

Reportage:

Love thy neighbour

Reporter:

Craig Scutt

Thoughts lead on to purposes, purposes go forth in action, actions form habits, habits decide character, and character fixes our destiny.

– Tryon Edwards (1809–94)

Abang's eyes flash from side to side. He seems rattled, nervous, unsure. It's 8pm on a Saturday night and we're on the middle of an old grey bridge in Loi Kroh Road, Chiang Mai, the provincial capital of northern Thailand. He puts the bunch of withered red roses he has to sell on the pavement and leans back on the balustrade, badly affecting nonchalance. A colourful parade of Thais and *farangs* (foreigners) streams by. Everyone is out for a good time. The night bazaar, girly-bars and gay bars are filling up. Abang grits his teeth and scans the busy street. You'd think we were in the middle of a drug deal. Finally satisfied his friends aren't around, he cups his hands in front of his chest. My companion, Pot Rungrojkulporn, drops a fistful of condoms into the boy's open palms. Abang is eleven years old. He isn't scared, he is embarrassed.

I hadn't come to Thailand to hand out condoms to kids. Ostensibly I was here on business with my mother-in-law. When I found out we had a few days' R&R in Chiang Mai, I couldn't resist finding a story to cover. Writing about the sex industry in a nation dubbed 'the world's brothel' may seem passé but I couldn't help myself. Perhaps there was an underlying element of titillation at play, but I like to think it was an innocent wave of curiosity that propelled me out of the sweltering midday sun into an internet café, sans coffee. Google brought me to Pot, a project officer for the Volunteer Children's Development Foundation (VGCD).

Ten years ago, four local university graduates noticed a growing number of street kids hanging around the city's medieval cultural landmark, Tapei Gate. They talked with them and realised the youngsters were being preyed on by opportunistic sex tourists. The graduates decided they could help, and VGCD was born. With limited financial support from UNICEF, the foundation exists to provide a place of refuge and support, as well as recreation and education services, for street children in Chiang Mai.

Every night for a decade, Pot and a small team of volunteers have scoured the main tourist areas seeking out children who are begging or selling flowers. They often find them in the sex bars, where they are most vulnerable to overtures from paedophiles. Pot carries a brightly illustrated book that he uses to show the kids how to spot sexual predators. There are pictures of men offering children sweets, taking them to the movies and making gifts of bicycles. Images of gift-giving lead to illustrations of men fondling or drooling over kids. The last page depicts a lonely street boy covered in sores after his immune system has been destroyed by HIV/AIDS, his soul floating away to symbolise death.

As I watched Pot showing the kids these pictures, I found it impossible to gauge from their responses whether or not they had engaged in prostitution. When we first met Abang, he was patrolling the streets with a friend. They laughed when Pot whipped out his book. Both insisted they were virgins and convincingly, as far as I could see, demonstrated an appropriate level of coyness. It was only later that Abang returned alone and whispered to Pot that he had been sleeping with male tourists.

Pot tells me around two hundred and fifty children currently use the VGCD's rundown headquarters as a place to hang out. The building's façade is like a shopfront except there's a gaping hole where the display window ought to be. Despite its dishevelled appearance, it is a happy place. The walls inside are covered with bright pictures painted by the kids. A huge blackboard is used by volunteer teachers to instruct classes about basic hygiene and health care, drugs, sexually transmitted infections and the dangers of prostitution. For street kids, the appeal is obvious. The headquarters is safer than the slums, and it must be reassuring to have someone take a genuine interest in their welfare.

With a population of 1.5 million, Chiang Mai is Thailand's second largest city. Under ousted former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who was born here, the city benefited from five years of intensive investment. Most of the children who end up living rough come from remote rural villages in the country's far north, or across the border from Myanmar and Laos. The majority, like Abang, are sent here by their parents. It is debatable whether their uneducated parents, who have probably never set foot in Chiang Mai, understand the potential horrors awaiting their children. Pot says most of the kids arrive with the intention of becoming beggars or flower sellers, not prostitutes. The development foundation's core mission is to prevent them from entering the sex trade.

