



Security Guards

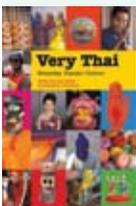
A salute to the whistle-happy man in uniform

Walking through any upmarket Thai district, it's not unusual to get a salute. Behind the clicked-heel, hand-to-brow reflex of the *yaam* (security guard), a beaming grin emerges. The uniformed man at attention really enjoys the salute. He was raised with a sense of deference to strangers, but his pleasure in politeness may lie simply in face-to-face contact. To someone confined to this spot day-long, day-in, day-out, a resident strolling past his apartment block is light relief from saluting tinted-windowed cars.

Every few metres in urban Thailand, you'll find a *yaam*. Doffing his cap, helping cement trucks reverse, wielding a red flashing baton so a big car can push in to traffic. All manoeuvres are conducted with bursts on his whistle.

Yaam love their whistles. If there's a meaning to the shrill rasps they emit it's not a language known to drivers. But noise is good, positive, colourful: the sound of doing something. He looks the part, too.

In the West, uniforms have degenerated into pseudo-leisure wear: bulletproof anorak chic. But here *yaam* get dandified with embossed buttons, clip-on ties and, most crucially, a loop of rope brocade around the left shoulder. Security firms admit they adapt these styles from military dress, hence it appears like every compound has a private army. Indeed, the profession is rather like a privatised army, given the entrepreneurial sidelines of certain officers. They tap into an industry of 2,000 firms and 200,000 personnel worth 36 billion baht a year – that's a billion dollars. Not to mention the boon to the brocade and whistle industries.



Very Thai: Everyday Popular Culture is a book that almost every foreigner living in Bangkok has on their bookshelf, a virtual bible on Thailand's pop culture. For page after colourful page, author Philip Cornwel-Smith guides readers on an unconventional tour of the quirky everyday things that make Thailand truly Thai. From the 60-plus mini-chapters, we present a different excerpt each month. Prepare yourself for the sideways logic in what seems exotic. Snap up a copy at any good book shop.

Very Thai – River Books | B995 | hardcover, with photos by John Goss and Philip Cornwel-Smith