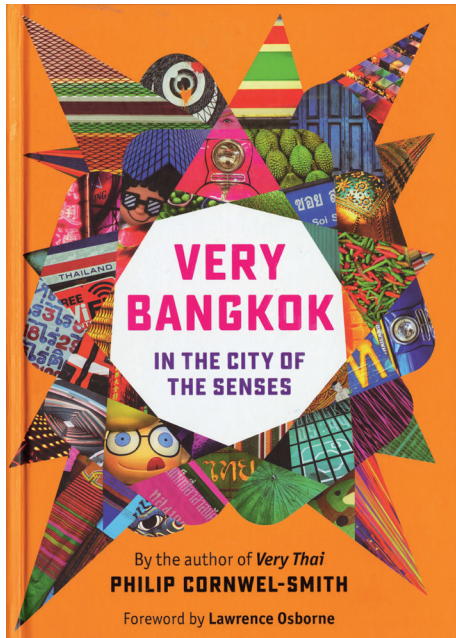


Very Bangkok: In the City of the Senses by Philip Cornwel-Smith, Bangkok: River Books, 2020. ISBN: 9786164510432. 995 Baht.



Bangkok is one of the most often studied and written about cities in the contemporary world.¹ Sometimes ‘Bangkok’ stands by itself as a singular set of urban phenomena (p. 15), as a symptom of other social conditions, as a unique destination for tourist delectation (p. 193). Sometimes discussions of this city function as a stalking horse for yet another representation of progressive globalization (p. 87), or it poses as the ultimately flawed epitome of the ‘Thai’ nation whose outer honour is fanatically defended but which conceals a cruel and nihilistic core (p. 187). ‘Bangkok’ can serve as a symbolic cauldron into which are titrated the liqueous humours of a strangely occult concoction, partly a modern excitatory effluvium, partly an ancient flow from an implacably poisonous, subterranean swamp (pp. 13, 25).

Cornwel-Smith’s second Thai compilation from fifteen years of further perceptions and recorded glances, after his *Very Thai, Everyday Popular Culture* (2005),² is organized as the product of three zones, or modes, of physical perception and display: Senses, Heart, and Face. The text is accompanied by photographs, which he largely took himself and sometimes take over from the text as the bearers of his perception. The written texts are far more insightful than *Very Thai*, but both books have their origins in the rather breathless *Time Out* style of the guides he used to edit: a kind of ‘travelling Wikipedia on speed’ without too much interventionist or academic referencing. Nevertheless, *Very Bangkok* is much more careful in tying its perceptions to other sources, or to more rounded if often critical perceptions, and the index is printed in better-spaced columns, making it more useful and more valid as a traveller’s reference. Unlike Cornwel-Smith’s earlier book, it also includes two particularly detailed maps, a conventional North-South view, and one with a new orientation of Bangkok rightwards and southwards towards the sea.

¹ Among more useful texts are: Askew, Marc, *Bangkok: Place, Practice, and Representation*, London: Routledge, 2002; Hamilton, Annette, “Wonderful, Terrible: Everyday Life in Bangkok”, in Bridge, Gary and Sophie Watson (eds.), *A Companion to the City*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2000, pp. 460–471; O’Connor, Richard A., “Place, Power and Discourse in the Thai image of Bangkok”, *JSS*, vol. 78, no. 2, 1990, pp. 61–73; Ünaldi, Serhat, *Working towards the Monarchy: The Politics of Space in Downtown Bangkok*, Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2016; Van Roy, Edward, *Siamese Melting Pot: Ethnic Minorities in the Making of Bangkok*, Singapore: ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute and Chiang Mai, Silkworm Books, 2017.

All images in this review are from *Very Bangkok*.

² Cornwel-Smith, Phillip, with photographs by John Goss and Phillip Cornwel-Smith, *Very Thai, Everyday Popular Culture*, Bangkok: River Books, 2005.

