

Hi again from the Land of Smiles---

Speaking of smiles, I must say that when I first arrived here, it was great being greeted by a smile everywhere I went. Thais enjoy smiling. However, after being here a while, one begins to realize why they smile all the time: 1) They are happy--Thais love being happy (almost to a fault) 2) Thais are very polite people (almost to a fault) and they feel that smiling is a very polite thing to do 3) In the instance of greeting foreigners, they are glad you are here but don't really know what else to do...or 4) you have some Green Curry left on your face.

OR secret option number 5! --You have actually met one of the few Thais who really IS trying to rip you off and thinks they are getting you good, you rich white guy, you. This is what happened in a taxi this past weekend. After sending a quick email to my parents I got in a cab with my friend, Hao, for a trip to [Sukhothai](#), center of the first "real Thai" empire, dating from the 13th Century. We wanted to go to Mochit, the northern bus station. We were going for the last bus out, at 11 at night (get there in the morning after sleeping most of the 7-8 hour drive). However, our cab driver had other ideas. He decided he was going to take the foolish farangs, us, for a ride and charge us 100 baht and leave us about 30 minutes-drive from the bus station at around 10 to 11pm. Little did he know

he wasn't going to get paid. We realized we weren't going to get to the bus station in time once he decided to stop the taxi near Siam Square and after complaining (in Thai) to him that we weren't where we were supposed to be (and he insisted we were, smiling the whole time) we got out

of the cab without paying. He quickly jumped out of the cab to yell at us, but I came back telling him calmly that we were students at Thammasat University and he ended up apologizing profusely and offering to take us wherever we wanted. We left him on the street as he realized his mistake in trying to not only swindle us, but to swindle Thammasat students. Such

is the appreciation of students. If only I had told him right away that we were Thammasat students we might have been able to go to Sukhothai this past weekend. Boo.



In other, happier news however, I got my first real taste of Thai high society (in Thai, "hi-so"). But it wasn't just the affluence. This took place [84 stories high!](#) Literally high society! My friend A, of the previous email who took us to the Muay Thai boxing matches, invited a few of us to her father's promotion party. He apparently is a high-ranking military guy and is now even more high ranking because of his role in the coup last fall. Very interesting. However, they were all great to us and we had a wonderful time scoping Bangkok from the tallest tower in Thailand. The food was wonderful and so was the view.

Along the lines of the coup--everyday gets a little more tense, especially around Sanam Luang where the nightly coup-protest continues. However, last night the military proceeded to dismantle the stage upon which revelers were speaking. I'm not sure what's going to happen now...but I guess the protest continues across the field of Sanam Luang outside Thammasat.

In my Buddhist Institutions class (oh the horror! he's talking about *classes*!) we were discussing ghosts today and the role they play in Thai society/beliefs. Though not associated with Buddhism at all, these ghosts and spirits pervade. Example: Every house/building or plot of land has "spirits of the land". We must always pay respect to them and there are shrines which are built near every house or building to satisfy these spirits/ghosts.

Warning--heavy reading in the paragraph ahead. skip to the next if you are not ready for a bit of gruesome history

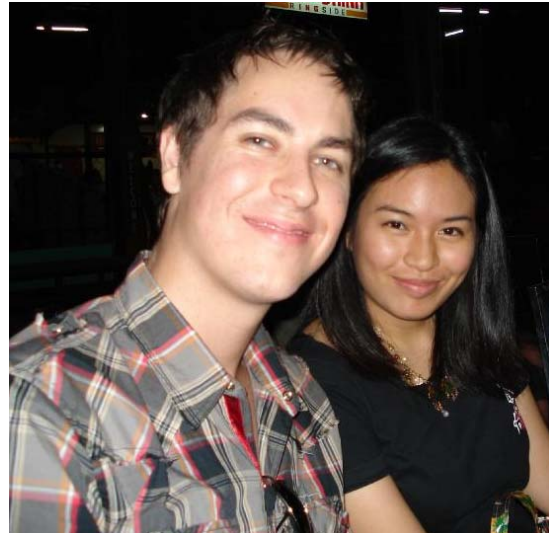
However, we failed to talk about probably one of the more interesting aspects of how this ghost belief (which happens to permeate nearly the whole country...everybody) affects Thammasat. For those of you not up to snuff on your [Thai 20th century history](#), the majority of the century was dominated by a military junta. However, there were 3 years (1973-76) in which democracy reigned, brought about by student protests and struggle. In '76 this came to a stunning end as Thammasat students, protesting at the aforementioned Sanam Luang the return of the military prime minister from pre-1973 days. Brutality ensued. Tanks began to roll and students were mown down by gunfire. They ran to their hopeful safety in the Thammasat grounds, but were pursued and beaten/tortured/killed etc. [Accounts](#) even tell of students being stripped and forced to crawl naked across the grounds of the university as they were piled into vans to be jailed or killed. Gruesome right? How does this relate to ghosts at Thammasat? Well,



