

New Western Cuisine.



ISSUE 68 February 2011



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定价: RMB 25 US\$ 5



I Shed a Tear for Khun "A"

By Fred Tibbitts, Jr.

Photo of sculpture at Basilica of Sta Anastasia by Richard Xu

Photo of Thai students courtesy of Nation Photo Centre, Thailand

...and for so many like Khun "A" for whose dreams never seem to come true: Instead, they find themselves living to serve those whose dreams have come true. Life is but bitter-sweet for so many of the sons and daughters of Thailand. I am reminded of the landmark novel, "Cry, The Beloved Country" by Alan Paton, documenting the plight of the black South Africans: That their land was so beautiful, yet because of the color of their skin, they were not allowed to enjoy it. In Thailand what prevents the disadvantaged from enjoying the beauty of their country is not the color of their skin, but the universal lack of equal opportunity among the poor for a higher education and their families a better standard of living. The average girl is lucky to finish sixth grade; the average boy, high school. At some of the rural, temple schools, the best that can be expected is a visiting teacher two to three days a week for all grades in one room with shared, hopelessly out-of-date text books, the pages worn thin. English is rarely taught. I shed a tear for Khun "A" and all the disadvantaged sons and daughters of Thailand, who awaken each morning to find themselves forever on the outside, looking-in.

It's 4:55am Monday morning. Khun "A", my regular airport car service operator is waiting as scheduled at the entrance to our apartment building, downtown Bangkok: It's another early morning run to Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi Airport. Khun "A" sleepily hops out of his SUV and quickly greets me, as always with "Sawa Dee Krap, Khun Fred". And as always, I return the favor "Kob Khun Krap, Khun "A". My four bags are swiftly loaded into the back of the car with the help of all four lobby and doormen on duty—all eager for my regular gratuity of 100 Baht each: It's more than most residents give them; if they give them anything at all. But I'm happy to share. Everyone bows and "wais" in appreciation. I "Kob Khun Krap" them, returning their bows with equal warmth and respect. And we're off, just ahead of the 5:30am rush hour traffic as planned.

As we speed along the still-darkened, star-lit Bangkok streets, maneuvering in and out of the slower traffic, I always start by asking Khun "A" "Saba Dee Mi (How are you)?" Khun "A" always responds "Oh, I am fine, Khun Fred". "And your kropkrua (family)?" I always say. "They are fine, also, Khun Fred, thank you"...but he often adds that he wishes his wife would drink less beer—"She is not feeling well this morning". I usually just sigh and try to console him as best I can with, "Yes, that would be nice: I hope she stops drinking so much, soon". And he always laughs, "Oh that would be very nice, Khun Fred, but I don't think so!" And so it goes all the way to the airport, back and forth, reassuring one another of our genuine friendship and that we wish one another well.

I often wonder what he does to make a living and afford his new Japanese SUV, besides driving some farang (foreigners), like myself, to the airport now and again. He does not have many regular customers. He is living on the edge: I can feel it. He's desperate, but by no means the exception among poor Thai, constantly searching for a better job, a better way of surviving for just another day. I feel very sorry for him and his lovely wife. Sometimes when he picks me up on my return to Bangkok, she comes along with him. Her Thai first name is "Thaipalat"; her western nickname is "Apple". I like her. She's very sweet, but also very quiet. She speaks no English. But I think she's depressed. She's thinking he's not going to make it. And then what will she do? I don't know if she could stay with a friend or if her family would take her back. I don't ask. I want them to have a better life, but my better-than-average fare both ways is all that I am doing for them now; though I have given him a "bonus" now and again, when I sense he can't afford the gas. I should do more for them.

The underprivileged sons and daughters of Thailand struggle each day, that it might not be their last day in this life, hoping and praying that things will be better soon; clinging to whatever shred of dignity remains in their lives. Yet most have come to accept their plight, knowing that hope is for those with an education and school connections, who quickly leave their less-fortunate friends behind once they graduate and become well employed. Many of the rich of their country seem to have forgotten how to share, so for these rich, I also shed a tear, as they are truly the most disadvantaged of all; that their hearts are closed and as such, they have no love, not even for themselves.

So, as for Khun "A" and his pallyaya (wife), Thaipalat, I guess I'll just give them some extra Baht as I have it to give, though my means are limited. They see me as being rich, living in a nice condo building, flying all over the place, even if I go economy most of the time: For I'm an American



with a university education...Yes, we live in very different worlds, but they just have to keep trying to advance themselves; it's what we all must do.

I shed a tear for Khun "A" and Khun Thaipalat. And though I see they are so often overwhelmed with life's challenges for survival, they may take solace, though they don't yet know it, that they and all the underprivileged residing in "The Land of Smiles" are truly members of the Royal Family of Thailand: For they are Princes and Princesses each of them in their own right. They are the heart and Soul of Thailand and they deserve whatever help is available, that they may enjoy healthier, more joyful lives with their families. As benevolent monarchs of new, let them always remember their days and nights of despair and hopelessness, that they will become the salvation of the less fortunate of Thailand.