Prostitution in Thailand is comparable in some ways to the presence of cricket in Australia. It attracts legions of fans and armies of detractors, while an ambivalent majority wonders what all the fuss is about. But unlike Australia's national sport, the most ardent fans of Thai prostitution are foreigners. Last year the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dr Kantathi Suphamongkhon, addressed members of the American business community at a reception put on by the Tourism Authority of Thailand. He

announced that more than eleven million people visit the Kingdom as tourists every year. In talking about the country's bonanza of attractions, he failed to mention that around 10 per cent of visitors arrive with the express purpose of getting their rocks off.

In 2005, veteran British journalist Alex Renton was the first to demonstrate that analysis of the Thai Immigration Department's statistics 'reveals an interesting discrepancy'. Each year, between 25 and 30 per cent more men than women arrive as tourists. Renton concluded there were almost a million single men travelling to Thailand for sex – a figure undisputed by the Director General of Thailand's Office of Tourism Development.

The Chulalongkorn University Political Economy Centre in Bangkok estimates the country's sex industry to be worth in excess of US\$4 billion, making it by far the most profitable sex trade in the world. But while Thailand occupies the industry's pole position, it is the men, women and children of South-East Asia more generally who service the world's desires, the Philippines, Thailand, South Korea, Sri Lanka and Hong Kong are the primary destinations for sex-seekers.

I can't now recall whether I was surprised to learn that Australia is one of the major exporters of sex tourists into South-East Asia, after the United States, the United Kingdom and Japan. According to World Vision, Australians account for 9 per cent of sex tourists arriving in the region. This suggests that almost a hundred thousand Aussies descend every year on Thailand alone. To me, such an influx seems odd.

Judging by the vast number of billboards promoting brothels and other sex-related services I see around Melbourne, Australia's sex industry looks to be thriving. Speaking at a seminar on the effect of legalisation of prostitution, Sheila Jeffreys, Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Melbourne, estimated there were a hundred legal and a further four hundred illegal brothels operating in Victoria. A similar number was suggested for New South Wales. While state legislation varies, it is possible to secure the services of a prostitute legally anywhere in the country. So why the exodus to South-East Asia?

In my view, it is simply a matter of taste. Some men – a lot of men – prefer Asians. I remember the first time I was introduced to this concept. I was in my early twenties, living in London. My stepfather had come over on business and was staying with me for a few days. It was the first time we'd talked as adults, man to man, face to face. We gossiped. After telling him about a passionate but doomed relationship I was having with an Indian girl from Mauritius, he decided to reveal something of his own desires. I have deleted his exact turn of phrase from memory, but it was something along the lines of, 'I've always fancied a bit of exotic. That's what attracted me to your mother.'

My mother is half Chinese and half English. I am a quarter Chinese, a quarter Polish and half English. My eyes hardly slant at all and I've only ever been regarded as Caucasian. My mother, as my stepfather reminded me, is 'a bit of exotic'. Usually the comments she receives about her appearance are positive. But I recall times in

South Africa where we lived in the late '80s when she copped racial abuse. Back then, apartheid was official, and the Chinese were considered second-class citizens in the same bracket as 'Coloureds' – those of mixed race. I haven't forgotten the contempt occasionally levelled at the woman who brought me into the world. It may even explain why I feel compelled to point out that what really lies at the heart of Thailand's sex tourism industry is the way we sexually stereotype Asians.

Putting aside other Asian stereotypes, there is a definite stereotype perpetuated – mostly by men – about the way Asian women perform in the bedroom and act in a relationship. I say 'mostly by men' because I haven't broached the subject of sex with Asians with many women. But I will never forget the time at university when my female housemate asked me to confirm explicit details about my then girlfriend's genitalia which, according to my housemate, endowed her with an unfair sexual advantage. The girlfriend in question was English-Chinese – that is, she was brought up in England but her parents were from Hong Kong.