The longest zone is of the ‘Senses’, with fifty-five subcategories. ‘Heart’ has twenty-six and ‘Face’ has eighteen subcategories, and within these texts about sixty per cent are closed off into mini-essays on special topics like ‘cycling’ or ‘graffiti’. I was a little frustrated at the rather choppy flow until I reached the fourth group of subcategories under ‘Space’, which has the four subcategories, ‘Sanam Luang’, ‘Background City’, ‘Third Places’ and ‘Green Space’. I then began to see the author’s careful imbrication of his material in a number of critiques of urban life, some environmental concerns and notions of different kinds of urban space. One set of examples shows the author’s skill in this area:

Tiered spaces reinforce social tiers. Rich, middle and poor often live adjacent and may mingle in some public areas, but their worlds barely touch. Each class accesses separate overlapping grids, whether for work, shopping, or socialising, with modes of transit for each class of passenger. (p. 48)

Foreigners can be oblivious to the social rules of *kalatesa* [time-space] which govern what’s appropriate to any situation from manners to possessions. (p. 49, in ‘Background City’, ‘City of Levels’, p. 46)



It is, however, difficult in such an apparently haphazard set of different texts to sustain an underlying flow, and the quality of an aleatoric, non-consecutive existence only reappeared, for me, in the later section, ‘Portrayals’, which had six subcategories. This is where the author comes to grips with the fictionality of the city and of its imagined mess, which is somehow liveable and, despite itself, self-sustaining. Cornwel-Smith cites the use of soap opera templates by the prominent author, Veeraporn Nitiprapha, to reveal Bangkok’s ideological blindness.

If you can understand the myths of love then you can understand the myths of everything, of hatred and of conflicts.....what struck me about the 2010 crackdown is how there were people glad about other people’s deaths. (Veeraporn, p. 309)

He also neatly at the end summarizes ‘Theories of Bangkok’. This subcategory could have been included much earlier to clarify matters for the reader, but I suspect the author did not want to appear didactic, and wished this last section to provide a few hermeneutic surprises.

Strangely for a book based in part on senses experienced in Bangkok, I missed the perennial sense of crisis I have known there (p. 38). These crises are all mentioned by Cornwel-Smith in various ways and intensities, but the fact that Bangkok is still living at all – let alone whether it will be ten years from now after the real consequences of global warming have arrived – doesn’t strike home. Perhaps Cornwel-Smith, like many Bangkokians, is already habituated to Flood (p. 330), Traffic, and the Vicious Competition for Land. These crises, whatever their historical generation, are also handled by a political and regal symbolic system, which seems only suited to defer or obfuscate them. There is no chapter which handles authoritarianism, in particular that shown in the military massacres on Bangkok’s streets in 1992 and 2010. Cornwel-Smith may think these events would be a



political distraction from the subject of experiencing the city through his senses, but they are a real part of the lives of all Bangkokians, even if deflected or obscured in many aspects of daily life. He does handle memory in the section ‘Memory: remembering to forget’, noting that ‘Forgetting is policy. Recent events dissolve before our very eyes, didn’t happen here’ (p. 282), but this may be a too straightforward a formulation for the deliberate and self-interested avoidance by both the perpetrators and their victims.

Walking about almost any city is likely to trigger associations of historical memory. However, one does not find in Cornwel-Smith’s text the lyrical engagement with the past in Orhan Pamuk’s *Istanbul: Memories of a City*,³ that might require a longing, or love, that is slipping out of grasp and is only recuperated by Pamuk’s text and by his mobilization of other photographs and illustrations of a world which has nearly gone. Nor does one see the probing historical mind of late 19th century Northern European visitors to Istanbul, who divide off parts of a city by the period and type of their occupation. One would not know much about Thonburi or its role in the genesis of the Bangkok side of the river from Cornwel-Smith, as one sees clearly the rise of ‘Stamboul’ in Hutton’s *Constantinople*.⁴

³ Pamuk, Orhan, *Istanbul: Memories of a City*, London: Faber & Faber, 2005.

⁴ Hutton, William Holden, *Constantinople: The Story of the Old Capital of the Empire*, London: J.M. Dent, 1900, reprinted 1933.

