ALEX KERR

AUTHOR OF *LOST JAPAN*

Another BANGKOK

Reflections on the City

PENGUIN BOOKS

ANOTHER BANGKOK

Alex Kerr is an American writer and Japanologist whose previous books include *Lost Japan*, *Dogs and Demons* and *Another Kyoto* (with Kathy Arlyn Sokol). He was the first foreigner to be awarded the Shincho Gakugei Literature Prize for the best work of non-fiction published in Japan. Having first visited Bangkok in the 1970s, since 1990 he lives half of each year in Kyoto, the other half in Bangkok.

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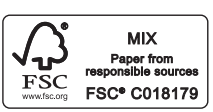

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Foreword

This 'meditation on Bangkok' first came out in 2009, published by River Books under the title of *Bangkok Found*. Now it's twelve years later, and I've revised it in light of Bangkok's more recent changes. In the meantime, in 2016 I wrote a book called *Another Kyoto*, which looked at the city of Kyoto based on the 'lore' accumulated from years of living there. On revisiting *Bangkok Found*, I saw that it shares a point of view with *Another Kyoto*, hence the new title. That point of view is to probe the heart of the old culture lying behind the new city.

In Japan, bookshelves sag under the weight of books in English about ceramics, *ikebana*, gardens and the ways of thinking that have inspired them. People come to Japan on bended knee, eager to soak up the Zen wisdom of tea ceremony. You don't find this in Thailand, and it's because Thailand is mostly seen from abroad as a place for fun and relaxation, shopping and the beaches. Few would imagine the existence of a rich traditional culture from which you could learn something of value.

In Bangkok, as in Japan, a vibrant popular culture abounds on every street corner. My quest has been to seek the deeper, older wellsprings of those things.

While I've written about the city of Bangkok, this also tells the tale of a journey, by a man who started out in one place and ended up in another. While American, my background for over fifty years has been Japan. A writer friend once described me long ago as: 'a youth who loves in Japanese, lives in Japanese'. Now that I'm much older, that's still true.

And then, I came to Bangkok. In a break with everything in my former life, I arrived to live permanently in this city when I was over forty years old. Thai culture had lots of surprises in store, causing me to go back and question much that I'd taken for granted in Japan, and in the end, my thoughts on Thailand congealed into this book.

Some chapters mirror those on Japan, such as the ones on old houses and performing arts, yet reach very different conclusions. Other chapters take up new subjects, such as slums, food, sex and nightlife.

I've written this for people who, like myself, have come here and have been wondering, about simple things. Why do Thai dancers' fingers bend backwards? Knowing full well that the 'Thai smile' is not always so charming, why are we still charmed?

Behind these things, enriched with input from India, Java, Cambodia, China and the West, flows one of Asia's deepest, and at same time kaleidoscopically complex, cultural traditions.

The starting point is the huge modern city that Bangkok is today. With one turn of the kaleidoscope, we see the colour and chaos that's such a familiar image of

Bangkok in the world. With another turn we see the hidden rules of order that give Thai life a sterner edge, and also its stability, peace and grace. The journey to this new city takes us back to the origins underlying it all.

Thailand within Southeast Asia

1 Grand Palace
2 Emerald Buddha Temple (Wat Phra Kaew)
3 City Pillar (Sao Lak Muang)
4 Royal Ground (Sanam Luang)
5 Mahachulalongkorn University/Wat Mahathat
6 Thammasat University
7 National Museum (Phutthaisawan Chapel)
8 National Theatre
9 Baan Phra Arthit
10 Khaosan Road
11 Democracy Monument
12 City Hall
13 Brahmin Temple (Devastan)
14 Sala Chalermkrung Royal Theatre
15 Pahurat Market
16 Flower Market (Pak Klong Talad)
17 Saranrom Park
18 Wat Pho
19 Temple of the Dawn (Wat Arun)
20 Patravadi Theatre (1992–2014)

On 28 December 1989, I was seated reading a newspaper on the bullet train going from Kyoto to Tokyo, when a voice from on high boomed in my ears and proclaimed one word: Bangkok!

