

US Popular Representations of Thailand and the Construction of Uniqueness during the Cold War¹

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Abstract

The Cold War in Southeast Asia is best understood as a battle for ideological hegemony in an era of decolonization. Successful projections of American power, therefore, could not only be opposed to communism, but also had to establish the idea of harmony between the interests of the United States and the developing world. It was for this reason that Thailand became a central location in the assertion of U.S. power in Southeast Asia. As the only country in the region to have remained free from imperial occupation, American popular culture repeatedly emphasised Thailand's unique status, claiming that the country had survived the colonial period with much of its traditional identity intact. Yet, invariably, this image served to reproduce American ideology, familiarising the

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American public with a view of Thailand that made sense to their notion of the world in the context of the Cold War. This also presented Thailand as a safe and hospitable location, where Asia could be imagined as untroubled with American involvement, and where the Cold War could ultimately be won. Drawing from a range of American travel writing, articles and films from the 1950s, this article establishes how Thailand was successfully produced as an ideal location from which Americans might establish a 'free world' ideology.

Introduction

I had decided not to go to Thailand, for other major nations seemed more important than this small self-governing land. But as I was preparing my itinerary a famous newspaperman rushed up and cried, "My God! I just heard you were planning to skip Siam!"

I replied that I had other more important work to do and his face became mock-ashen. He grabbed me as the ancient Mariner must have intercepted the wedding guests and said, "If you miss Siam you miss Asia. Siam is a sanctuary in a troubled world. Siam is the air-conditioned room in hell. The padded cell in the insane asylum. Siam is all things to all men and its girls are the most beautiful in the Orient."³

Published in 1951, James Michener's account of a trip through Asia is illustrative of a post-war process through which American attitudes developed toward Asia. Originally printed as separate stories in *Life*, *Readers Digest* and the *New York Herald Tribune*, the book retold a number of encounters with Asian communities that located the region firmly within an American centred discourse about the

³ Michener, *The Voice of Asia*, 134.

Cold War, and which promoted it as central to an American future. This work also, however, sought to establish the continent as a place where hostility toward America was rife, and where Americans needed to work hard to convince Asian populations that such animosity was misplaced. As a result, Michener asked his readers to engage with Asia anew, to move away from the racial stereotyping that had previously governed American views of the continent, and to instead see its populations as “individual human beings who can be approached by every single psychological avenue used to persuade Americans.”⁴ Entitled *The Voice of Asia*, the book claimed to report the continent on its own terms so that Americans might learn to humanise Asian people and, in turn, convince them of the ‘good’ nature of American intentions.

Asia was described in Michener’s account as a region in flux. It was a place where it was impossible to avoid the difficulties of being an American in a land fighting colonialism and where the search for real independence preoccupied the thoughts of the oligarchs, students and business leaders who were shaping the region’s future. In particular, he recognised “six great nations that dominate the continent”: China, India, Pakistan, Russia-in-Asia, Japan and Indonesia. The first of those, China, had already fallen to the Russians; the result, according to Michener, of a failed American foreign policy that had “dreamed and dallied ... meddled and muddled just long enough to defeat ourselves on all counts.”⁵ What was needed now, he went on to explain, was a clear and confident engagement with the urban based nationalist communities that would need to be won over if the rest of Asia was not to be abandoned to the Soviet threat. To succeed in such a task, Americans would need to develop the courage to overcome their prejudices and engage with Asia with full awareness of the United States as “an intelligent and moral nation trying to find its way.”⁶

However, if Asia was understood to be ‘troubled’ when viewed from American eyes, Thailand represented something different. As

⁴ Michener, *The Voice of Asia*, 134.

⁵ Michener, *The Voice of Asia*, 242.

⁶ Michener, *The Voice of Asia*, 242.

the preface to Michener's short account of the country explained, this 'small self-governing land', was a place that apparently lacked the complexity so present elsewhere. As a result, Michener came very close to missing it altogether, viewing it initially as a near irrelevance when compared to the conflicts being played out in the major nations of the region. Upon visiting the country, this view was to be further transformed, as he increasingly identified Thailand as a place that provided important insight into what the future of Asia might look like. Significantly, this was not because it had any particular regional authority, but rather because of the historical 'fact' that Thailand had remained free from colonisation. In keeping with the underlying aim of the book, Michener sought to explain this significance through the words of Thailand's neighbours. He thus employed a literary device where he recounted a conversation between an Indian, a Burman, and an Indonesian. Here, told through the authenticity of the Asian voice, the Thai were presented as fundamentally different, not because of any great wealth, indeed, "in no way can Siam compare with Burma, so far as wealth goes," nor in terms of greatness, for "it will never be as great as Indonesia will be some day," but in terms of freedom.⁷ Thailand, the Indonesian went on to explain, "has been a free nation for many generations" and "it makes a difference."⁸

Throughout the Cold War, such representations of Thailand in the American media were common. Whilst the country was often presented as peripheral to the battle going on around it, reference to Thailand would invariably present it as unique; a place where the American fight for freedom in Asia could be observed with an authenticity unviewable elsewhere. The privileged location that Thailand held in the minds of American editors, journalists, and film producers, thus encouraged the American public to experience the country, both from afar, and increasingly through actual visits, as a field within which it was possible to provide meaning to the fight they were engaged in globally. This portrayal of Thailand was also able to foster confidence that the desire to experience Asia on its own

⁷ Michener, *The Voice of Asia*, 147.