Talking sex with men is an everyday occurrence. When I told my squash partner I was going to Thailand, he looked up wistfully and said, 'You lucky bugger! Sure you don't want company?' He then proceeded to tell me about the good times he'd spent with numerous 'tight-bodied Asians'. Surprised at his openness, I decided to ask my brother whether he'd experienced a similar outpouring when he announced his recent trip to Beijing and Thailand. He revealed that when he told his work mates he was going to Thailand, they gave him 'the look' and asked whether his girlfriend would be going too. If she wasn't they said he'd be able to have the time of his life. They described the trip as a golden opportunity for him to 'fill his boots'. Two of his office mates had been there on sex holidays.

Maybe I'm just ridiculously naïve (I have yet to set foot in a strip joint), but I was shocked to learn that three people I knew – one of whom I consider a friend – had been to Thailand, paid for sex, and thought their actions were sufficiently ordinary to talk openly about it without fear of recrimination. Buoyed by these phenomenological observations, I spoke to someone I consider an authority on the subject of Asian stereotypes: my ex-girlfriend with the 'unfair sexual advantage'. Viv lives in London and we've only kept in touch sporadically. Thinking myself the pinnacle of postmodernity, I contacted her through Facebook. The response I got certainly wasn't the one I expected. Her words detonated off the screen.

'Oh my God, I have SO much to say about this!' This was followed by a heartfelt rant spanning five A4 pages. In her opinion, there is 'a hell of a lot' of sexual stereotyping. In a subsequent telephone conversation she told me, 'We call it "yellow fever", which I find hilarious, or "Asian fetish", which is more common. I get it all the time at certain clubs and you know that guys are only talking to you because you look Asian. It comes as a complete surprise when I can actually speak English without an accent. Sometimes I think they're disappointed.'

Viv had a number of theories about why Caucasian men are attracted to Asian females. First, there is the physical difference. 'Perhaps it's the hairlessness of our bodies and the different feel of our skin due to the extremely healthy diet and the blackness and straightness of the hair,' she said. 'Everything is completely different. Even my boyfriend Tim, who had never been out with an Asian until me, always comments on how my skin feels and the fact I never shave my legs and yet have not a single hair. The smoothness astounds him.'

Cultural differences serve to heighten the attraction. Viv was raised by first-generation Chinese migrants and has strong ties with relatives throughout South-East Asia. She believes that traditional 'Eastern culture' teaches women to be submissive, to look after their man and do everything for him. 'Girls are taught to bring up a family and to know their place; to take all sorts of shit and still be courteous and long suffering without a word of complaint,' she said. 'I am far too Westernised for that but there are girls I know in China, Vietnam and the Philippines who are completely like this. Western guys who look ugly as hell and don't stand a chance with strong-minded, selfish, feminist, materialistic, status-driven Western girls can have beautiful Asian girls falling over themselves to be with them.'

The image of smooth-bodied, submissive Asians seems to be the unique selling point touted by sex travel agents. These businesses, with names like, 'Global Sex Vacations' and 'Pleasure Tours', are the motivating force behind booming numbers of sex tourists pouring into South-East Asia. The United Nations defines sex tourism as 'trips organised from within the tourism sector, or from outside this sector but using its structures and networks, with the primary purpose of effecting a commercial sexual relationship by the tourist with residents at the destination'. A casual glance at their online brochures is enough to reveal the method: standard tourism jargon mingled with seductive phrases like, 'all of your fantasies can become reality here regardless of your age and form' and 'these girls really love to please the men who are prepared to show them kindness in return'.

