



side-saddle, toes brushing truck tyres. Sitting cupped behind the driver risks incurring a whiff of 'eau de *seua win*' cologne.

Helmets also offer scope for self-expression. Despite safety laws, they're often not worn in *sois*, and often get left unfastened. Aside from the expense and cramp on freedom, they're simply too heavy and hot. Because wing mirrors clip cars as they zigzag through jams, they get folded inwards, which creates a handy helmet rest. If brand names like Safetymet or Ladymet aren't sufficiently hip, riders sport helmets with horn-like spoilers, blue visors or stickers. A few don Nazi-style helmets with a swastika. Passenger helmets generally have the strength of a plastic salad bowl. Commuters who bring their own helmet arouse nervous laughter. It's a loss of face for the *win*, and besides, accidents only happen on karma's command.

Motorbikes account for the large majority of Thailand's road injuries and especially fatalities, and each *win* suffers one or two scrapes a week. The state introduced cheap personal accident insurance premiums of just one baht a day as one of its anti-poverty policies. Insurance might reduce the tendency of drivers causing an accident to flee the scene in an act of conflict avoidance. Truckers and car drivers have been known to drive back over injured motorcyclists to prevent them being a witness or a cripple they'd have to compensate.

Registered *win* drivers are eligible for training. Just as well; pathologist Vira Kasantikul found that only 0.1 per cent of motorcyclists involved in accidents had passed a driving course. While car, bus and truck drivers break road rules, too, they

get fined far less than bikes, partly because they may have influential connections.

*Motorsai* collect like a swarm of metal hornets at red lights, then zoom off speedway-style. Scary at 50km/h, this primal thrill intensifies at 140km/h in illegal speed duels for cash, pride or girls in cities like Had Yai and Chiang Mai. Late at night, Bangkok's ringroad (dubbed 'Ratchadaphisek Racetrack') draws spectators, gamblers, groupies and competing crews of charity 'body collectors'. Police may chase or impede boy racers, who lie flat on the seat. "When they hit the ground they're already horizontal," quips a letter to the *Bangkok Post*. "Thais call the illegal motorcycle racers *malaeng wun* (flies) because of the way they buzz around – loud, irritating, erratic and dirty," writes Philip Blenkinsop in *The Cars That Ate Bangkok*. "They also happen to die like flies." In this heavily two-wheeled society, there are few legal outlets for bike racing. Circuits, courses and training could create new sport-biking role models, just as licences gave pride to the bike taxi profession.

So far, *win* reform dwells less on *win* welfare and more on how they impact others – insurance, training, nice jackets, signs for fixed fares and some waiting stands designed for passengers. Just as police get comfy traffic booths, *win* need shelter, seating, water, toilets, fair treatment, and safe, affordable helmets. After all, like the hi-tech trains they connect, *motorsai* are modern mass transit.

Their sheer mobility matters. "They do different services for different classes," says Sopranzetti. "They know police, they know army, they know officials, they know really wealthy people." During political crises, *motorsai* act as mobile protestors, messengers and intelligence gatherers. In 1992 they were hired by politicians; in 2010-11 they volunteered mostly as Red Shirts. In 2012, *win* biker Dejchat Puangket hit world news for posting pictures of a bombing to his 'MotorcyRubJung' blog on OKNation.net. "When I began I wrote about rural life in my [Sisaket] hometown," says Dejchat, who like many was a part-time farmer. "When I moved to Bangkok I wrote about things I saw." He posts breaking news he encounters on his rides and founded an internet messenger service. As *motorsai* develop with the popular culture, they have become an icon of Bangkok.

top left: A *win* driver marks his place in the queue. PCS

top middle and top right: A *seua win* on Koh Si Chang (JG). An old Bangkok *seua win* (PCS).

lower near and far right: Generic jackets have a Thai number, a reflector, and a hue that varies by district. A rare artistic old bike jacket from Thonburi both JG