⁸ Michener, *The Voice of Asia*, 146.

terms came from a genuine desire, on behalf of engaged Americans, to liberate it from colonialism and protect it from communism. By identifying the common themes of such narratives, this article seeks to understand how such media representations drove the production of Thailand as an exceptional and untroubled land. In doing so, this article will explain how Thailand was conceived of as a psychological space within which Americans could feel free to both work and play, constructing what they perceived to be meaningful relationships that might further the interests of American foreign policy, whilst guarding against the communist threat.

Self-governing Thailand and American cultural production during the Cold War

The Cold War in Southeast Asia has been widely regarded as an event that ran in parallel with, and in many ways developed in direct response to, the process of decolonization.⁹ Following a century of European hegemony, the Second World War had proved a watershed in the historic trajectories of political communities throughout Asia. The Japanese invasion had, consciously or not, encouraged what was already a prevalent urban nationalism in most colonial cities in the region, and it was obvious to U.S. policy makers in the aftermath of the conflict that most countries would move quickly toward self-rule.¹⁰ Such narratives as Michener's were to therefore act as mediators of this 'reality' to an American public, encouraging them to engage with the 'facts' of the post-war situation in Asia, and forcing them to acknowledge that, "sooner or later the people of Asia will govern themselves."¹¹

Michener's commitment to confronting the hard political realities of global leadership, and the way he sought to encourage his readers to think of themselves as globally conscious American citizens,

⁹ See Christie, *A Modern History of Southeast Asia* and Christie, *Ideology and Revolution in Southeast Asia*. Also see Hack, *Defence and Colonization in Southeast Asia*, 93.

¹⁰ Ninkovich, *Modernity and Power*, 220.

¹¹ Michener, *The Voice of Asia*, 241.

would have been familiar to his middlebrow readership. When the American media emerged from the end of the Second World War, it did so with a confidence and unity of purpose about America's place in the world that was lacking prior to the country's entrance into the conflict. Imbued with the ideological commitment to an 'American Century', much of the US media was, upon victory, to rally behind the idea that American society must take on the mantle of world leadership.¹² As a result, popular magazines, newspapers and documentary films, on either side of the political spectrum, tended to take it for granted that America had been largely responsible for the allied victory and that it was time for American society to take a lead in furthering the spread of Western civilisation and modernity.

However, as it became increasingly obvious that Russia too had emerged from the war victorious, and was itself capable of the technological advances that had transformed the status of the United States in the world (evident by the successful test of an atom bomb in 1949), what was seen as the inevitable progress of American interests and values globally became 'frustrated' by the haunting presence of a strong Soviet Union, and the spectre of communist ideology.¹³ Much of the U.S. media, as a consequence, supported the broad political and social drive that promoted American society as ideologically superior to Russia.¹⁴ At the same time, with Europe well established as a place where an ideological battle was already being fought, the attention of newspaper and magazine editors increasingly fell upon Asia as a second front in that battle. When China fell to a communist regime in 1949, the fear that Asia would be 'lost' to America was presented to American readers as a very real possibility. Presenting Asia as the location of an escalating emergency, or as Christina Klein has described, a "sentimental crisis", James Michener imagined "that America will be destroyed through separation from the people of Asia

¹² This term first entered American public consciousness in February 1941 when the owner of *Life* magazine, Henry Luce, wrote an editorial encouraging America to join the Second World War and to think about America as the centre of global progress.

¹³ Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War*, 5.

¹⁴ Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War*, preface.

and the loss of their affection.”¹⁵ In response, therefore, American society would, according to Michener, have to deal head on with reality of decolonization. As he argued in *The Voice of Asia*, Americans needed to “assure Asiatic nations now teetering between our way and Russia’s that we are closer to the spirit of democratic nationalism than Russia can ever be.”¹⁶ Asia was to be convinced that Americans had, “like almost all Asiatic nations, won our independence through revolting against our own alien masters.”¹⁷

Yet, if the crafting of an ideological commitment to Asian independence was to prove crucial in shaping how the continent was to be imagined by American writers and thinkers, Thailand was different. When the Japanese had arrived in Thailand as part of their campaign to take Southeast Asia in late 1941, they did so not as the self-proclaimed liberators from European colonialism, but as a force that sought alliance with an Asian government. In January 1942, Prime Minister Field Marshall Phibun Songkram had complied with that request by declaring war upon Britain and America. In the final months of 1945, the new administration, that had managed to remove Phibun in 1944, sought to convince both the British and U.S. occupying forces that the ex-Prime Minister acted against the will of the Thai nation. What transpired was a fierce war of words. Whilst British representatives in Bangkok wanted to punish Thailand, the United States was keen to establish good relations with an Asian nation that remained independent of the complex process of decolonization.¹⁸

Moreover, the fact that Thailand had for the past two and half years been an enemy of the United States meant that Thai political leaders, to a great extent, recognised the need to rebuild good relations. Upon the declaration of war, the Thai legation to the U.S., headed by Seni Pramoj, had promised to work with the State Department to bring an end to the conflict. During the course of the war this had led to the formation of strong personal relationships between members of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), a clandestine body that would

¹⁵ Klein, *Cold War Orientalism*, 129.