This lack of a lyrical or a historical thread becomes a very clear impediment with regard to formation of the multi-ethnic nature of Bangkok's population, which has arrived over time. In *Very Bangkok* the treatment of ethnicities is spread out, not seen as



a particular force given via the nature of late Ayutthaya history, the defeat of the Burmese, and the recommencement of one of many long waves of Chinese immigration (p. 222). Instead, Brahmins and Muslim Thais are handled under the subcategory of 'Sacred', but Indian Thais under that of 'Becoming Bangkokian', and Thai-Jiin under a mixing concept of 'Stir-Fry'. This reader lost all sense of a peculiar and place-specific interaction between historical situations and the geographical/geological possibilities of habitation in Thonburi/Bangkok. This is clearly laid out in the book by Van Roy, *Siamese Melting Pot: Ethnic Minorities in the Making of Bangkok* (2017), which Cornwel-Smith includes in his bibliography but does not actively mobilize.⁵ Such ethnic variety explains the restricted viability of the concept of 'Thainess' like none other, and the casual observer may not so easily sense

in *Very Bangkok* the fictional quality of ethnic categories in the streets and in historical time (p. 297).

It could be objected that the purpose of *Very Bangkok* is not to capture 'Thainess', but the range of specific experiences and their real-world situations which can be cumulated into 'Bangkok Thainess'. Unfortunately the multi-ethnicity of Thai society makes one realize that the lack of such an intention will not make the issue of a deceptive and self-interested 'national essence' deployed assiduously by the rich and powerful go away (p. 178), whatever level of concreteness any particular set of sensations have given rise to. Indeed, Cornwel-Smith assumes throughout a sort of inclusivist sensibility which, in practice, the reader has no means of affirming. He leaves himself out of the account of his sensations, which, for him, have a directness and purity. It is difficult to believe that inherited cultural habits may allow such perception to be unmediated, however long someone has been in Thailand.

Despite extensive observations about digital realities (see 'Feeling digital', pp. 166-169, and index, pp. 350, 353), perhaps this book has come too late to examine in depth how digital virtuality functions in the integration of opinion youth cohorts, especially in the urban environment of Bangkok.⁶ These children and adolescents are now beyond

⁵ See note 1 above.

⁶ Cornwel-Smith somewhat simplistically concludes: "Time will tell if digitisation poses an existential threat

the control of their parents, and increasingly younger cohorts have escaped the insistent ideological training provided by the Thai education system even before University. There is a large set of digital networks among youth, which facilitate or produce the self-positioning affiliations of even younger school children active in recent calls for constitutional reform. ‘Thai’ society is now being integrated beyond the control systems hitherto active.⁷ It would be useful to know how these circuits are now functioning in Bangkok and whether, or how, they have affected urban identities to any extent.



What *Very Bangkok*, brings the reader, apart from its texts, are Cornwel-Smith’s own photographs. Towards the end, he confesses that he is wary of the status of the street photographs he takes because of the posing or reaction to the camera of the street subjects. He queries what has become, from Henri Cartier-Bresson, photographer’s dogma for street photography that emphasises:

“capturing ‘The Decisive Moment’, the skill of freezing a moment to convey deep meaning.” Given the way that Bangkok street photography can flummox the viewer with ambiguous juxtapositions, it could be said to capture ‘The Indecisive Moment’ (Klongton, p. 311).

The reader can thus go back to take an open-ended interpretive view of the images he presents. Bangkok now appears as a litany of in-between pauses, which segment and redefine its ambiguous meanings.



Overall, this is a valuable guide to the sorts of Bangkok one can experience without necessarily forcing the reader to agree with the author. Aside from an understandable reluctance to handle issues to do with royal status or the authoritarianism of the current military regime, it represents a remarkably comprehensive view of Bangkok’s social phenomena as may be encountered in the street.

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to the sensory experience of Bangkok or gives it a new flavour’ (p. 169).

⁷ On the issue of digital controls, see Aim Sinpeng, “Digital media, political authoritarianism, and Internet controls in Southeast Asia”, *Media, Culture & Society*, vol. 42 (1), pp. 25-39, 2019. There is some analysis of the role of the internet in forming new youth cohorts in Aim Sinpeng and Janjira Sombatpoonsiri, “New tactics, old grievances in Thai Protests”, *East Asia Forum* at <http://eastasiaforum.org/2020/09/08/new-tactics-old-grievances-in-the-thai-protests/>