In the next instant, I could hear only the hum of the speeding train. In all my life, it was my first and last visitation from heavenly spirits. Putting down my newspaper, I thought what this could this mean. The fact was that until that moment I had practically forgotten Thailand, which had accounted for a few interludes in my life in the 1970s. I had not seen Bangkok in over ten years.

My life until then was largely lived in Japan. My family came to Japan in 1964 when my father, an American naval officer, was posted to the base in Yokohama. I was then twelve years old and found a fascination with Japan that inspired me later to study Japanese and Chinese and, after 1977, to take a job and live in Japan permanently. By 1989, when the Voice spoke, I was working for the Oomoto Seminar of Japanese Arts near Kyoto, writing about Japan, doing business in Japan. There seemed to be no reason why I would ever leave.

But, as I sat there on the train, memories of Bangkok flooded in.

The First Wave

I can see that my experiences with Bangkok came in waves, each one drawing me a little closer, until at last in 1997 I washed up on shore. The first wave came when I visited Bangkok in 1975, on the way back to America after a summer in Japan. In those years before the Khao-san Road area became an international backpacker mecca, young travellers stayed at the Malaysia Hotel on Soi Ngamduplii. It was the nerve centre where you could pick up information about any place in Thailand, Nepal or beyond, from papers stuck up on the message board in the hallway.

In the city, I experienced what backpackers still do today: I wandered Chinatown, set a bird free at Wat Pho,

marvelled at the Grand Palace and boated to the Floating Market. The streets brimmed with intriguing things for sale. I bought one of my first antiques on that trip: a fifteenth-century incense burner picked up at the flea market in Sanam Luang, the square in front of the palace.

While wandering around Sanam Luang, I also stumbled on the Shrine of the City Pillar, a small structure sheltering a golden column to which streams of worshippers brought flowers and incense. My companion, a Thai student guiding me around in order to practise his English, read me the history from his text book: 'Fifteen days after his coronation in 1782, King Rama I set up the city pillar here to mark the founding of Bangkok, and only later did he start constructing the Grand Palace. The exact moment of the raising of pillar, as fixed by the astronomers, was 6:45 a.m. on 21 April 1782.'

In a whisper, he added, 'We believe that when this pillar was raised, they sacrificed human beings to be buried beneath it so that they would guard and protect the city.'

The reason I made the trip was a pilgrimage to meet John Blofeld, an authority on Daoism. John had lived in Beijing in the twilight years of the 1940s before the Communist takeover, and he had inspired me with his books about exploring the secrets of the Dao with pale-skinned immortals who dwelled in cloudy hermitages in China's remote mountains. John was part of the diaspora of 'old China hands' who, after the Communist victory in 1949, had relocated around Asia, some to Taiwan and Hong Kong, others to Japan. John had chosen Bangkok.

Navigating a maze of back streets, I sought out the guru. Off the traffic-choked main avenues, Bangkok was still leafy, even rural, in those days. John Blofeld lived in a traditional Thai compound. Above the dogs and screaming children in the muddy yard below, John presided serenely on the verandah of a wooden house raised up on stilts. He sat me down on the terrace in front of a golden Burmese Buddha and proceeded to expound Daoist arcana, and other secrets, such as why roofs in Thailand and China curve upwards at the eaves.

It is, he explained, to purge a taboo. When you raise up a building, you are breaking a taboo against the earth – and so the eaves, rather than pointing back down at the earth, should rise again at the tips to point up towards the sky. Since then I've heard other explanations, probably more accurate historically, but I never look at curving Thai or Chinese rooflines without remembering that conversation.

At that point, I saw Bangkok as a stop along the way, not as a destination in itself. So, just as young travellers continue to do today, I used Bangkok as a jump-off point for a trip to Burma. Returning after a week in Burma, I felt relieved to find creature comforts like air-conditioning, and also a slight sense of disappointment. Compared to Rangoon, where most people still wore *lungyi* (Burmese sarongs) and the largest structures to be seen in cities and in countryside were golden pagodas, Bangkok seemed like just another crowded dusty Asian city.