¹⁶ Michener, *The Voice of Asia*, 245.

¹⁷ Michener, *The Voice of Asia*, 244.

¹⁸ Baker, *A History of Thailand*, 137.

become the CIA, and those Thai who, residing in America in 1941, sought to oppose the Thai alliance with Japan. Made up largely of students, this group of Thais developed into a movement that was, toward the end of the war, to call itself the Free Thai (Seri Thai). As the authority of the Phibun government weakened, and as the war against the allies proved increasingly unwinnable, the Seri Thai movement gained momentum and by the end of the war included a significant percentage of the country's political elite and, in particular, those who sought to oppose Phibun.¹⁹

Whilst the political scene in Bangkok was in the years that followed to prove far more complicated, with Phibun reoccupying the job of Prime Minister from 1948 following a military coup, there was no doubt that the relationships built between the members of the OSS and certain sectors of Bangkok high society were to prove extremely valuable.²⁰ They opened doors unavailable elsewhere in the region, and with Bangkok society now keen to return to the consumption practices they had enjoyed before the war, they also paved the way for opportunity. As one of those OSS officers who stayed on, Alexander MacDonald, reflected in 1949, in the immediate aftermath of the war, "neighbours on all sides of Siam – Indo-China, Burma, India and Indonesia – were deep in it." "Siam" on the other hand, "always wily enough to retain her sovereignty from one monarch to the next, stood only in the shallows of the stream." For an American willing to remain in the country, he therefore saw great rewards:

As poor and as ravaged as such a country might be, immediately peace came, the people wanted luxury goods. They wanted lipsticks, refrigerators, automobiles, and electric fans; wanted them at any price. That was why in Bangkok, import-export firms were being born almost as fast as signboards could be painted.²¹

¹⁹ For a thorough synopsis of the background to US interest in Thailand and the details regarding how the Japanese invasion was received in Washington see, Reynolds, *Thailand's Secret War*.

²⁰ Fineman, *The Special Relationship: the United States and the Thai Military*, 133.

²¹ MacDonald, *Bangkok Editor*, 12.

In the complex political environment of the late 1940s, and even more so during the early part of the following decade, those Americans who resided in Bangkok thus became regarded as important allies to policy makers back in Washington. Whilst, long term strategies for the Thai economy might have drawn more heavily from geo-political goals and macro-economic development structures, the fact that a small group of Americans had been able to establish themselves with relative ease, identified the country as a place of symbolic, as well as practical, value in the region. In a series of documents, drafted for the National Security Council in 1949, entitled NSC 48, it was emphasised that in relation to Asia as a whole, “xenophobia often directed especially toward occidentals” should be regarded as the principal threat to the emergence of a US orientated economic and political stability.²² However, in a separate report, completed a year later, Thailand was identified as different, for there “The absence of Western colonialism,” “has resulted in the absence of the extreme anti-Western passions which inflame much of the Far East, thus making it easier for the Thais to cooperate with the United States politically than it is for some other governments.”²³

Just as popular representations of Asia would often compliment the challenges facing policy makers in Washington, they would also mirror those ‘realities’ that shaped America’s relationship to Thailand. With one of the principal ‘facts’ of an engagement with Asia being latent distrust, even hatred toward Americans, Thailand was presented as a place where Americans could feel at home. More than that, over the course of the 1950s, Thailand became a location where the symbolic value of its independence was employed in American centred ideological production to present a vision of Asia as it might look under American hegemony. Importantly, whilst this vision was to identify independence as central, it was also to identify other key characteristics of what such a continent might look like:

²² Glassman, *Thailand at the Margins*, 45.

²³ Glassman, *Thailand at the Margins*, 45.

