

THAILAND FOR SALE

FEDERICO FERRARA*

Our youth would do well to get ready to play the part they were assigned in life, and within the State. With any luck, one of these days our youth will be sold in the streets for something far worse than hunger or fear.

— Curzio Malaparte, *The Skin*, 1949.

SOI 4, JUST OFF SUKHUMVIT ROAD, has all the gloss and silky smoothness of a chunk of pulsating, raw flesh. The uniquely Thai blend of fermenting piss, rotting compost, exhaust fumes, and burnt-out cooking oils is only rendered more asphyxiating by the cheap incense smoldering by the ubiquitous makeshift shrine. Steam rises from the roadside foodstalls that cramp the narrow, potholed sidewalk; it is with difficulty that it finally dissipates into the thick, damp air. A bewildering lineup of dead animals on a stick lie on display on pushcarts, alongside tropical fruit whose freshness has long evaporated on the foggy plexiglass shielding it from the flies and the dust. Whole roasted chickens sit on bare tables next to fake eyelashes and make-up, flanked by rows of size-zero tank-tops and lingerie. Typically most transfixing to newcomers and repeat offenders alike, however, is the repugnant assortment of deep-fried crickets, roaches, locusts, and other bugs sold here by the bagful. They are a favorite with the go-go dancer, who can at times be spotted crunching lazily on the six-legged crit-

ters — occasionally plucking the limb of a grasshopper impudently lodged between her front teeth.

It's not long after dusk, but the place is swarming. A ragtag army of hustlers and beggars is out in full force. Middle-aged females sprawled out on the wet pavement pull at every pant leg within their limited reach, imploring passers-by to look at the filthy, emaciated children sleeping in their arms. Men with mutilated limbs shove their stumps into startled white faces for dramatic effect. A blind, deranged man in tattered clothes stumbles through the crowd, holding a cup half-filled with coins that jangle loudly as he violently bumps shoulders with pedestrians briskly walking past him. Touts selling Viagra, teddy bears, and cheap knock-offs of brand-name wrist watches and sunglasses hassle every foreigner they come across, often placing the items in their prospective customer's hands — as if to make the ill-advised purchase a *fait accompli*. Fat American women take turns having their pictures taken atop a small elephant. Nearby, a six-foot tall ladyboy poses with a Middle-Eastern tourist shrouded in a black burqa. On the other side of the street, a stray dog looks on, crippled and scarred, as if unsure of his next

*Assistant Professor, National University of Singapore, Department of Political Science. 11 Arts Link, AS1 #04-10, Singapore 117570. E-mail: fed@nus.edu.sg.

move, perplexed by the feeding frenzy unfolding before his very eyes. Rummaging through trash is a tough business in this part of town.

“Haah-rrroow, weeeear-come, where you go sexy man?” The endlessly repeated mantra echoes all around, mixing in a thunderous cacophony with the thumping sounds of techno, disco, and hip-hop, the languid falsetto flamed out by a neutered Thai pop star, and the dire opening notes of Gimme Shelter blasted from the crackling loudspeakers of the Morning and Night Bar.

They are everywhere. Free-lancers stand shoulder-to-shoulder on sidewalks and alleyways. Others prepare for another long night of somewhat less than backbreaking work. They pack what little seating is available by the foodstalls and clutter the brightly lit convenience stores in a last-minute search for chewing gums, cigarettes, condoms, vaginal lubricant, lottery tickets, and travel-sized toiletries — the requisite tools of the trade. Still others lovingly pay homage to mysterious celestial beings, genuflecting with evident devotion before a spirit house adorned with garlands, plastic action heros, butter cookies, and freshly opened bottles of bubblegum-flavored Fanta surrounded by swarms of flies. It is only upon completing the elaborate preparatory ritual that they finally report for duty, making their way into the go-go bars or alternatively joining their colleagues atop worn-out stools lining the wooden barroom verandas.

Nana Entertainment Plaza — the word “entertainment” serves as a euphemism for ejaculation in much of the country — is a disheveled three-story bazaar of cascading go-go bars, glaring red neons, and mildewy guestrooms rented out by the romp. Acts of unspeakable depravity are committed or tentatively agreed upon here. Men who seeped through the bowels of every first world society have dripped all the way

down here to feast on a banquet of oriental game. Barely post-pubescent, bronze-skinned metrosexuals join limp septuagenarians carrying lifetime supplies of indispensable hard-on pills. Veteran sex fiends wear as decorations from previous, valiant campaigns t-shirts acquired in places as far flung as Cambodia, the Philippines, Brazil, Costa Rica, and the Dominican Republic. Most belong to the thick sludge of balding middle-aged men, tourist and expatriate alike, flaunting their trademark deformity — guts swollen from a lifetime of the old lady’s home-cooking and an eternity spent lounging in the slothful comfort of a living-room couch.