I visited Bangkok a few more times during the 1970s, usually on the way to Burma or Nepal. Then, in 1977, my

long university years ended and I took a job at the Oomoto School of Traditional Japanese Arts, outside of Kyoto.

Ping and His Family

The Thai connection restarted when a young Thai from Bangkok, Ping Amranand, came to attend the Oomoto Seminar. At Oomoto, while studying Noh drama and tea ceremony, Ping and I became fast friends. In 1977, I went to Bangkok to visit Ping, and it was on this trip that I first started to think of Bangkok as a place to live.

Ping came from an exotic background, having been introduced to us as a 'Thai prince who lives in a palace'. Ping explained that he was not a prince, and only his mother, not himself, had a noble title; and the palace was a place his grandfather had purchased and which Ping sometimes visited but never much lived in. But he was in fact a descendant of King Rama IV.

Ping's family was heavily Anglicized, so much so that his aunt Nunie spoke better English than she did Thai. His mother, Pimsai, who died the year before I saw Ping in Bangkok, wrote eloquently in English, penning a book on gardens, and evocative memoirs about her childhood in England and later return to Thailand. Most of the family were educated in England, including Ping's brother Pok, who had studied at Oxford.

The British influence went way back. Ping's great-grandfather, Prince Svasti, was the first Siamese to study

at Oxford. However, what fixed Britain firmly in the family's destiny was the coup of 1932 that abolished absolute monarchy. King Prajadhipok (Rama VII) went into exile in London in 1934, abdicated in 1935 and remained in England for the rest of his days. Ping's mother and her sisters grew up in London, where their father served the exiled king. Only in 1951 did they return to Bangkok.

During my week in Bangkok, Ping took me up for a weekend to the old capital of Ayutthaya, where we explored seventeenth-century ruins and paid our respects at one of the temples with his grandmother. Naked children with topknots swam in the canals, a glimpse of something soon to disappear; nowadays one only sees a

Boys with topknots: Topknots were cut at about twelve to fourteen years old.

scene like this painted on tourist trinkets. As the grandmother entered the temple, everyone fell to their knees.

Back in Bangkok, an interminable drive through horrible traffic would bring me to a quiet, leafy road off Sukhumvit, and there I'd find cheerful Nunie, Ping's aunt, surrounded by her helpers and disciples, mixing up vats of dye and melted wax for her small factory of tie-dye fashion. One of her disciples was later to visit Oomoto along with Nunie's daughter Oy and in time became one of Thailand's leading fashion designers.

But at that point we were all still young, and Nunie's atelier had more the feel of a hippy establishment than haute couture. Nunie and the gang of cousins who surrounded her – Ping, Ing and Oy – became an adopted family for me. Nunie had a scholarly bent and was a goldmine of information on traditional Thailand.

Looking back, I realize that the milieu I had fallen into with Ping and his family was part of the huge extended family of Thai minor royalty. Earlier reigns had enormous harems (King Rama IV had 43 consorts, Rama V had 153), producing hundreds of princes and high court ladies, who built their own palaces, a few dozen of which still stand in Bangkok today. Their descendants were honoured with titles, following the Chinese system of nobility, in which you go down one rank in each generation, until finally you become a commoner. So the titles are diminishing, and in another thirty or forty years will mostly disappear.

The nobility still features on the boards of companies, in high society and in politics. In 2009, M. R. Sukhumbhand

Paribatra, scion of a noble family, won election as mayor of Bangkok. However, the land ownership that gave the nobility much of its power is dissipating as siblings break up larger plots on the death of their parents, and families sell property bit by bit to keep up their lifestyle.

It used to be said that there were three powerful groups in Bangkok: the nobility, the army and the Chinese businessmen. Of these, the nobility is fading. That leaves the army and the Sino-Thai businessmen as heirs to the city. Of course, in those days I hardly knew about this background, because Ping, Nunie and their family never talked about any of this.

