



Nicknames & Namecards

What Thais call each other is a serious business, whether lucky, rhyming or cute

"What's your name?" asks a Bangkok English teacher. "Yes," the Thai student replies. "No, what are you called?" rephrases the American teacher. "Yes. My name is Yes, Khun Yes," repeats the student, wondering why his English name wasn't understood. Thai nicknames are often as startling as they are playful. He could just as puzzlingly have replied "Oh", "Eh", "X", "Boy", "Not", "Joke" or, wait for it... "God."

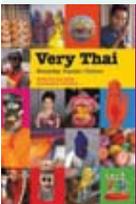
In all but form-filling and formal situations, the Thai use *cheu len* – play names. You can know someone for ages before learning their real first name and maybe never hear their family name.

While some sound fun – Eew, Oui, Oei, Nooi, Dtik – most mean something. Boy's names may mean brave, strong or noble. Girls usually get very delicate, pretty or charming names, often Thai words for flowers, gems, scents, or wistful things.

Nicknames can also describe the baby's size: Lek (little), Noi (small), Yai (big), Uan (fat); or skin tone: Daeng (red), Dum (black), Som (orange). Non-human names apparently fool evil spirits from claiming kids. Hence people answer to Moo (pig), Gob (frog), Poo (crab), or Gai (chicken), and even to farmyard sounds: Oud (oink), Guk (cluck), Jiab (chirp).

Once expressive of rural culture, nicknames now also reflect modernity and globalisation. Old *cheu len* may reappear in English: Fern, Ant, Rose, Ink, Oak, Bird, Baby. Others use foreign words, often shortened from the end, like Bo (from Jumbo), Taem (from Je t'aime), Sin (from Cinderella) and Lo (from Marlboro).

Since surnames never caught on except among major families, it's often only encountered on receiving a namecard. Unlike the casual tossing around of nicknames, namecards embody the giver's face, so their exchange involves care, especially among Sino-Thai. Bowing slightly, you pass it with the right hand, or pinching the top corners so it faces the receiver, who handles it carefully. With so much face at stake, it's no wonder Thais stick to nicknames.



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