Much like their patrons, the working girls come in all shapes and sizes. Most have the brown or burnt orange complexion of the Lao and Khmer peoples of Isan, the vast wasteland of depressed northeastern provinces surviving on reliably meager rice crops, occasional handouts distributed by local officeholders, and a steady flow of remittances drenched in the bodily fluids of all manners of Western creeps. They are not all young, nor are they all pretty. Nor, for that matter, are they all women. With a few, blinding exceptions easily explained by the bulge in the man’s back pocket, the girls are rather well-matched with their employers *du jour*. Those whose looks afford them the luxury pride themselves on picking their dates discerningly, with a keen eye to physical appearance, dress, charm, and any information about net worth one might glean from a man’s consumption, mannerisms, and eagerness to part company with money for no reason whatsoever.

The pocket-sized Lonely Planet guidebook that accompanies scores of tourists on their first, wide-eyed trip down here proclaims, in an exercise of rather misplaced self-flattery, that “beautiful [Thai] women will throw themselves at you, all for a modest sum (money or status).” That men of

wealth, status, and taste would have privileged access to beautiful women hardly distinguishes Thailand from any other country. The operative word is “modest”— what counts as money and status here gets one a stack of foodstamps and a welfare check back home. That said, for many Westerners Bangkok’s legendary magnetism does not lie in its heavily discounted market rates. It’s rather that the services rendered in this town involve a measure of passion and lust that prostitutes elsewhere typically don’t offer.

For the local bargirl, after all, a long term relationship with a *faràng* is prospectively the most secure of early retirement funds. Most are well aware that the clock is ticking inexorably on their capacity to earn incomes equivalent to those paid to mid-level corporate management in Thailand’s private sector — and several times the salary of most government workers. To make matters worse, their lifestyle mercilessly accelerates the aging process, rendering them thoroughly washed up by age thirty. And when the music stops, in a few short years, a life less glamorous still awaits those left without a foreign husband. Not many among them look forward to working night shifts in a factory, giving \$5 handjobs in a seedy massage parlor, or sweating it out in the rice paddies upcountry.

So rather than settle for a single-night shakedown of the worthless pigs, the girls often take a more calculating, long-term approach to dealing with Westerners. After all, the typical working girl is smart enough to run circles around the slow-breathing prole or petty bourgeois that is your average sex tourist or expatriate. They might not have the faintest idea of what they are getting into — most foreigners here posing a varying measure of danger to themselves and others — but many jump at the chance of taking the devil they don’t know. Indeed, the instant cuddling may be some-

what unauthentic, the words they whisper a bit sappy, and the loud, writhing orgasms a tad contrived, but the attempt to get them to care is sincere enough. You may call it “the fierce urgency of now.” And that makes for a damn good time, one would guess, for those so fortunate as to be singled out as a potential one-way ticket out of the cesspool or, at the very minimum, a temporary shelter from its sickening stench.

While some might soon internalize the detachment required to keep philandering fun, costless, and risk-free, many never get a chance to hone this much under-appreciated talent. The biggest losers revel in the seemingly single-minded attention lavished on them by their cheap conquests. At last, their *joie de vivre* has staged an improbable comeback, rekindled by the renewed certainty in a measure of cosmic justice that comes in the flesh and blood of a twenty-something Thai hooker — a true Siamese cat of a girl eager to suck cocks no matter how puny, wrinkled, or flaccid. A week in Bangkok makes humble men proud. Even for the less desperate, though, spending a few days with a Thai working girl is often all it takes to become thoroughly confused about her motives, to begin to wonder whether romantic considerations could have indeed replaced the pecuniary. Of course, this dichotomy of motivations is often fallacious, for one only precludes the other in the facile mental schema with which the Western obtuse makes sense of the world around him.

The anthropologist Erik Cohen has it about right when he notes that there is “often no crisp separation in Thai society between emotional and mercenary sexual relationships.” If anything, it’s more complicated than that. Specifically, while it’s the girls themselves who frequently push relationships held together by regular side payments to quickly develop some emotional content — animated bouts of jeal-

ousy, profanity-laced tirades, crying fits, physical abuse, and even the stray assault with a deadly weapon are far from uncommon after just a handful of encounters — at the same time the girls go to some lengths to compartmentalize the demands of their careers from other aspects of their lives. And while they are aware of the stigma with which their profession brands them, they are quite keen to protest their modesty upon being characterized as loose or promiscuous.