In many ways Siam is a foretaste of what all Asia may some day become. Its business procedures break the hearts of many American businessmen, I'm told, and absolutely no one keeps an appointment. But the nation has prospered under its own haphazard guidance for some 2,000 years. It is a gentle and wonderful place.²⁴

Freedom from violence: the production of an 'oasis' for Americans

One of the most obvious ways in which Americans were asked to confront the 'fact' of Asian independence was by acknowledging the threat of violence. Writing in the *New York Times* in 1957, Peggy Durdin, was explicit about how the existing association that Asian societies attached to American visitors meant that travel through the region required a high degree of courage:

The visitor with the white skin not only observes but also experiences the self-assertion of ex-colonial people; he is the object of their neurotic suspicions and fears, their long-suppressed resentments and hatreds as well as their gentleness and generosity. He tastes, too, the horrid fascination of violence: the mine on the peaceful road, the bomb bursting under a hotel window, the grenade exploding in a busy street.²⁵

However, unlike the rest of Asia, Thailand was presented differently; associated not with the threat of violence, but rather as a land that was safe for Americans. As James Michener stated, from the moment he "stepped from the plane I heard people actually laughing, the only time I heard this in all of Asia." He went on to state that he "could roam the streets at night without fear."²⁶

In the same year as Michener's book was published, *Life* magazine published its Asia edition, a ninety page issue covering the regions 'troubles and opportunities.' Appearing in December 1951 the edition sought to present Asia as immediately relevant to American

²⁴ Michener, *The Voice of Asia*, 138.

²⁵ Durdin, "The Potent Lure of Asia".

²⁶ Michener, *The Voice of Asia*, 137.

readers. Using the Korean War as its starting point, the issue explained that Asia had for decades been situated “beyond the farthest horizon of any average American interest or comprehension.”²⁷ Now, however, that had changed and “the US is inextricably involved in Asia—both as the chief force of the free world, defending itself against the new aggressive force of communism, and as a global good neighbour.”²⁸ Organized clearly along editorial lines, the magazine presented Asia a place split, some of it ravaged by communist inspired conflict, with the rest of it enjoying freedom and peace. At the centre of the magazine, just after a long piece covering the “Rise of the Red Star”, and a shorter article, “Why We Fight”, the magazines black and white images gave way to a glossy picture of Bangkok at dusk. Described as a “peaceful city”, the capital was presented as a place unaffected by the troubles elsewhere, and therefore as a place of opportunity. Bangkok, it explained, offered, “the good life for Westerners.” Whilst the magazine acknowledged that Thailand continued to suffer from political instability, it sought to reassure readers that “unlike other parts of Asia, where Americans and other Westerners have to tread carefully, the changes in the Thai Government have had absolutely no effect on foreigners in Bangkok.” The reason for this, the article explained, was that Thailand, “an independent monarchy for six centuries was never anybody’s colony.”²⁹

This idea, that Thailand was a place not caught up in the violent business of establishing freedom from the West, was further emphasized in a documentary film produced in 1953. Produced by *Life’s* sister company, Time Incorporated, as part of the *March of Time* series, the documentary was entitled *Oasis on a Troubled Continent*, and presented the country as a land at peace, nestled on a continent at war. At the start of the film, Thailand was thus introduced as exceptional, first and foremost, because its people remained unaware of the troubles afflicting the world in which it was situated:

²⁷ “Who cares about Asia”, 12.

²⁸ “Who cares about Asia”, 13.

²⁹ “For Westerners the Good Life”, 37.

In recent weeks, the *March of Time* has taken you to several Asian countries where the even tenure of daily life is constantly interrupted by open warfare, and guerrilla activity, usually communist inspired. Today we concern ourselves with a land whose people have in recent years lived peacefully, surrounded by countries seething with intrigue and violence. This is idyllic Siam, also called Thailand.³⁰

From there the film introduced Thailand as a place where the “even tenure of life” continued unabated, as if in a historical bubble when compared to the rest of Asia. The film looked at what it described as a “traditional kite flying contest” and it showed images of Thai temples. It presented images of the king attending a sporting event and it noted the deep veneration that the Thai people had for the nation.

Narrated through the authority of an American announcer, the Thai people in the film were not heard speaking. That privilege was reserved for those Americans who had chosen to make the country their home. Half of the film focused on a number of this group, who, it was explained, were “living comfortably in this easy going country... (and) are taking an active part in Siamese life.”³¹ Included in the list of people interviewed was Bill Davies, who had set up a soft drink company with Thai partners and was distributing Coca-Cola throughout Bangkok, and Alexander MacDonald who had by then established the *Bangkok Post*. Speaking directly into the camera, MacDonald explained to the viewer back in America that he found his work at “the Post” “very rewarding”, and that “other Americans are beginning to feel the way I do, and they’re coming here to Bangkok.” He went on to explain that once settled, such Americans invariably “find the kingdom hospitable, and they find the Thai a friendly and good natured people.”³² Also mentioned was Jim Thompson, who the film informed the viewer had set up a company selling Thai silk onto the international market, and who should be thought of as a role model for potential American entrepreneurs: “Siam has proven a country of opportunity to Thompson as it has to other enterprising Americans.”³³

³⁰ *March of Time*.

³¹ *March of Time*.

³² *March of Time*.

³³ *March of Time*.

