that does not end

until the last drop of blood evaporates from the corpse.

“May Satan himself protect this woman.”

I heard myself praying.

Linda, dirty bitch! Your humble writer will not forget the spark that is still in her eye.

Her sad smile reflects crying. She still has a lust for life, while becoming accustomed to the punishment of being human.

Her price is cheap! But somehow she is still worth more than the Buddhist nun who does not keep her strict precepts, and who uses religion as a mask to cover her face, but who still wanders along the street begging for money, seeking friends in this world who will share her suffering.

Tomorrow, your humble writer hopes to meet her again.

But in the back of Rong’s mind the final puzzle to be solved at Joe Chung’s Cocktail Lounge is a need to explain to a Thai audience what it means to be Asian in America. As was made clear in the preamble to his essay about Joe Chung’s Cocktail Lounge, he does not completely trust the Chinese bartender, Charlie, whom he suspects of overcharging for cheap whisky—a prejudice Rong brings from Bangkok which had received a major wave of Chinese immigrants in the 1940s and 1950s; immigrants who many Thai were convinced are like that great Maryland chicken farmer, too tied to the pursuit of money for its own sake.

But as Thais in San Francisco, Rong and Malee are ciphers, even for Charlie, the Chinese bartender. Who are these strangers, and how do they fit into the categories Charlie carries? Are they Mexicans or Italians? The end of Happy Hour is coming, and finally Charlie has a chance to talk directly to Rong.

I am alone with Malee and Charlie the bartender. Her watch told us that it is now 7 p.m. which is the end of Happy Hour. The price of whisky changed back to the normal price, which is 70 cents per glass.

The bartender whistled in a fashion that was not really a song.

After the fifth Gibson we are becoming familiar with each other. The tips are the fiber linking our relationship. His eyes look hesitant and doubtful. He cannot figure out whether your humble writer is a Mexican off a corn farm, or a fisherman from Naples .

“Where are you from?”

Just asking the question relieves his worries.

“Everywhere except hell,” your humble writer responds.

His face changed to one more suitable for friends [perhaps because he concluded I was not a Mexican or from Naples]. “Is this your first time in San Francisco? ”

“No, years ago I was nearly a San Franciscan.”

“Why aren’t you still?”

“I think I’m not suitable for any other place except Bangkok.”

“Bangkok!”

“Why?”

“Nothing. We are both Asian!”

“Do you know Bangkok?”

“I’ve read about it in the newspaper. One of your generals fled to Taiwan because of politics. He was rich, wasn’t he?”

Your humble writer shrugged in response.

“Are you from Taiwan?”

“That has nothing to do with me anymore. I’m from there from before Chiang Kai Shek came to rule the island.”

This glass of whisky is taking a while to be finished.

And so it goes in Rong’s mix of Gonzo journalism and Thai awareness of Buddhist suffering. But this goes further than just a lonely and scared prostitute in a bar at 891 Market Street. For Rong it reflects the ethos of San Francisco itself, a city which was caught in karmic cycles of suffering, the same as a rich Maryland chicken farmer, Peter Fonda, a lost American youth, and a lonely black man. This for Rong is the cycle of karma—a cycle that applies to San Francisco too. A San Francisco which is always pushing the edge, toying with catastrophe as a consequences of sin, indeed to a point at which it was almost destroyed.

18 April 2449 B.E. (1906) when evil brought disaster

On that evening Enrico Caruso sang at the Opera House.

Amidst the ranks of disaster, this one was to be of the highest level in the tide of civilization, and was to reverberate loudly. Sin hastened out onto the streets as a coarse evil. Exhaustion had arrived.

400,000 people of San Francisco were sleeping.

At 5:13 a.m. the earth broke apart.

Its power was strong as the earth quaked. It shook, and swelled over the hills, moving from side to side from its origin deep within the earth. It threw back the ocean with a roar.

And with speed the barriers were split, the water pipes burst with a calamitous speed that was faster than anticipated. This all happened at the same time. The firestorm glowed red, licking at the wood and everything else—consuming everything it touched. This was a power that exceeded that of human beings. The fire department was powerless to respond. The companies of soldiers from around the shores were given orders to control the fires using explosives, which brought disaster to San Francisco.

“God has punished us!”

The old people began to raise laments and prayers.

The people on ships swore. An all-consuming anger arose and was directed toward the fire.

The bankers’ moods became a kind of craziness in the confusion, as they watched their purpose disappear before their eyes.

Buildings tumbled, and the screams of the people torched in the flames were terrible. Thieves grabbed any opportunity. The owners of bars cried like crazy people, as they gathered up the money from the cash drawer and ran out with many other people who grabbed whisky because they had no fear of the law.