Quite aside from what the girls more or less purposively do to turn a quick in-and-out into a sultrier, more protracted affair, the stories they tell are frequently poignant enough to drive a dagger into the soft spots of even the most irreparably jaded, cynical, or sociopathic. A common thread runs through the dismal narratives. In the background is a large or broken family. The surviving parents are always poor, sometimes abusive, and occasionally in the throes of an addiction to alcohol, gambling, or methamphetamine. As soon as she is old enough to make it on her own, if still much too young to do anything useful with her life, the girl drops out of school and moves to the big city.

The poor bitch, no education, marketable skills, or social graces to boot, comes to Bangkok to face quite the conundrum. One option is to work twelve hours a day in a convenience store, serve tables at a restaurant, or scrub the latrines of a hotel, shopping center, or private home. That only gets her about 6,000 baht (no more than \$200) per month. And after paying rent for a shared hole-in-the-wall, not much is left for herself or her family. The alternative is to sleep until mid-afternoon, lounge around for a while, take a leisurely promenade shopping for faux name-brand clothes and accessories, and finally make it to the bar at a late hour of her choice. At work, have a drink or two, suit up in boots and

bikini, take twenty-minute turns “dancing” — more like wobbling listlessly around the pole with all the conviction and energy evocative of Shakira on Xanax — and find some foreigner to screw at the rates fixed for short-time and long-time romps. Between the regular salary paid by the bar, the commissions on “barfines” and “lady drinks,” and a hundred percent of the fees paid by the customer directly to the girl, a fraction of the effort, to say nothing of the abuse and humiliation, generates an income at least five times as large as that guaranteed by 7-Eleven. If the girl is pretty, charming, and has a strong enough stomach to service multiple strangers a day, her monthly income might exceed \$3,000 — more than what a decent chunk of her own customers make. More empowering still, the status of a young girl otherwise as authoritative as the water buffalo parked underneath the stilted family home in the provinces soars as she becomes the family’s chief breadwinner.

Beyond this skeletal plot, variations on both theme and cast of characters are legion. Many of the girls have one or more children living with their grandparents in Isan. Their eyes well up when they are pushed to admit that the kids no longer recognize their mother — much less pay attention to anything she has to say — when they go back for a rare visit once or twice a year. Mom or dad might have initiated the girl to the time-honored trade by selling her virginity to an acquaintance of their choice. Ever present is also a younger sibling whose studies are subsidized by the big sister turning tricks in the big town. But it’s the dangerous Thai ex-boyfriend who’s invariably the most interesting character. He might enter the storyline as a thug, a drug dealer, or a deadbeat dad. Or he might just be the girl’s first love, the man who broke her heart when he walked out with someone else, got thrown in jail, or better yet, per-

ished in a barroom brawl, a drug overdose, or an all-out shootout with the police.

It's upon learning of such deplorable lives that the foreigner might begin to fathom the once imponderable eventuality of shackling up with a whore, making it his mission to rescue the girl from a life of poverty and ignorance. Many meet this pathetic fate here. So it's no doubt with a large measure of astonishment that newcomers will first notice just how many have ceased to wear the giddy, inebriated expression one would imagine etched onto every man's face in such a generously discounted theme park for the self-indulgent. Much to the bemusement and sometimes the chagrin of the locals, thousands of Western men stroll Bangkok's bustling streets and shopping malls, watching over rented girlfriends and hired wives with the dreamy, loving eyes of someone who, against all logic, self-respect, and sound advice, at some point began to care.

The *faràng* isn't much loved here — at least not at the highest rungs of Thailand's social ladder. The word itself — a derivative of Frank, as in the barbaric tribe that swept through northern France after the demise of the Roman Empire — is used, somewhat disparagingly, to describe the amorphous, undifferentiated mob of barbarous white men and the relentlessly mocked contingent of corpulent, unkept white women. Beyond the miscellany of geo-political grievances that the editorial pages of Thailand's English-language newspapers persistently, if rather inelegantly, articulate, the resentment is often well-deserved. After all, the white man's immorality and boorishness is on permanent display in this city — at every hour of the day and night.