Overall, the OSS generation who remained in Bangkok were presented as a group who did so because they had fallen in love with the country. Willis Bird, another ex-OSS officer, for example, was pictured in the *Life* article above a caption that explained that he was running a successful import and export business and that he “had liked Thailand so much that he had decided to make it his permanent home.”³⁴ In presenting the group in such a way, Thailand was produced as a place where the psychological implications of being an American in Asia were not of primary concern. The *Life* article also located Thailand conceptually in the context of a news agenda that sought to narrate the on-going struggle in the region. Indeed, the special focus of *Life* on Asia sought to present the continent as a place of potential as well as conflict, for whilst “Asia’s troubles are told in daily headlines... the opportunities are not always apparent.”³⁵ Thailand, as a peripheral, yet peaceful location in the day to day realities of that conflict, thus gave credence to the idea that there remained fragments of the region where the fight for freedom could exist alongside the expansion of American interests.

Freedom to consume: the production of a poor yet abundant society

Christina Klein, in her analysis of *The Voice of Asia*, recognises that the ideological foundation of the text in many ways directly supported U.S. policy in the region. Drawing from NSC 48, Klein notes how the documents, which sought to lay out American objectives, policies and courses of action in the region, were primarily focused upon achieving economic integration. America, it was recognised, should seek to “maximise the availability, through mutually advantageous relationships, of the material resources of the Asia area to the United States and the free world generally, and thereby correspondingly deny those resources to the communist world.”³⁶ In laying out such objectives for the nations of Southeast

³⁴ “For Westerners the Good Life”, 37.

³⁵ “Who cares about Asia”, 12.

³⁶ Klein, *Cold War Orientalism*, 127.

Asia, the plan was therefore to emphasise their status as “primary commodity exporters” in a system of production, consumption and resource management that would link them to the US economy via an industrialised Japan. This “pattern of trade”, as Jim Glassman has put it, “would involve the export from the United States to Japan of such commodities as cotton, wheat, coal, and possibly specialized industrial machinery; the export from Japan of such items as low-cost agricultural and transportation equipment, textiles and shipping services to Southeast Asia; and the export from the latter area of tin, manganese, rubber, hard fibres and possibly lead and zinc to the United States.”³⁷ Plans for Thailand, Glassman identifies, focused on the maintenance of the country’s status as a primary exporter of rice.

Importantly, however, in the *Life* article from 1951, the fact that Thailand should remain an agricultural society was emphasized not in terms of US policy, but as a key factor in its own internal status as a peaceful nation where foreigners could experience the ‘good life’. As the article explained, “because Thailand is the only country in Asia which produces more rice and other food than it can consume, the cost of living is low,” meaning that a “steak dinner in one of the best restaurants costs only 75 cents.”³⁸ Time’s *Oasis on a troubled Continent* also emphasized the existing social and economic life of a rice producing nation as crucial to its current peaceful status, explaining that “Tourists, so familiar with the poverty and hardships of so much of Asia find Siam a country in which no man need go hungry,” and could therefore travel through Thailand with a clear conscience. Siam it explained “can afford to export vast quantities of this vital crop (rice) to its less fortunate neighbours and still live comfortably.”³⁹

In another film, *Walt Disney’s Siam*, the symbolic value of Thailand’s rural and traditional society was further emphasized, but this time through the relationship of the Thai to nature. Unlike the representations in the *March of Time* documentary, this film did not

³⁷ Taken from: Glassman, *Thailand at the margins*, 43.

³⁸ “For Westerners the Good Life”, 37.

³⁹ *March of Time*. In another book, published in 1957, Thailand was further described as “an important country”, that “because of its rice production... is quite prosperous.” See, Caldwell, *Lets Visit Southeast Asia, Hong Kong to Malaya*, 65.

actively seek to locate the country in the context of a continent at war. Rather, it stated that the point of the film was to present “interesting people and the places in which they live” through “authentic” scenes and “factual” stories. Where there was a similarity, however, was in the iconic depiction of an oasis community, a land that was “forever green”. As the introduction to the film explained, “all around Siam, a solid wall of mountains hides it from the rest of the world,” and “each monsoon season, this mountain valley traps the rain clouds and from April to October a daily torrent falls.” The story of Siam therefore was “the story of a people who from childhood have learnt to accept the flood as part of their daily lives.” By living and working in harmony with these floods, the Disney depiction of Siam presented the Thai as having an intimate, and historic, relationship to nature; the reward of which was the “the priceless gift of happiness.”⁴⁰

In *Walt Disney’s Siam*, the annual rains not only supported rice production, they also helped to regulate a complex, yet timeless, economic system. The film, for example, described elephants as the principal machinery of the country, depicting their use in the harvesting of teak, which was sent down to Bangkok on the river. The film also focused on the network of *klongs* (canals), not as a feature of the urban landscape, but as the city itself, “instead of buses and taxis, it’s boats and barges in Bangkok.”⁴¹ Living on these *klongs*, the narrator explained, the families of Bangkok engaged in lively economic and social activity. The film told the story of a “typical” small young family travelling on the *klong* in a “snug teak wood sampan” where they lived, worked and played. On the occasion of the film, the mother, Senai, was planning to cook a curry, but because she was in Bangkok, “she doesn’t have to go to the store, the store comes to her.” When evening came, and the curry was ready to be served, the narrator depicted a man dressing himself, expertly pulling a piece of cloth in various directions to create a suitable garment to sit in. The narrator explained that, “in Siamese etiquette, dress for dinner is in a way semi-formal for the men here, nearly always wearing tails, neatly tucked in.”⁴²

⁴⁰ *Walt Disney’s Siam*.

