

The Eagle and the Elephant

When Charles Marlow steamed up river to the center of the Congo Free State, why did he go and what did he find? Gripped by imagery of a jungle we would not dare visit in person, we read from armchairs Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness. The novella evokes the irrepressible spirit of western civilization, secure in its superiority while exploring distant lands. But for African writers, the text is testament to the corrupt impunity of the white world and its literature, understating how Belgian colonialism and the ivory trade created the awful abyss Conrad painted in words and blind to the accomplishments and humanity of Congo's Fang people. Marlow found Mr. Kurtz, but a deeper revelation is shrouded in Kurtz' final phrase – The Horror, the Horror.

Tonight we launch a modern sequel, about how two Literarians ventured overseas to find not Kurtz or ivory but business opportunity from the Kingdom of Thailand.

If America is the eagle, Thailand is the elephant.

What happens when the eagle visits the elephant?

The first known visit of an American to Thailand, then known as Siam, was in 1821 during the reign of Rama II of the Chakri Dynasty, when Captain Han sailed up the Chao Phraya River to Bangkok. The first transaction between Siam and the United States? America's only specifically constitutionally enshrined product, guns – 500 flintlocks bestowed on the King, who in gratitude granted Captain Han the rank of Khun Pakdiraja and tax exemptions on his cargo.

The next American export seven years later was Protestant missionaries. Like his subjects, Rama III was a devout Theravada Buddhist who let them enter Siam on the condition they distribute Bibles only to the Chinese population. After four decades of proselytizing zeal, including translation of the Bible into Thai, by 1870 they succeeded in converting exactly one Thai to Christianity, an orphan boy sent to America.

The first Thai export to America left on a cargo ship in 1828, two brothers joined together from the chest-bone to the waist – Eng and Chang. Their American importer profited by touring them through America as curiosities, riding horses, doing four-legged long jumps and playing chess, eventually escaping their patron and becoming American citizens, the first Thai immigrants to the United States and the origin of the phrase Siamese twins. Each married. They produced 22 children. Their descendants include a president of the Union Pacific Railroad and a US Air Force General.

The flintlocks and American support from the time of President Andrew Jackson helped Siam remain the only Southeast Asian country never to be colonized by a European power. Astute Siamese kings kept at bay the Brits to the west and south and the French to the east and north. Until 1932 the country was an absolute monarchy, but that year an Army coup transformed it into a constitutional kingdom.

What does an eagle see when inspecting the elephant? And if the eagle is there for business, what final words will conclude the story?

We enter a foreign land with vision blurred by our frames of reference.

Consider Monarchy. To Americans it paints Thailand as a quaint, archaic backwater, lacking the glory of two legislative chambers from two political parties ever able to pursue the public good rather than personal power, a dignified election process that inevitably secures our wisest president, and a Supreme Court deciding 5 to 4, or perhaps now 4 to 4, the clear and obvious meaning of a written constitution. Thailand has so far to go before it reaches the apex of democracy as perfected in the USA.

Viewed through Thai eyes, the King is essential societal glue, revered and respected while the country has over 84 years suffered 18 coups and 18 constitutions. Sometimes the Army, other times the Navy, takes power, each junta pledging to restore democracy when it's safe, after extracting benefits to ensure a comfortable life after elections. The general now running the country was a \$40,000 a year soldier, but when he seized power two years ago and declared his assets, he reported net worth of \$4 million, half of it in cash. Yes, the coup leaders were required to and did report their wealth upon taking control, in a respectful nod to democratic transparency, but more deeply a recognition that even they operate under the supreme watch of the King, and thus are limited to modest plunder.

It was the monarchy that modernized Thailand and kept it free from foreign domination in the 19th and 20th centuries. King Bhumibol Aduladej, meaning Strength of the Land Incomparable Power, is himself a US export, born in 1927 in Cambridge, Massachusetts. As Rama IX, he has reigned for 70 years, longer than any head of state, Head of the Armed Forces, Adherent of Buddhism and Upholder of Religions. As an enlightened one, the King serenely symbolizes that all will pass away in time, even populist politicians, generals and admirals.

Consider Freedom of Speech. Western human rights advocates were outraged by a recent 28-year prison sentence for a 29-year-old hotel employee who pled guilty to seven counts of lèse-majesté. Her offense arose from a few Facebook posts about the royal family, details censored because it would be criminal to republish words disparaging to the King or his immediate family. To us, outrageous repression. Perhaps to Thais our dousing Vietnam with Agent Orange was indecent. The King transcends politics as the incarnation of the nation, preserving Thailand's very definition – the Land of the Free. But one is not free to criticize the King.

Consider the Land of Smiles. Thailand is courteous bows with prayer-formed hands, jokes and gentle laughter in all settings, including business. This may lead Americans to think this is the happiest place on earth. If the World Bank ranked Gross Domestic Happiness, surely Thailand would be at the top.