Even as far back as the sixteenth century, Dutch traders sojourning in the old Siamese capital Ayutthaya had a penchant for taking local concubines — fathering multiple

children to be readily abandoned upon one's return to Europe. So many Dutchmen left fatherless children in Ayutthaya, it seems, that an orphanage of sorts appears to have been in operation for the sole purpose of attending to the half-breeds. By the nineteenth century, when the Kingdom of Siam witnessed a substantial influx of Western merchants, artists, engineers, and bureaucrats, close to every last one of them had one or more Thai mistresses, some apparently going as far as maintaining harems. And it is well known that at least since the halcyon days of the Vietnam War — when a corrupt military government drooling for foreign aid and investment rented out to American servicemen its least valuable human resources — Westerners in Thailand have been strictly on their worst behavior.

Of course, the fact that foreigners are the most conspicuous and shameless consumers of homegrown young flesh doesn't mean they are either the most numerous or the most irredeemably depraved partakers in this bountiful sector of Thailand's vast semi-submerged economy. One would never tell by simply walking around Bangkok, but those in the know remind us that 95 percent of the country's notorious sex industry caters strictly to Thai men. Thai men, however, don't particularly like to be seen hiring hookers. Those at the very high end of the scale patronize "entertainment" and "massage" venues that line major thoroughfares like Rachadapisek and Phetchaburi Road — places ostentatiously known as Caesar's, Emmanuelle, Cleopatra, and Poseidon. The buildings are imposing and grandiose, with ample parking out back. Inside, men choose from dozens of girls sitting in "fishbowls" separated from the clientele by thick, sometimes one-way glass. Also on offer, though hidden from view, are models said to have posed in the Thai editions of famous magazines. Once the charges are settled — all major credit cards accepted — the two-hour

dalliance takes place in lavish rooms endowed with jacuzzis, king-sized beds, and plentiful mirrors.

These places of merriment operate quite openly, thanks to the relaxation in the anti-prostitution laws that occurred in the context of an aggressive promotion of tourism in the 1960s — from all-out prohibition to the legalization of entertainment venues where women offer unspecified “special services.” The ambiguity of the law and the arbitrariness proper to any kind of law enforcement in Thailand, however, still leaves the possibility that these places of widely known disrepute may be subject to official harassment. So it doesn’t hurt to cultivate a clientele of powerful businessmen and politicians. Or to enter politics directly. Current Commerce Minister Pornthiva Nakasai, for instance, was offered a cabinet post on the basis of her experience as the owner and long-time manager of Poseidon, arguably Bangkok’s most renowned brothel. For good measure, cash by the truckload is doled out to policemen at every link of the chain of command. Chuwit Kamolvisit, once one of the city’s most powerful pimps and more recently twice a candidate for governor, confirmed back in 2004 what everyone already knew. That he paid twelve million baht (some \$400,000) a month to police and offered five million baht in free services to keep just a handful of places running — as he claimed in an interview with the *Guardian* newspaper — is astounding not so much for the corruption it reveals, but rather because it hints at just how immense his profits would have been.

Though priced at a relatively modest \$80-\$200, these establishments are well beyond the reach of most Thai men. For the petty bourgeois, the best available alternative is to enlist the services of the streetwalkers who congregate around Suan Lum Night Bazaar, the strip of discos and nightclubs around Rama IX Road, and other areas

spared the influx of foreigners, where one might get laid for as little as \$10-20. Many of the girls working this beat are said to be college students dabbling in the trade for some extra *argent de poche*. Nearby, a wealth of short-time motels are equipped with curtains that can be drawn around each parked car so as to conceal make, model, and license plate from prying eyes. For those who still can’t afford these, the city is littered with dirt-cheap “tea houses” fronting for brothels where the company of frequently underage, immigrant girls kept in conditions of semi-bondage can be enjoyed for a nominal fee.

It may be worth noting that monogamy, at least as a legal construct, is a recent import to Thailand. Though de facto restricted to noblemen and, more recently, to commoners who had risen to top positions in the bureaucracy, among such groups polygyny was practiced well into the twentieth century. King Chulalongkorn, aptly regarded as Thailand’s greatest monarch, fathered 77 children from as many as 150 “minor” wives bestowed upon him by families desperately seeking royal favor. When it was proscribed in 1935, after decades of debate that gradually spilled from the small circle of the King’s closest advisers into the public arena, the practice had long ceased to play its historical function. By the turn of the century, the replacement of a system of feudal vassalage with an absolute monarchy commanding a bureaucratic and military apparatus extending deep into the provinces had rendered the system largely superfluous.