⁴¹ *Walt Disney’s Siam*.

⁴² *Walt Disney’s Siam*.

In short, the *klong* was depicted as a place that should be considered familiar to Americans. It was a place where small nuclear families were engaging in the same economic and social practices that were common to all people the world over. The difference in the Thai case was the geographical and cultural landscape, and the “fact” of a life regulated by the floods. Whilst the scenes depicted were ones that might also have been associated with poverty, they were in the film re-ordered as scenes of economic and social security. In doing so, *Walt Disney’s Siam* reified the vision of Bangkok as portrayed in the more politically driven *March of Time* documentary. There, the floating market was only part of Bangkok, but was nonetheless, “for a large part of Bangkok’s population ... the real shopping centre of the city.”⁴³ In another film, *Golden Temple Paradise*, released in the same year as the *Time* production, the economic status of those who lived on the *klongs* was also mentioned. Here, this status was explicitly one of poverty, but a poverty of which they were blissfully unaware. Narrating the Thai through an American voice, but in the first person, the film thus sought to bath them in an authenticity made particularly evident in their disposition toward fun:

The canals are used for many things. For bathing and for transport and the water is used for cooking, and for just having fun, because we here in Siam, with all the seriousness that we attach to our temples and our Buddhist religion, we are a very happy people. We like to laugh, and some people say that we never take anything seriously. That of course is not true. But we do like to smile, and we like the sun, and the water, and above all, we enjoy being alive, even if we are poor, and the happier we are, the happier we are that we feel happy, if you follow me.⁴⁴

Such framing of Thailand drew from another central feature of American Cold War ideology, abundance. Americans, as “consumer citizens”, were also charged with the responsibility of spreading

⁴³ *March of Time*.

⁴⁴ *Golden Temple Paradise*.

American civilization in the form of mass consumption.⁴⁵ As Christine Skwiot has explained “Kaiser and American Express, Hilton Hotels International, and Pan American Airlines executives... argued that incorporating the developing, decolonizing world into a US-led capitalist world economy represented the surest, safest route to modernization, collective security, and the age of high mass consumption.”⁴⁶ Americans she argues “would contribute to the modernization of new nations emerging from colonialism and imperial rule” providing “overseas people with a glimpse of their future as modern nuclear families blessed with an abundance of goods.”⁴⁷ In Thailand, however, it was Americans who gained that glimpse, of a society where abundance was already a feature of everyday life. If entrance into an American centred world thus meant the “full freedom to live abundantly,” then Thailand had already achieved that status. Most important, however, was that it had apparently achieved this task by maintaining a traditional agricultural society.

What these portrayals also reveal is a second way in which narratives about Thailand differed from the rest of Asia, for as Klein has noted, American travel writing on Asia would tend to eschew “the nostalgic search for the pre-modern and the authentic that has characterized so much Western travel writing about the non-West,” and instead favour a “head-on encounter with the modern.”⁴⁸ Yet, as can be seen from such representations of a peaceful and abundant society, narratives about Thailand tended to elude more to an unbroken and historical ‘way of life’ as the basis for the country’s contemporary status as a stable and peaceful nation. As a result, communism tended to be reduced in American portrayals of the country to an external threat. Moreover, rather than a country that had been engaged in a discourse about modernity for over a century, Thailand was viewed as a country with ancient cultural traditions that remained intact despite the era of European imperialism. At the end of *Oasis on a Troubled Continent*, therefore, the theatrical enactment of a battle performed in temple grounds and in traditional Thai costumes was accompanied by an ominous narration:

⁴⁵ Cohen, “The New Deal State and the Making of Citizen Consumers”.

⁴⁶ Skwiot, *The Purposes of Paradise*, 171.

⁴⁷ Skwiot, *The Purposes of Paradise*, 171.

⁴⁸ Klein, *Cold War Orientalism*, 103.

The people of Thailand, the land of the free, take as much satisfaction from the dramatic traditions of the past as in the comfortable prosperity of the present. Today this peaceful and easy going nation is surrounded on all sides by communist aggression, which threatens its very existence. In this drama of another century the Thai may well discover the symbol of their own present, living in constant fear of attack, by a superior force... Time Marches On!⁴⁹

Freedom to be themselves: The production of encounter with the ‘real’ Thailand

Throughout the Cold War, U.S. government policy makers recognised the importance of physical encounter in the battle to both win the hearts and minds of Asian populations, and provide meaning to the conflict back in America. Particularly in the early years of the Eisenhower administration, cultural policies were developed that emphasized the importance of Americans meeting with local communities in the major urban centres of Southeast Asia, and increasingly in the more rural areas of the region. The most explicit of those programs was the People to People program, which was formulated in 1955 by the United States Information Agency (USIA) and which saw the coming together of public and private groups in a combined effort to counter Soviet propaganda by promoting “face-to-face contact between Americans and people in other countries” so that they might witness what America was “really” like.⁵⁰ Other arms of the cultural offensive launched during the 1950s were organisations such as the Asia Foundation, funded by the CIA, and the Ford Foundation, which during those years also had strong connections to the intelligence bureau.⁵¹ Whilst the later might have tended to lend themselves to longer periods of involvement, be it through academic programs that sought to map rural Thai culture or through studies into the nations religious identity, the Eisenhower regime also sought to encourage brief moments of encounter through activities such as

⁴⁹ *March of Time*.