Of course, sex tourists are not just straight men. Bangkok has over sixty gay bars and nightclubs – most serving as pick-up joints where foreign tourists can hook up with prostitutes. A more recent phenomenon is the wave of Aussie females breaking over Balinese beaches in search of satisfaction. Having never been to Indonesia, my knowledge of Balinese gigolos is restricted to hearsay, but a well-travelled surfer friend informs me that gigolos' public appearances are usually few and far between. In his opinion, this is because the men are embarrassed to be seen out and about with the 'rough Aussie mingers' who queue up for their services. It's just as likely the men are simply trying to avoid the stigma that comes with being a prostitute. While the number of gay and female sex tourists is increasing, straight men are by far the majority. They arrive in search of an Asian fantasy and more often than not it is fulfilled.

follow Pot in and out of Chiang Mai's sex bars; nearly every farang punter is a dead ringer for my own stereotype of a dirty old man: reptilian eyes, creeping obesity, and a constantly quivering mouth wet with lust. They appear to hunt in pairs and are easy to spot amongst the throng of 'normal' tourists. You don't even need to look.

As I'm talking with Pot, I hear Australian voices approaching excitedly behind us. They are discussing what the night holds in store. I turn to see a fifty-ish bald man strutting like Don Juan, shirt buttons undone to reveal a freshly waxed chest. He leads his younger apprentice towards the centre of the red light district. The younger man looks about forty and is almost creaming his pants as he ogles the endless rows of gyrating girls calling to them from the bars.

As the Aussies strut by I can't resist taking their picture. At the click of the shutter the older man spins around. His glare is a threat. Of course, he has every right to be annoyed. I hadn't asked permission to take his portrait, he is acting legitimately and I am invading his privacy. There is nothing wrong with coming to Thailand and paying for sex. Everybody does it. According to my squash mate, it is *de rigueur* for any red-blooded male to buy off the flesh menu.

The trouble is that the number one dish served up by the sex industry is young girls. Not young women, but children. The 2001 World Health Organisation report, *Sex Work in Asia*, revealed the premium age for sex workers in the region to be between twelve and sixteen. In Thailand, it's estimated that a third of foreign sex workers are younger than eighteen. These are not children brought into the industry to satiate the desires of paedophiles. These youngsters are part of the mainstream sex industry that caters to foreigners. In this country alone there are around two hundred thousand men, women and children who exist to provide sexual services to overseas visitors, with at least a similar number thought to cater specifically for Thais.

According to the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women, the average age of girls entering the sex industry is fourteen. The poorest villages in countries like Vietnam, Myanmar, Laos and Thailand are ideal recruiting stations for traffickers supplying children for sex. Dozens of academic research papers have been written about this practice, which essentially results in children being either kidnapped or sold into the trade, either knowingly or unwittingly, by their families. It happens because their poverty is extreme and the economic incentives are too good to ignore. Even though Thai men account for the largest proportion of visits to prostitutes, it is the high sums paid by foreigners that have made the industry lucrative.

The Bangkok-based organisation End Child Prostitution in Asian Tourism claims 'the influx of sex tourists and the existence of sex tours catering to Japanese, European and other Caucasian tourists are the reasons why the sex trade of children refuses to die.'

A bar girl servicing farangs can expect to charge anywhere between five hundred and two thousand baht for either a short time (one to two hours) or a long time (all night). Hence the phrase, 'Love you long time.' On top of this, the punter usually has to buy the girl, or girls, a designated number of drinks – usually two – plus pay her 'bar fine' for taking her out of the establishment. Drinks can cost up to two thousand baht (\$80) and the bar fine could be anything up to three thousand baht (\$120). The girls are usually required to pay a percentage of their fee back to the bar, and I am reliably informed that a similar arrangement exists in brothels and massage parlours. A sex tour organised in Australia can cost up to \$5,000, but is all-inclusive. If you compare these figures to the average monthly wage for a policeman of six thousand baht and the current minimum wage of a hundred and seventy-five baht per day, it's easy to see why a ruthless network of brothel and bar owners, pimps, corrupt cops and recruitment agents would turn a blind eye to upholding the human rights of young people who can earn them a fortune.

Over a slice of pineapple with my friend, Pimjai, the wife of an ex-pat Australian, I broached the subject of prostitution in Chiang Mai. I told her about a Thai girl I'd seen helping a farang on to a rented moped. The old man was so stiff she had to pull his leg over the seat so he could get on. 'It's disgusting,' she snapped. 'Those stupid girls will sleep with anyone if he has money.' She shook her head and fixed me with a glare, as if searching me for evidence of my own indiscretions. 'Those Australians, they are not good people,' she said stabbing her toothpick into another piece of fruit.