I went back to the Shrine of the City Pillar and this time learned a little more. When he established the pillar, it is said that King Rama I was following a Thai tradition of erecting a wooden pole to mark the centre of each town or village. But Nunie cautioned me: 'Don't believe everything you read. City pillars, as they exist in big towns today, are not the ancient Thai things that everyone imagines. They actually derive from the stone Shiva lingams that stood in the great temples in Angkor. So they're really Khmer in origin.'

Bangkok by Night

The pleasant time spent with Nunie and her family was during daylight hours. On this visit I was more prepared to see what the night had to offer. When darkness fell,

my friend Bobby Bird, son of an American-Thai family, came to pick me up in a car filled with his friends, and we would go off careening madly through the streets.

And so, by accident, I fell into the exotic nightlife of the 1970s. Bangkok was a smaller town then. When Baron Krupp flew into town and threw a big party on the boat *Oriental Queen*, handing out as party favours diamond rings and rubies to the prettiest boys and girls, all the people I met at night with Bobby were there. So was the young fashion designer whom I met during the day at Nunie's studio. At one point Bobby arranged for a Venetian bank owner to host his international guests at an old Bangkok mansion for a party – that lasted for a month. They had nineteenth-century costumes tailored for all the guests, as well as waiters, cooks and servants, who were trained in palace etiquette. A truckload of orchids arrived every day.

Bangkok at that time reflected the hedonistic abandon of the post-1960s liberation and pre-AIDS era, a decade when London and New York, too, were at their most decadent. A party for a month, entirely in antique costume, with an endless supply of fresh orchids, was one form it took in Bangkok.

Mixed-blood Bobby's high position in Bangkok's social world contrasted strongly with what I was familiar with in Japan, where people like him lived mostly on the margins. Meanwhile, Thais had been living and studying abroad for generations, as you could hear in the clipped British accents of Nunie and her children.

All this made Bangkok feel truly 'international' in a

way I'd felt before in New York, but never in any other Asian city. Bobby, and the foreign-educated Svastis, were misfits in their way, and yet they had successfully built niches for themselves in Bangkok. It made me feel that I, too, could create a life here.

Bangkok began to exert its spell. I made plans to move here and work as an English teacher. I knew next to nothing about Southeast Asia, but nevertheless, I made my decision to leave Japan. Nunie arranged for a job and even a little house in Bangkok. When I returned to Kyoto in December 1977, I was all set to announce my departure to Oomoto.

There was just one little cloud on the horizon. The night before I left Bangkok, Nunie did a divination using the old Chinese book of hexagrams called the *I Ching*. When I asked how my Bangkok life would go, we got the hexagram *The Abysmal*. 'In the abyss one falls into a pit,' the *I Ching* said. 'Misfortune.' And sure enough, on arrival at immigration in Osaka, I made the mistake of marking on my health card that I'd had a bit of diarrhoea. Armed guards rushed me off to a hospital, where they kept me in solitary quarantine for a month. A friend later said they were right to hospitalize me, but it should have been for mental reasons – for being naive enough to write the truth on the health card.

As the *I Ching* had foreseen, Japan was not ready to let me go, for immediately on emerging from the hospital, something happened that changed everything: I met the Kabuki actor Tamasaburo and became infatuated with Kabuki actors and their world. Before I knew it, all

thoughts of Thailand had flown my mind. I wrote to Nunie to say I wouldn't be needing the job or the house. I spent the next few years submerged in the backstage of the Kabuki Theatre. Japan reclaimed me. A decade went by without another visit to Bangkok.

During those ten years, there were some twinges. My father, after retirement, sailed around the world for years on a small yacht, and at Christmas 1983 I went to visit him in Tahiti. One evening, I took the ferry from Tahiti to nearby Moorea, where we were anchored. It was dusk, and the Tahitians were lounging in the evening breeze, men and women wearing flowers in their hair scented with coconut oil. As they murmured soft syllables of Tahitian in gentle ripples of sound, the evening light gleamed off their smiling white teeth.