⁵⁰ Klein, *Cold War Orientalism*, 54.

⁵¹ Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War*.

tourism, combining the American citizen as consumer and political actor.⁵² What all of them had in common, however, was an emphasis upon establishing the terms upon which a successful encounter might occur, and how it might relate to the future development of those countries.

Similar to elsewhere, the American encounter with Thailand assumed American supremacy in the world, and in particular as the most modern nation on earth. However, cultural narratives of encounter between Americans and Thais also tended to focus on the search for a Thai authenticity, framed largely within the themes already outlined. They also tended to reprimand fellow American travellers for their failure to take an interest in what was ‘really’ going on in the country, transforming even more pointedly the role of the tourist from pleasure seeker to cultural diplomat. The publication in 1958 of William Lederer and Eugene Burdick’s novel, *The Ugly American*, epitomized this sentiment, in many ways defining American engagement with the developing and decolonizing world during the period. In it, as Christine Skwiot explains, the authors, “condemned a US diplomatic corps and other emissaries of the nation for preferring to lead globe-trotting, country-clubbing, party-going lives in capital cities over working with the people to develop new aspiring nations and their economies.”⁵³

Yet, once again, in the case of independent Thailand, the popular representation of those encounters that took Americans out of their comfort zone seemed to suggest that the aspirations of such communities were already fulfilled. In a travelogue, written in 1957, William Zinsser wrote about a trip to Thailand in which this search for the ‘real’ Thailand formed the basis of the narrative. In many ways pre-empting the *Ugly American’s* principal message, the first thing that frustrated his trip was the number of “luxury loving” American visitors that he found he had to share the experience with. At a trip to the Grand Palace, for example, Zinsser voiced irritation both with the number of fellow Americans and with the way they behaved:

⁵² Endy, *Cold War Holidays*, 148.

⁵³ Skwiot, *The Purposes of paradise*, 170.

Of course it is a photographer's paradise, and our companions were giddy with the pleasure of capturing it all. But each time one of them would frame a picture exactly as he wanted it, five or six others would wander into the scene. Nothing demolishes the purity of the Siamese court so much as tourists straggling about in their pale faces and flashy suits, but rare was the picture taken that day that didn't have a half-dozen Americans in the foreground, peering into their own cameras.⁵⁴

Such criticisms, that he was unable to find the 'real' Thailand, continued into the night, where at a nightclub, aptly named 'The Oasis', he found a night of entertainment largely made up of mimicked American songs performed by a Filipino band for American visitors. It was at this point that he decided to leave Bangkok and take a flight the following morning to Chiang Mai. However, when explaining his thinking to a clerk back at the hotel, he also recognised that a large part of the reason he wanted to leave was because, "We want to see *rural* Thailand. We cannot get to know your country if we stay here in Bangkok."⁵⁵ In doing so he conflated two separate, yet apparently related, views regarding what was preventing him from "getting to know" the country. Indeed, whilst he recognised the fact that Bangkok was a modern city "clogged with shiny American cars," and full of "air-conditioned theatres" showing "Hollywood films," the implication was that these were more signs of Americanisation than of any "authentic", internally led process of development. Conversely, when he arrived in the north of the country he found himself in a "Shangri-La", where a certain level of comfort and limited signs of modernity were working in harmony with the cultural and geographical landscape. Chiang Mai, he described, was "a peaceful little town with low buildings and cheerful stores. Its people were happy, and there were few cars pushing and honking through the streets."⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Zinsser, *Any Old Place With You*, 176.

⁵⁵ Zinsser, *Any Old Place With You*, 168. (His emphasis, not mine)

⁵⁶ Zinsser, *Any Old Place With You*, 185.