There was the burning smell of meat in the market. There was also the smell of incense, and that of burning duck feathers in Chinatown. Drug addicts vomited and cried because their opium burned. Naked women ran out onto the street, and there was great disorder among the crowds that feared the heat of the fires.

“It is the fire of Sin,” some people groaned.

The organist from the church ran too, because the fire would destroy the church, just as it did everything else..

Three days of burning.

28,000 houses and buildings were destroyed and 500 bodies buried.

Nothing moved and silence overcame San Francisco. Only the printing press worked in the dust. And reporters did their best to report as much of the news as possible.

Jack London wrote a piece in a special issue newspaper that...

“San Francisco is no more...”

This was his painful observation, and that of everyone else during those 72 deadly hours.

He and everyone else did not yet think that after this fire created from sin, San Francisco will again become a new proud city on the Pacific Coast of America.

If some people wanted to be grateful perhaps, fire is the best way to think things through. After all, death and its downfall reflect the relationship between sin and merit. It destroys some good people unwittingly, however, it also surely destroys evil, and that is surely not an accident.

Fire surely works better than police and laws.

It cleans out and sweeps all the dirtiness out from a city. The engineer finally will have a chance to plan for real requirements, and satisfy the needs of the church, the business man, the bank teller, and of course the requirements of citizens who seek a happy life of hope.

Some Americans gossiped to Jack London about his sadness regarding the earthquake saying:

“He is a playboy surely—he must regret that the city was burnt, the life that he expected and worried about is gone.”

Your humble writer thought that this was not fair for that author.

However, gossip was gossip: it carried less weight than the feather which blew without direction. Jack London maybe was a playboy, before this word was used in America. Or he might be a rude person, since he spoke roughly, and drank his whisky seriously. Or he might be a rough harsh man, because his heart was never generous towards others. He could be anyone that he wanted—nice or evil—following the notion of the up and coming generation. No one can deny that he was a most important writer, and the person who created a literature for his nation.

Some people were annoyed by him, but your humble writer loved him. He was the man who spoke boldly and without any ambiguity:

“I have to play with 1,000 girls before I die.”

And indeed such a goal somehow seemed possible in his rich life.

The handsome President Kennedy, with his high rank, was able to run up a high score, too. There were air hostesses, female secretaries, models, and film stars—there were loads of them, perhaps almost a hundred of them.

That is the American world Rong Wongsawan (young man!) of Bangkok revealed to Thailand in 1978. It is a world where libertines are celebrated, but even the libertine are still accountable to the eternal cycle of sin and merit. This of course brings us back to “Linda” and that Buddhist nun who ignores the noble precepts. Which is worse? That is not as important to Rong as who is in the story, and he tells Malee and the Thai people about the rather odd characters that made up his California. And Linda is really a metaphor for San Francisco and the indomitable post-earthquake spirit. But California is also the place where characters charm him, whether a Maryland chicken farmer, the peripatetic Peter Fonda, a young boy chasing after a girl for her Volkswagen, a cougar in a bar, or a lonely young man who has yet to befriend whisky. Then there is the wonder of the womanizing of Jack London and President Kennedy, not to mention the skill of Carol Doda’s plastic surgeon!

It is indeed from a Thai perspective a confusing country, as Rong wrote. Americans, those people who would celebrate the fact that their chickens eat better than they do, are indeed a very difficult people to understand.

Which of course does not answer that most Thai of questions. Was Rong Wongsawan a hippie? He wrote: “Yes—some parts I do not object.” (p. 169).

Translation note

The translated portions of this article were undertaken by the author and Thai students in his “English Translation” course at Payap University in 2016-2017. The students include: Jiranant Sirikunpahisan (Taew), Airin Horatschek (Airin), Kwanjira Wiwattana (Palm), Mayweya Koryaklang (Fang), Kuansiree Suanek (Meaw), Supon Phonchatchawankun (Su), Thirawit Pueng-ngam (Thor), Krittaporn Ruankaew (Yo), Hande Yilmaz (Hande), Sasithorn Katika (Cake), Nattaporn Chantajitpreecha (Nati), Chris Benson (Chris), Danielle Trappett (Dani).

On the Back of the Dog includes 111 separate vignettes/chapters/comments, each with a bolded heading. In Thai the book is 432 printed pages, including 40-50 pages of photographs. The extracts quoted here use Rong’s headings, where appropriate.

The extracts, here shortened for the purposes of this paper, come from the following pages: Astride the Iron Greyhound, 21-22; Do you really know today, 46-49; Another confusion for me, 55-60; Afternoon musings, 53-54; Happy Hour, 94-104, 112-24; and 18 April 2499 B. E. when evil brought disaster, 135-38.

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