At the stern, seated squarely on a stool, legs akimbo, was one of those ubiquitous Chinese shop ladies: dressed from head to toe in black satin, with her hair pulled back in a bun and her face in an unmoving frown. The fierce Chinese madame and the gentle Tahitians, although co-existing for generations in these islands, belonged to completely different cultural universes. I thought to myself at that moment, 'I've spent most of my life in North Asia, but it's the south and the islands – they're my people!' I felt for an instant the tug to Thailand, but the moment passed, and after that I forgot again.

And yet, when the Voice from heaven spoke on the bullet train in 1989, I knew instantly what it meant. A seed planted long before had been quietly growing for the previous decade. It must be a classical pattern for

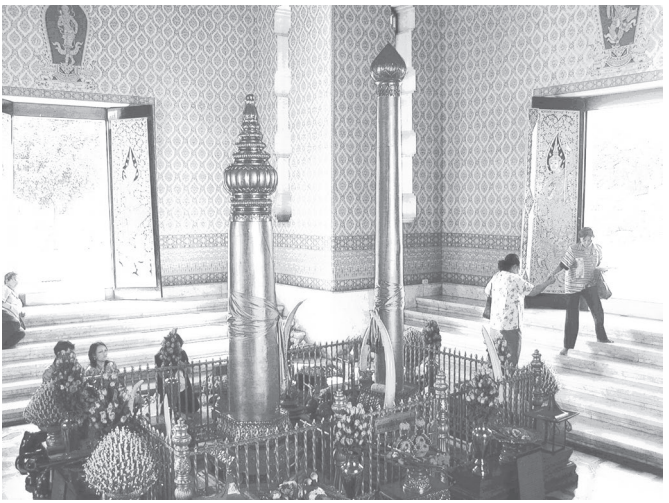
midlife crisis – something inside that had been buried so deep I hardly suspected its existence burst forth, and there was no resisting it. At the time I had a busy life in Japan and had no idea what to do in Thailand, or even what the country would now be like. Nevertheless, by the time that train reached Tokyo, I had made up my mind: I was moving to Bangkok.

Arrival at Last

And so, nervous but filled with anticipation, I found myself, on 11 April 1990, driving through Bangkok's dark streets on the way to the hotel. The first thing that struck me was the darkness, such a contrast to brightly lit Japan. Bangkok has brightened considerably since then, but that night the darkness lent the city an air of invitation. Images of street carts, children selling flowers and people lounging in front of shophouses filtered through my taxi windows as I drove through those shadowed avenues. I knew this was the right place for me.

During the following week, I made another pilgrimage to the Shrine of the City Pillar. It had been rebuilt in 1986 and looked rather different from what I remembered. This time there was not one pillar, but two. One was tall and thin; the other was short and fat.

Which one was the true City Pillar? Guidebooks said nothing about it; nobody I asked seemed to know. In



Shrine of the City Pillar: (*left*) the pillar of King Rama IV; (*right*) the pillar of King Rama I.

fact, they didn't seem even to have noticed that there were two pillars.

I did a bit of research. It turns out that tall thin one is the original City Pillar put up by Rama I. When first erected, it had contained within (or below it) the horoscope for the city, which, it is said, had a lot to do with the Burmese who had invaded and sacked Ayutthaya in 1767. However, by the time of Rama IV, it was apparent that the big threat to Thailand was not the Burmese, but Western colonial powers.

So in 1852, not long after he acceded to the throne, King Rama IV had a new horoscope cast and a new City Pillar (the short fat one) put in place of the old one. Rama I's pillar was removed and stashed against the shrine wall,

which is where it had been standing in the shadows for over a century, unseen by most visitors (including me), when I had first visited.

In the 1986 restoration of the Shrine, officials rediscovered Rama I's pillar and stood it up again so that it joined Rama IV's pillar in the duo we see today. But although they now stand side-by-side, Rama IV's shorter pillar is considered to be the true centre of Bangkok.