What is particularly noticeable about Zinsser's account of Thailand, however, is the way that he asserts the idea of a general Thai character as inherent in the way that Thai people dealt with urbanisation, seeming to presume the existence of a cultural identity that was fundamentally distinct from the modern city around him. Moreover, Zinsser seemed to identify the search for an encounter with that form of Thai cultural identity as the principal way through which Americans might hope to construct a relationship with the people of the country. Indeed, apart from the derisory analysis of other American tourists, the text's main focus, with clear echoes of Michener's work, was on a number of encounters with people he seemed to suggest represented the 'real' Thailand. The first of these came at the hotel, when he was trying to organise the trip to Chiang Mai. After a minor disagreement in the lobby about what the purpose of a trip to Chiang Mai would be, Zinsser noted how the man finally erupted into a "hearty laugh". This he explained was something the American could expect throughout the country because "whenever something goes wrong, the Thais think it is a big joke." "It is," he went on "a charming defence against the pressures of urban life, unlike anything we have in New York."⁵⁷

A second occurred when he went to Chiang Mai. Upon arriving in the city on a Thai Airways plane, Zinsser enquired about the return flight, which he intended to make the following day. He had a ticket, so he didn't think there would be a problem. But to his surprise, the plane was already full and there was no space for him and his wife. A disagreement ensued with Zinsser calling "people in Thai Airways crazy," but the girl responsible for the bookings didn't know what crazy meant, meaning that he was getting nowhere. He continued to try and get his message across, shouting in pigeon English, "Must go to Bangkok tomorrow-ticket okay." At this point Zinsser described how the chickens, which had joined him on the flight to Chiang Mai, started to cluck noisily, "and the girl's eye's filled with tears."

⁵⁷ Zinsser, *Any Old Place With You*, 168.

That made me feel terrible. It was not her fault that she was caught at such an early age in the grown-up web of bureaucracy. I smiled, and she smiled through her tears – the shy, disarming smile of her race. I appealed to her feminine sympathy... Finally I tried the Thai system of laughter, I laughed at what a big joke it was, and this broke the ice. Everybody laughed. It was like a bad surrealist movie – the laughter billowed up from every corner of the room, and even the chickens and the goats guffawed at our plight.

“Okay,” the young girl said when the din quieted down.
“You come to plane tomorrow-we fix.”⁵⁸

What Zinsser thus retold, was a story about an economic arrangement, that would have ended in disaster had he not been able to engage with the Thai through an understanding of their inherent cultural character. In doing so, he confirmed the fact that Thailand was, indeed, a friendly place where Americans could do business as long as they did so with sensitivity to a specific notion of Thai behaviour and social etiquette. Such representations, of what the right kind of encounter might be in a Thai case, were not, therefore, so much a direct confrontation with the Cold War. Rather they were with a society where Americans should be persuaded to work with the local population in order to achieve global harmony without a concern about the colonial past. All that the American needed was the courage to discard a conventional tourist experience for one that sought a cultural authenticity in an encounter with the Thai people.

But Thailand still existed on the peaceful side of a boundary that demarcated the world of freedom, from a world dominated by communist brutality. Making up the penultimate chapter in the book, Zinsser also portrayed his visit to Thailand as one of the final that he would be able to make. Whilst in Chiang Mai, he met with the American consul who informed him of “the crucial position of Thailand in the struggle for Southeast Asia”; how “Communist propaganda from Hanoi” was seeking to infiltrate the society but how, “western projects” were “bolstering this strategic land.” Zinsser’s

⁵⁸ Zinsser, *Any Old Place With You*, 184.

fleeting, but powerful engagement with the global conflict identified the burden on American shoulders, noting that as far as Thailand was concerned, “it seemed wrong that the chills and vapours of the cold war should shake such a gentle people.”⁵⁹ In the final chapter, however, Zinsser faced head on with what he meant by the statement, travelling right to the border, up from Hong Kong, and into the ‘New Territories’ that brought him to the edge of the communist world itself. He went there, he explained, in order “to look across from the carefree British colony to the oppressed land beyond, shut off to tourists like us who would have enjoyed it in a happier time.”⁶⁰ In comparison with Thailand, from where he had come, China filled him with regret, a tragedy for those Americans before him who had made it in, and who were now forced to leave.⁶¹

Conclusion

Throughout the Cold War, Thailand proved a crucial ally to American diplomats, military officers, and economic planners in the region. At the same time, popular representations in the U.S. media provided a cultural narrative with which to understand the relationship between the two nations through a language of friendship and understanding. Through such narratives, Americans came to construct Thailand as a unique location where they could escape the complex identity concerns they faced elsewhere in the region. In many ways, this allowed for something of a ‘re-orientalization’ of Thai culture, allowing Americans, as a new economic and political elite class, to indulge in enjoying their position at the top of the global hierarchy through constructing difference. At the same time, Thailand was also placed firmly within the more specific framework of American centred notions of progress. The country was imagined as a stable example of how modern consumption practices and social relations could work alongside, and even be the product of, a timeless tradition that had been shaped by a relationship to nature. This ‘natural’ status

⁵⁹ Zinsser, *Any Old Place With You*, 188.

⁶⁰ Zinsser, *Any Old Place With You*, 212.

⁶¹ Zinsser, *Any Old Place With You*, 212.

of the Thai was perceived to have given rise to a fundamental set of characteristics and behaviours that, even in the midst of a modern city, would continue to shape the country's future. Through emphasising those characteristics as 'peaceful', 'happy', and 'easy going', Thailand was further reinforced as a special place, whose people were unaware of the conflict raging around them, and who were happy to get along with life amidst an American led global future.

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