The sole purpose that polygyny now served, it seems, was to quench the nobleman’s taste for variety and parade his virility for the whole world to see. The government went so far as to craft rambling defenses of polygamy as a symbol of religious and national identity — the best they could do on this count was to note that the

practice is nowhere explicitly prohibited in Buddhist texts and teachings. That much of the nobility obstinately defended the custom, however, was to their great collective detriment. Internationally, polygamy was viewed as a symbol of Siamese backwardness. Its persistence provided colonial powers with an excuse to impose highly unequal treaty provisions and, potentially, deprive the country of its independence should France or Britain have elected to carry the white man's burden into Siam. In addition, as the absolute monarchy began to run afoul of an increasingly vociferous, modernized middle class in Bangkok, polygamy figured prominently in the pointed derision of the nobility as a listless, profligate, lascivious holdover from an uncivilized time. When disgust for the old order spread deeply enough into the bureaucracy and the military, it offered top officials the opportunity to seize power and abolish the absolute monarchy in June 1932.

That Bangkok's bourgeoisie increasingly identified with liberal ideals of equality and freedom — and grounded their virtually unanimous condemnation of polygamy in Enlightenment ideas — did not mean they practiced monogamy themselves. In fact, it was precisely when the calls for legal reforms in matters of family law intensified that Thailand's sex industry exploded into a massive business. Legally sanctioned, officially licensed, and regularly taxed, prostitution had been around for hundreds of years. But if it had experienced considerable growth in the nineteenth century, owing to the immigration of Chinese men who almost invariably left their women behind, it was the institution of a modern, salaried bureaucracy — and hence the creation of an upper-middle class — that infused loads of freshly minted cash into the trade. In the early twentieth century, brothels became Bangkok's main claim to fame. Streetwalkers appeared all over town. And the erotic

shows precursive to those that now attract throngs of tourists to Patpong — where ugly women use mangled vaginas to smoke cigarettes, play the trumpet, or shoot darts into balloons fifteen feet away — became a staple of the city's famed nightlife. Modernization may well enlighten minds, but whose cock has ever read Voltaire?

For the women, the motivation to staff brothels was much the same back then as it is today. Among the tiniest of the millions-strong masses of *phô nôi* ("little people"), there existed a long tradition of female participation in the labor force — much like today, women were often expected to work to feed their parents and their children. And if the economic life of the city offered women "with needs" a plethora of demeaning, exploitative careers, selling sex was often the most remunerative among them. Tens of thousands went for it willingly, if not eagerly. Many others had the decision made for them, as it was customary for parents to sell their teenage daughters into brothels should the need arise to pay off debts or otherwise cash out the proceeds of their investment on female offspring in a single lump sum.

The glaring dissonance between the reality of an exploding market for able-bodied women and the myth of a sexually conservative populace, now further enlightened by a newfound sense of national identity, individual freedom, and equality, was patched up with the same glue that precariously holds together every cultural system humans ever devised. The solution was an immoderate dose of hypocrisy in the public debate about women and morality, as well as the enshrinement of said hypocrisy in the nation's legal apparatus.

In the face of the first, almost entirely homegrown boom at the turn of the twentieth century, the government's instinct was to profit from the trade — just as it did in pre-modern times, when brothels in

Ayutthaya were registered, tax-paying businesses. And so brothel taxes, much like those levied on opium and gambling dens, began in earnest to fill the state's coffers — a contribution that was, however, attenuated by the countervailing determination of entrepreneurs and civil servants to profit from the trade at the government's expense. With the complicity of police and high-ranking civil servants, many a self-respecting brothel owner took his business underground. On the one hand, owners merely sought to maximize profits — then as now, bribes were cheaper than taxes. On the other hand, they sought to minimize the risk that their businesses would be shut down should too many of their workers be found to be afflicted by venereal diseases. Characteristically, the main impediment to the enforcement of the law was that the interests of the state diverged from those of the state's officialdom. So while the sex scene thrived throughout much of the city, it did so largely outside the government's control.

It took about a half century before the Thai government could devise a clever policy that would benefit businessmen and civil servants as well as the state. At first, Sarit Thanarat's authoritarian regime banned prostitution outright. The ban was only partially relaxed in 1966, so to this day the practice remains technically illegal. Subsequently, the Vietnam War and the influx of dollar-bearing American soldiers caused the demand for pretty young women to skyrocket — multiplying profit-making opportunities for police officers, state officials, and businesspeople — and induced policymakers to look the other way so as not to compromise the torrent of economic aid that good US-Thai relations guaranteed. At the end of the war, the departure of US troops threatened to bring the whole party to a sudden, screeching halt. But that was never going to happen.