I learned that other old cities, such as Ayutthaya, had city pillars too. The funny thing was, though, that despite having visited Ayutthaya repeatedly in the 1970s, I just couldn't remember ever seeing the city pillar there. I went to Nunie, who laughed, and said, 'Well, of course you didn't see the one in Ayutthaya because it didn't exist. These things aren't ancient; they're quite new. Most of the city pillars we see now trace back to Phibul Songkhram (Thailand's dictator for much of the 1930s and 1940s). Officials saw city pillars as advancing Thai identity, and so they set them up in other towns, and now people think they've been there for ever. The reason you didn't see a city pillar in Ayutthaya when you went before is that they only put it up some time in the 1980s.'

So the City Pillar that represents the heart of Bangkok turns out to be two pillars, not one. As for the other city pillars, including even in the ruins of ancient Ayutthaya, far from being misty relics from ancient history, they're the inventions of modern bureaucrats.

They were installed to strengthen 'Thai identity' – but the tradition they celebrate came from Cambodia. Meanwhile, the story of human sacrifice, in which many

Bangkok dwellers still believe, also turns out to be myth, Bangkok's original 'urban legend'. No evidence exists that such a thing took place. This was my introduction to the slippery, dualistic world that is Bangkok. History is largely an illusion; and where there is one pillar, there is always another.

The questions surrounding the City Pillar made me realize that learning about Thailand was not going to be the straightforward course of study I was used to in Japan. So began a gradual process, where I would travel back and forth, spending larger amounts of time in Thailand. In 1990, I met my partner of the next sixteen years, Khajorn; in 1991, I rented my first apartment. Soon I was addicted to Bangkok and spending three or four months of each year there.

Although I was coming often, during this phase I was basically a tourist. It's a common lifestyle for foreigners who live part-time in Bangkok. Thousands shuttle back and forth between their home countries and Thailand, just as I did. Tourist life in Bangkok was exciting and *sanuk* (fun), with excursions to Pattaya and the island of Samet, restaurants and Saturday afternoon at Chatuchak Market.

Life got more exciting in February 1991, when a military coup toppled the elected government, and by spring of 1992, a civil uprising against the military junta filled Bangkok's streets. It ended in tragedy, with soldiers shooting scores of demonstrators around the Democracy Monument.

The events of 1991 and 1992 were my first coup in

Thailand, but not my last. Revolutions came and went and could even have a *sanuk* side in Bangkok, as we were later to see in the coup of 2006, when people offered flowers to the soldiers and dressed their babies in khaki to be photographed next to submachine guns and tanks.

Over the next three decades, as the anger in the demonstrations has grown more heated, and the government crackdowns more far reaching, the coups have come to feel a lot less fun. *Sanuk* was a mirage. But in the mid-1990s these more sober days were still far ahead.

Finally, in August 1997, the big moment came. I took a larger apartment that would fit my books and belongings, packed them up and shipped everything to Bangkok in a container. I sent out a letter to all my friends announcing my departure from Japan, and this time when I consulted the *I Ching*, I got *The Creative*. It said, 'Sublime success.'

On 5 September 1997, some friends gathered in the big empty apartment to which the furniture and books had not yet been delivered. We popped open a bottle of champagne and toasted Bangkok. I had finally arrived, twenty-two years after my first visit, and eight years after the Voice spoke on the bullet train.

Well, not quite. The karmic bonds with Japan hold strong. Despite having moved to Thailand, to this day I still spend about half of each year in Japan, maintain a home in Kyoto and continue writing and speaking there. Japan keeps its hold on me, and I can see now that it always will. In a sense, I've ended up like the Shrine of

the City Pillar – an old life and a new life standing side by side.

While I've learned much since then, Thailand will always remain a challenge. My life has been in Japan. My heart lay in Thailand. Eventually, after many zigzags along the way, the life finally followed the heart to Bangkok.