In 2005, a team from the University of New South Wales led by Dr Robert Howard surveyed nearly a thousand Westerners who were or had been living in Thailand. A third of the respondents left the country in less than two years. Of those who left, 20 per cent said it was because they were disillusioned with life in Thailand. One said, 'Thais look down on whites. They don't like us and I got tired of it.' Should this come as a surprise? I don't know of any culture – past, present or future – that's made up of masochists desperate to be dominated, subjugated and exploited by a foreign power.

When I asked my squash buddy whether he slept with prostitutes in Australia, he laughed and said of course he didn't. So why did he do it in Thailand? He told me, 'Because that's just the way it is over there.' As he said this, I felt something in me starting to burn. I wanted to stand up, challenge him, tell him what a lame excuse that was for behaviour he wouldn't accept on his own turf. I wanted to ask whether he thought the respect he was shown by prostitutes was real, or whether he knew he had bought into an illusion and just didn't care. I wanted to know if it mattered to him what circumstances had delivered these women to his bedside, made them strip off seductively and lick him all over. But my fire went out in silence and I ordered us another beer. He's my mate. Who am I to tell him what to do? He isn't the first Australian to go to South-East Asia for sex, and he definitely won't be the last. He's merely part of a groundswell of men, and now women, who believe they have the right to exploit the sons and daughters of neighbouring nations. The precedent was set long ago.

The process of European colonisation in South-East Asia began five centuries ago with the arrival of Portuguese and Spanish sailors, but it was not until the British began expanding their trading posts by taking control of Singapore in 1824 that the rhetoric to legitimise colonial 'sexploitation' entered British and later Australian discourse. In her book *Prostitution, Race and Politics: Policing Venereal Disease in the British Empire* (Routledge, 2003), Philippa Levine, Professor of History at the University of California, writes, 'Prostitution, as colonial officials were fond of asserting, "offends no native susceptibility". It was a routine part of life and evidence of native disorder.' Levine suggests that whereas the British were civilised and controlled, their 'subjects' were promiscuous, immoral whores.

These attitudes were carried to Australia aboard the First Fleet. Governor Phillip's first set of instructions from the Admiralty had been to proceed to Tahiti before landing at Botany Bay to procure enough females so as to prevent 'gross irregularities and disorders' (sodomy) among the male convicts and marines when they arrived at New South Wales. Since 1766, Tahiti had been fabled for having beautiful women of 'little virtue'. A hundred and ninety three female convicts were transported from England, primarily to serve as concubines, and spared the Tahitian women from that fate. Their suffering has been well documented, though to some extent it has failed to inform the thinking of future generations. Levine writes that in the late nineteenth century, 'In the wealthy colony of Queensland, the preponderance in the sex trade of Aboriginal and Japanese women, and among whites, of Irish-born women, was likelier to draw comments about racial tendencies than sympathy for the economic disadvantages these women experienced.'

On Loi Kroh Road, the night drags on. For every girl shaking her booty at passing tourists, there are another four slumped behind her at the bar looking bored, bemused, jaded and pissed off. A man walks past me, his white hair and red skin contrasting with the black Rolling Stones t-shirt he wears. His eyes sweep the bars' perimeter. A glint in his eye tells me he suspects he has died and gone to heaven.

He doesn't notice the brooding glares coming from the young Thai men. Nor does he notice the dwindling figure of Abang, one hand in his pocket to hide the bulge of condoms stuffed inside, the other clutching his wilting flowers, which he knows are not the only thing he has to sell. Around us neon lights twinkle like fallen stars caught in an invisible web spun by the syncopated rhythm of a hip-hop beat. Pot flashes me a smile. Like he's apologising for showing me the dark heart of his city. Or maybe it's just my imagination. ■