The government figured that the same infrastructure of hotels, restaurants, bars, and brothels that had made American servicemen so comfortable in Thailand could accommodate scores of restless Western warriors who had no wars to fight — that is, if they only knew about the laxity of the country's laws, the submissiveness of its people, and the looseness of its women. It is at this point that the Thai government began to promote tourism — “Welcome to the Land of Smiles!” — by portraying its women as eager to satisfy a visitor's every desire, and its population at large as a mass of slobbering fools eager to share wives, husbands, brothers, sisters, sons, and daughters, all the while smiling meekly, with any white man so kind as to make it down here to spend a few bucks. The results were spectacular. Some studies suggest that the influx of foreign tourists grew from a paltry 40,000 in the late 1950s to a staggering twelve million visitors forty years on. The beauty is that everyone who matters benefits. Brothel owners prosper. The police has a steady source of revenue to compensate for its chronic underfunding. Legitimate businesses flourish as sideshows around the main attraction — lining in gold the pockets of many an aristocrat, state official, and army general. And the remittances that flow copiously from Bangkok to the countryside have long kept taxes low for the emerging Thai bourgeoisie.

Despite the undeniable contribution they have made to the prosperity of the country, the tens of thousands of provincial girls whom foreigners assiduously patronize in the dazzling number of brothels, massage parlors, and bars operating in Bangkok and elsewhere are typically looked upon with distaste — especially by those urban, upper-middle-class Thais who most profit from their work. A common approach is simply to pretend they don't exist. Even as the country was being transformed by its

rulers into a whorehouse — a veritable beggars' banquet — the Thai press spent much of the past century nostalgically lamenting the decline of Thai culture reflected in the far too revealing outfits now worn by city girls, the far too suggestive dances they can be observed performing in local discos, and the far too evident loss of propriety exhibited by teenagers who openly date their classmates in the absence of a formally proffered, carefully pondered, and solemnly approved marriage proposal. For anyone who has ever spent any time in Bangkok, to read the ongoing debates on morality and sex in the editorial pages of Thai English-language newspapers is to venture into a parallel universe — a bourgeois black hole disconnected from the everyday reality of Bangkok's busy streets.

In those pages, one can find stern condemnations of “Coyote dancing,” a practice performed by bartenders in nightclubs that threatens irreparably to corrupt the city's youth. Or one can find discussions raging on about the merits of the government-imposed ban on pornographic websites. All websites found to include obscene content are blocked by the ever-blundering Ministry of Information and Communication Technology — a fancy name for Ministry of Propaganda, whose most insidious aspirations are undermined by the comical incompetence proper to every government agency in Thailand. Laughably swept under the rug is the shrill dissonance between the government's ongoing moral crusade and the fact that even the most depraved acts featured on the World Wide Web are offered by scores of local women to anyone in Bangkok with the means to afford an internet connection.

The government's hypocrisy on matters of sex and prostitution has risen to new, dizzying heights in the past few months. Upon learning that cash-strapped, if notoriously consumption-conscious college stu-

dents in Bangkok have increasingly taken to advertising sexual services on social networking sites, the government feigned alarm, indignation, and grave concern over the threat posed by the practice to the morality of the city's youth and the integrity of the country's social fabric. As if to highlight the severity of this gathering danger to Thai society, it was the current Prime Minister himself who took the time personally to reassure the country's bourgeoisie that the government would swiftly intervene — cracking down with the usual mixture of underhanded censorship and wasteful re-education campaigns aimed at teaching students the “right values.” It's anyone's guess, really, where teenagers in Bangkok would have learned the “wrong” values. Most probably, it was their growing exposure to Western culture and media that tragically led them astray.

In a country where tens of thousands of young women — possibly as many as several hundreds of thousands — copulate for a living, one might ask what the hell is the point of imposing a ban of internet pornography, of lamenting the dangers of pre-marital sex, or of expressing alarm over a handful of students who screw their classmates to finance their weekend shopping. And if modesty, chastity, and innocence are so important to the idea of “Thainess” (*kwahm bpen thai*), it may baffle some that purists and cultural warriors would spend so much time fending off comparatively small threats to that ideal. What many foreigners do not understand, however, is that the filthy whores who have spent decades fueling the nation's growth, keeping entire villages afloat, and filling to the brim the coffers of the state simply don't count. Nor do the large numbers of provincial women in Bangkok — whatever their day job happens to be — who are well known to be available for liaisons involving some, if perhaps less direct form of cash payment.