in the Liberal Arts building, there are purportedly still ghosts of students residing in classrooms. Blood still stains the walls. And there is adamant refusal to even go near these rooms or clean them by Thai people because they do not want to disturb the ghosts or make them unhappy. It is hard enough to get Thais to talk about the incident, Hok Tulaa (literally 6th of October), let alone confront it 31 years later. Such is the weight of the history that I walk through every day when I go to class. It is a heavy history, indeed.

However, nowadays, democracy is in better shape (coup notwithstanding) and I am now privileged enough to use this historical museum as my university. It's also where I get to pay my overdue library book fines! It turns out that you can only have books out of the library for 10 days, and its 3 baht/book/day overdue! Little did I know I would be paying 6 bucks in the late fine....whoops. Though, the pleasure of the library might be worth it. I do believe it is the only library I know of where one finds the works of Charles Dickens (Tale of Two Cities) placed next to the [novels](#) inspired by [Halo](#), the wildly popular X-box video game. Great.

Another story of a Thai helping out--and he really *did* get us to where we wanted to go this time. My friend Hao was at my apartment the other night and she was leaving to walk home. It being dark and my neighborhood not being the safest at night, I would walk with her. However, there is a restaurant nearby which stays open real late---til about 5 or 6 in the morning, I think-- and I have gotten to know the people there rather well. They are really nice and make great food (though sometimes greasy). This time, as we were walking by, the chef, Buen, decided we shouldn't walk, but should ride his motorcycle. In Thai-style, we piled onto the back of his glorified scooter (motorcycles in Thailand look like oversized scooters, but ride with the power of a real motorcycle), and he zipped up the sidewalk and the wrong way down the street to get Hao home in a flash. It was great and now I'm even more happy we have befriended this family of delicious food and free moto-rides! Another example of how 99% of Thai people really do just want to help (for the other 1%, see above taxi driver).



Finally--the basketball games have been heating up lately! My faculty (like department) of economics decided to take on the economics faculty of Chulalongkorn University (rival school for title of #1 in the nation, though most say Chula is better in most academic areas) in a day of athletics, including a soccer match, a ping pong match and a basketball game. I showed up to the gym ready to play and didn't realize that I would be stared at by the 300-400 Thai students as I was the only white guy there that day. Talk about feeling self-conscious. And worries were high that Chula was going to sport a good team...because Chula always sports a good team. This time, however, they were no match for me and my BE mates as we celebrated a 10 point victory. Apparently people started betting on our team because we had the white guy (me). Last time, that didn't work out so well when we lost to the engineers by 25.

More adventures are coming up as this coming weekend I will be spending nights in Thai villages in northern Thailand, near the Burmese and Laotian borders, known as the [Golden Triangle](#). Two papers are due tomorrow (one for the James Earl Jones-esque professor of Thai Rural Development). In two weekends, [Songkraan](#) is coming up, promising to be wet and wild. Not the spring break kind of wet and wild, but thankfully the Thai New Year kind of wet and wild! Oh--and I am currently searching for my own, what I like to refer to as, [Buddhist Bling](#). Lately, the hot new thing for Thais is to wear pendants around their necks which remind me of [rappers and their gawdy jewelry](#). Thus, Buddhist Bling.

Soon I will be posting [pictures](#) from my Muay Thai adventure, and my Tallest-Building-in-Thailand adventure, as well as others!

Give me a holler back to let me know how you are doing and what you are up to!

Chon Kaeo--Aaron