Why the smiles? Thailand is a Theravada Buddhist society. We are deluded to think we are producers of our own happiness. This life is dukkha – suffering. Dukkha is caused by tanhā - craving. Beset as we are with desire for things, jealous of others, driven to shape a clear unchanging identity for ourselves, we fail to know that desires defile us and can never be satisfied. Until we surrender what creates our suffering, what prevents us from reaching Nibbāna, we will not be released from the painful cycle of birth, illness, aging, death.

Theravada Buddhists smile in the face of dukkha. They practice sanuk, loosely translated as fun. Why be too serious, as control is not ours to grasp? This life's journey is to move to a higher level in the next incarnation toward ultimate release. Sanuk is fun as an

intrinsically valuable social activity, ensuring group harmony. It is good natured, playful, genuine, satisfying in all we do. This does not mean there is no real business in Thailand. Thais are as bright as anyone, equally capable of shrewdness, focus, impunity, calculation and business brilliance. Sanuk is antidote to life's difficulties, an elixir toast to the immanent impermanence of everything. So live in the moment because that's all there is. The most important moment of your life is this second – and now it's gone.

Consider Corruption. Thailand is tied for 76th in Transparency International's corruption index with Bosnia, Brazil, Burkina Faso, India, Tunisia and Zambia. As a friend who ran Goodyear Tire's rubber plantations in Thailand told me, corruption has its principles. My friend Jack's boss visited the country and met Jack at the airport. They were driven north in two cars, the CEO in the lead. His car was stopped by traffic police, a transaction occurred, and they drove on. A second stop occurred further north a half hour later. When they got to the Goodyear plantation, Jack asked for details. The front car's Thai driver explained that he showed the second policeman a receipt for the earlier payment, and that was sufficient for the day.

I asked a friend who headed the Peace Corps in Thailand what single word best expresses the country. Fecundity, he instantly replied. It is a land of warmth, growth, cobras, rubber trees, macadamia nuts, hot spices. Everything grows. Logging is illegal to preserve remaining jungles, where elephants paint and play soccer on tourist preserves.

For almost two hundred years America has enjoyed a special relationship with Thailand, the first country with which our government signed a trade agreement, the Treaty of Amity and

Commerce of 1833. Today we share a free trade agreement. Leading Thai exports are electronics and automobiles, not rubber and rice. P&G's Thai company is 50 years old, making there and marketing from here baby care and beauty care products. Cincinnati has 43 Thai restaurants. A company led by a young Cincinnati in which I've invested sells U.S. craft beers in the Kingdom. What is going on?

I have a proposition. We talk of imports and exports, outsourcing and insourcing, offshoring and reshoring. These are increasingly antique and misleading notions created by national boundary thinking. It's not that the world is flat, as erroneous an image today as it was for 15th century mariners. The world is not smaller. And it's not that trade is free or fair or that culture and distance don't matter.

Instead, something fundamental has emerged. It is the age of the globalized individual. People and companies are transcending the boundaries and clout of nations. Some individuals are super-empowered, whether they be Elon Musk or Bill Gates or Osama bin Laden or even us. We need not board a steamer or plane to visit a place or pierce the secrets of cultures or sell or buy our products and services. Google Earth, Skype, Viber and the Web take us anywhere we wish any time to visit the Heart of Darkness or the Land of Smiles. We can enroll in ISIS through our browser or serve in Doctors without Borders through tele-medicine. And we can access the world's literature in any language on our iPad and have it roughly translated with a click of our browser.

Let's call this roundsourcing. We can today source anything from anywhere – products, investments, money, services, food, labor, inventions, faith, fiancés. Roundsourcing empowers

America to do what it does best. America's exceptional nature is its magnetic diversity, the ability to make all of humanity a part of itself, not devouring others but setting them free to become their ideal selves as part of an ever unfolding epic. America's noblest strength is its openness to everything and everyone, for the mosaic of humanity to mix, not to melt, and then for each of us free to choose our journey after surveying the vast global menu of possibility, as an eagle soars above its domain.

It is in the roundsourcing era that Bill and Tom ventured to Thailand to explore Muay Thai, inadequately translated as Thai boxing, the ancient national sport of Thailand. They flew there not to sell flintlocks or convert the infidels, but to explore whether there is business to be made from Muay Thai, a form of fitness, sport, spectacle, indeed a way of living. Could Tiger Muay Thai become a global brand? Can it sweep the globe as did Harry Potter, Grey Goose, Beyoncé and anime?

What part of the Elephant have our eagles discovered? And what will be written on their business tombstones? Will it be The Horror, the Horror? Or instead The Profits, The Profits? Or at least The Life, What an Adventurous Life?

An oracle would have prophesied to Columbus, "Set sail for India, you'll find America." A modern oracle might tell Bill and Tom, "Take wing for Thailand, you'll find America." For the great saga of America is its own constant recreation, taking in the offerings of the world and shaping them for humanity to choose what it can be when free to soar like an eagle.

This story is not yet written. But we can turn now to Chapter One.

Joseph J. Dehner, for The Literary Club, February 29, 2016