For the smug bourgeoisie, whose broken English is just good enough to read brain-dead editorials in the *Bangkok Post* or *The Nation*, the provincial girls who live in Bangkok are not really citizens of Thailand — not the same way they are. These women, after all, belong to a social class whose sole prerogative, in the heinous cosmology of the *phôo yài* (“big man”), is to grovel. Their duty is not merely to be poor — if not so poor as to inconvenience the highest authorities of the state into making token gestures of support — but rather to be content with the prospect of forever remaining poor. At least since the dictatorship of Sarit Thanarat, the notion that the provincial masses belong in the fields, that they should not take part in materialistic pursuits on the streets of the capital city, has been a centerpiece of Thailand’s official ideology. So economic migrants to Bangkok, especially those whose unsightly occupations reflect poorly on the country’s leadership, have long been treated as outcasts — their insolence and stubborn refusal to embrace their station in life threatening the “deterioration” of Thai culture and society. As such, debates in the Thai media focus almost exclusively on the sexual mores of middle- or upper-class city girls — and, occasionally, the peasant women who are still expected to serve as a symbol of cultural purity for the comfort of the Bangkok elites. The ubiquitousness of the sex industry in Bangkok is not inconsistent with the elites’ image of Thailand as a sexually demure, conservative country. Nor, for that matter, does it undermine their self-appointed role as the upholders of that myth. The army of streetwalkers, go-go dancers, and tentacled masseuses working in Bangkok, then, are not commonly regarded as the long-lost daughters whom the double-breasted, uniformed, and garishly bejeweled fathers of the nation have sold into prostitution. Far from being grate-

fully acknowledged for the heroic contribution they have made to the country’s prosperity, they are rather more conveniently ignored.

When their existence is acknowledged, the girls are treated with considerable ambivalence. On the one hand, as the country has grown synonymous with cheap and easy sex, they have been portrayed as quintessentially un-Thai — a category wholly distinct from the altogether more modest, more virtuous women of the same age who just happen to live off their parents’ wealth or have found more reputable (if perhaps less gainful) employment. In this narrative, prostitutes are scapegoated as the loafing, conniving reprobates single-handedly responsible for giving the country a bad name. They are a scourge, an indelible stain on the image of Thailand around the world — that which enables the fiendish white man to further weaken the country with the intent to rape and pillage it more freely still. Incidentally, the increased self-consciousness exhibited by the Thai leadership about the country’s reputation has produced very positive results. In the 1990s, for instance, Thailand launched a remarkably successful campaign to eradicate HIV/AIDS and destroy any trace of (visible) child prostitution. Once reportedly ubiquitous in Bangkok’s red-light districts, the practice is now banished behind the walls of dingy brothels that serve, discreetly, the needs of Thai men.

On the other hand, at times the prostitute is used as a metaphor for Thailand itself — a country whose blissful, bucolic innocence has forever been lost to the white man’s overbearing, foam-at-the-mouth rapaciousness. To be clear, as a matter of personal choice it is certainly the case that prostitution is born of the lack of economic opportunity. In this sense, those who see Thailand as the hapless victim of the rigged system of globalized capitalism may be right to trace its women’s lack of

opportunity to the subordinate position to which Thailand is relegated on the world stage. It is also the case that in spite of the economic boom the country has experienced over the past thirty years, its largely rural population has suffered from international competition. Their goods have gotten cheaper, their daughters more readily available. But who exactly is responsible for pimping Thailand's provincial youth? Who, if not the country's self-styled paternalistic leadership? And why, if not for the benefit of the urban elites? This nativist reasoning conveniently ignores the fact that the transformation of Thailand into the West's playroom was conscious and deliberate, motivated by the opportunity for massive financial gain it presented to those who had *already* been blessed with riches and power — politicians, generals, noblemen, and their friends in the business community. And it neglects to consider how it benefits the high-minded bourgeoisie, who can go about their business without wasting too much time thinking about exporting a measure of economic opportunity to the provinces.

