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Everyday culture by Gary Boyle



Photo by Varuth Hirunyatheb

Read the following story by Melalin Mahavongtrakul from the *Bangkok Post*. Then, answer the questions that follow.

When people think about culture, they mostly think of things like opera, literature or the arts. It's not often they would just look closer at things around them every day.

THAILAND MEETS GERMANY

A new exhibition at the Thailand Creative and Design Centre (TCDC) Bangkok invites audiences to see into both Thai and German culture through everyday objects that are often overlooked and may not make much sense to outsiders.

"Some of these things are extremely simple. They might be some of the most boring objects in any exhibition in history because they're so plain. But they all tell a story," said Philip Cornwel-Smith who is one of the curators of "Invisible Things" exhibition. Cornwel-Smith wrote *Very Thai: Everyday Popular Culture*, which was released in 2005. The book explores elements in Thailand's culture that represent Thainess.

At the Bangkok launch, Cornwel-Smith -- who curated the items from the Thai side -- and university professor Martin Rendel -- who curated the German side -- walked guests and members of the press through the exhibition room. And true to what Cornwel-Smith cautioned, these items were indeed ordinary. On the Thai side, we found packets of Mama instant noodles, a sticky rice basket, prickly heat powder, a wall calendar and even a red Fanta drink.

Over on the German side, there was a recorder, a garden gnome, Nivea cream, Nutella, cake mould and black bread.

"Maybe some of these objects that are invisible things today will become icons of the future. Time will tell," said Cornwel-Smith.

ACCIDENTAL ART

There are a total of 50 items on display. Half of the objects are Thai, the other half are German.

These everyday items may be able to inform us about ourselves and our culture more than we first think. We saw a plastic pipe stuck in a block of cement -- the everyday art Thai people use as a parking barrier.

"What it's used for is interesting," said Cornwel-Smith. "It's about negotiating who has the use of a public space for private use. In Germany, I'm sure there'll be a straight line on the road telling exactly what would go where and whose is what. In many places in Thailand, you have this negotiation. You see it with street vendors and others. It's a free for all, and it shows a sort of spirit of doing whatever you like to do within the rules -- and avoiding rules if you can."

Cornwel-Smith said the very ordinary fruit vendor cart that is minimal - with just metal, glass and bicycle wheel - can also raise the question of what Thainess really is. Cultural fusion is also reflected in some of the items, such as the *ong mangkorn* (dragon jar) from Ratchaburi province -- a water jar with a dragon design that indicates Chinese influence in the country. Or the Sino-Thai wall calendar that sees different cultures exist together in one place, combining Thai, Chinese, Western, lunar calendars, and even royal days, local taboos and lottery clues together in one object. It's nothing short of a multicultural marvel.

On the German side, Rendel introduced us to a red fake nose, like the one used by a clown. People around the world may perceive Germans as serious and unfunny, but they actually have a sense of humour.

Invisible Things runs today until Sept 15 from 10.30am to 9pm at TCDC Bangkok, the Grand Postal Building on Charoen Krung Road. It is closed on Mondays. Entry is free.

Section 1: Read through the story and answer the following questions.

1. Culture includes several things, and not just the arts. True or false?
2. The TCDC exhibition focuses on things we rarely see. True or false?
3. Philip Cornwel-Smith chose all the objects in the exhibition. True or false?
4. Both Thailand and Germany chose food products to represent culture. True or false?
5. A simple fruit vendor cart can make people think about culture. True or false?
6. Thai objects often show the influence of other cultures. True or false?
7. Many people think Germans are serious. True or false?
8. You can visit the exhibition every Monday. True or false?

Section 2: Write the noun form of the following words.

9. boring10. entire11. invisible12. interesting13. negotiating

Section 3: Read the following passage. Then, fill in the blanks with the correct words from the choices given.

Take for example the red Fanta drink. ...14... in Germany during World War II, these colourful fruit-flavoured drinks are ...15... popular in Thailand. But ...16... a lot of Thais reportedly prefer the green flavour, the best-seller is the red strawberry flavour, which is used as ...17... to shrine gods everywhere in the country. It's believed that the drink is used in place of a blood offering. It's a ...18... sight to see these bottles of bright red liquid ...19... open in front of spirit houses.

14. a. Originally b. Original c. Originating

15. a. wider b. wide c. widely

16. a. while b. when c. which

17. a. offers b. offerings c. offered

18. a. common b. commonly c. commoner

19. a. leave b. left c. being

Section 4: Find words that match the following definitions.

20. that cannot be seen

21. chose the objects for an art exhibition

22. people who sell things

23. very simple in style or structure

24. a mix of different styles or cultures

For the answers, find the story online at www.bangkokpost.com/learning

If you have any questions or feedback, please contact the Editor at garyb@bangkokpost.co.th