



Introduction

What makes something very Thai?

“What made society women’s hair so huge?” “How come napkins are tiny and pink?” “Why so many ladyboys?” Bemused onlookers often reach for the catch-all description “it’s, well... very Thai”.

This book gets its name from tracking down that elusive ‘very Thainess’. For over a decade, while editing *Bangkok Metro* magazine and guides to Thailand, I’ve repeatedly been asked to unravel such curiosities. So I set out to discover what these things really are – resulting in this book, which turned out to be the first overview of Thai popular culture. To unravel the mysteries I had to research deep into the traditional culture to find where modern Thai behaviour came from. Each step yielded surprises for eyes, ears and nose, but precious few explanations.

Coffee-table books and advertisements like to present an Amazing Thailand™ of dancers and temples, elephants and floating markets, with lots and lots of fruit carving. While these marvels of official Thainess do exist, you often have to look for them. Most of the time, what residents and visitors experience is the unsung popular culture. Day-Glo paintings of village huts zoom by on mini-buses. Overloaded broom carts resemble a roadside art installation. Vendors sell multi-bladed knuckle-dusters off souvenir stalls. Rubber tyres get recycled into lotus ponds. Such everyday things, being the public’s choice, are no less Thai and do frequently amaze.

Popular culture is the combined expressions of daily life as accepted by the vast majority, from commercial essentials like food, transport and consumer goods, through tastes in entertainment and pastimes to memes, beliefs and cultural moments. Shared through mass production and mass media, pop is imitative, and in the case of developing countries like Thailand, often adapted from imports to suit local ways and needs.

“Pop is an urban phenomenon, hard edged and savvy,” says Gilda Cordero-Fernando, the Filipina author of *Pinoy Pop*, which shares much with Thai pop. “It’s different from ‘folk’, which is rural, traditional, communal and a lot more innocent. It’s different from ethnic, which is also all the above but comes from the minority groups.”



left: Styles clash at every turn. Florid eaves at Wat Suan Plu gets dwarfed by balustrades on the neo-classical skyscraper State Tower, which is topped by a huge gilded dome on the 65th floor. JG

top: A Styrofoam Naga in neon hues protects a float at a fair in Sakhon Nakhon. PCS

above: The national shoe in all its colourful glory, on sale at Cape Promthep, Phuket. PCS