Among the myriad charges leveled against former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra — deposed in 2006 in a bloodless military coup staged at the behest of Bangkok's business community, its pompous coterie of "minor" princes and princesses, and a network of high ranking officials in both the civilian and military bureaucracy — the one that truly stuck was that Thaksin was hell-bent on "selling the country off" to the highest (foreign) bidders. But if Thailand is really up "for sale," who exactly is selling the country away? At least on this count, it certainly wasn't Thaksin or his minions. It was rather the same kind of unelected military government the urban elites restored in 2006 that transformed vast swaths of this proud country into a degenerate open-air

bordello. Incidentally, these are the same military leaders who sold off entire sectors of Thailand's economy to foreign and domestic oligopolists, in exchange for billions of dollars paid on the condition that the generals make life difficult for smaller, local competitors and that they repress any labor movement that might seek better pay and work conditions for millions of Thai workers. All of this for the economic benefit, and with the enthusiastic support, of the urban elites. At the end of the day, who owns the hotels, the shopping malls, and massage parlors that foreign tourists and rich locals patronize? Who leases the land, lends the capital, supplies the construction materials, and oversees the building of mega-projects in popular tourists destinations? And who sells the ugly Westerner the beer he drinks, the food he eats, the condoms he wears, the cigarettes he smokes, and the souvenirs he brings home as evidence he didn't spend his entire trip holed up in a brothel?

Follow the money. For every miscreant who descends upon Thailand, weighted down by the oversized baggage of smug condescension Westerners carry with them everywhere they go, there are thousands of enablers in this country. These enablers benefit — of course, some more directly and more bounteously than others — from the Farang Juice Company's sustained cropdusting of Thailand in imported, protein-rich fertilizer. They have a deal, you see. It's an unspoken one, but as iron-clad as any contract you could sign in this country. And, thus far, successive generations have seen it fit to honor it. All the modernized, urbane elites are asked to do is refrain from making too big a stink about the wide availability of plebeian girls. So long as they don't do a damn thing about it, in return they get to publicly berate the white man's shocking degeneracy, to bemoan his influence on the ignorant, impressionable little people, and thus proudly to wear the man-

tle of strenuous defenders of Thailand's national identity. All the while, behind closed doors, millions of their own men engage in much the same behavior.

It is in this light that one should read the recent, albeit now effectively defunct, debate over the legalization of prostitution in Thailand. It is questionable whether Western sex tourists have much to gain from the decriminalization of the trade or its increased regulation. Prostitutes could hardly be more widely or more openly available. At the same time, in an effort to keep the authorities' attention elsewhere, most go-go bars and brothels patronized by Western tourists have, on their own initiative, taken aggressive steps to make the girls disease-free. In all but the filthiest establishments, each "entertainer" and "special service" girl submits to monthly HIV tests and by-weekly gynecological inspections.

Legalization, in this sense, would change only one thing. Not only would the licensing and registration requirements put an official imprimatur on today's much disputed, unofficial estimates, thus bursting the illusion nurtured by those in the elites who still claim Thailand to be a sexually modest, conservative country; the fact that all that would now be allowed to happen legally, on the watch of the self-righteous bourgeoisie, would expose them as co-responsible for the phenomenon — knocking them off the pedestal of stalwart cultural guardians to which they have long elevated themselves. Unsurprisingly, the opposition to the proposal that Thailand allow de jure what has de facto been encouraged for decades was framed precisely around the need to defend Thainess and its values — as if to formally prohibit something one is informally peddling would do anything to affirm Thai morality. Then again, that was the whole point. So long as it is not enforced, the law as it stands has no adverse effect on tourism revenue

streams. The veneer of cultural purism coming at no cost whatsoever, there is no point being seen wallowing in feces with all manners of Western swine.

For the Thai bourgeoisie, the great thing about the status quo — beyond the fact that tourism makes businesses more prosperous, jobs more remunerative, and taxes less burdensome — is that while the measly sums families upcountry receive from their daughters keep them afloat and hence muffle the clamor for a more interventionist role of the state, in the absence of real economic development millions of provincial bores never go far beyond mere subsistence. Incidentally, though "sufficiency" is all the elites and the local press say provincial Thais should aspire to, the continuing reality of rural poverty perpetuates the incentive structure that makes prostitution the best possible career choice for upcountry girls by the hundreds of thousands. You can force people into mere subsistence, but it is quite another thing to extinguish any yearning for self-advancement, to sear upon people's faces idiotic smiles of contentment. Nor, for that matter, would the elites really want for the slogging proles to surrender all hopes of a better life — not lest they piss away the steady supply of cheap labor that makes their parasitic lives so comfortable.