

Exploring five centuries of shared history in a single day

Published: 2/03/2011 at 12:00 AM

Newspaper section: [Life](#)

The symposium "500 years: Europeans in Siam" has been too long coming for Bangkok's expat community. Many might have been hoping that the day-long event would finally dispel the myth that farang is the Thai word for both "foreigner" and "guava" since both smell a bit funny and grow in places you don't really want them to, but the origin of the word continues to elude etymologists.

0

Share



NMV president Bozena Mazur (right) presents a bouquet of flowers to Somsuda Leyavanija, director-general of the Fine Arts Department, to mark the centenary of the department's foundation.

In any event, the symposium, organised by the National Museum Volunteers and held at the National Theatre last Thursday, did an admirable job of charting the impressive historical contributions made by Europeans to Thai society and culture over the past half millennium.

For the past 100 years, the Fine Arts Department has worked tirelessly to preserve the Kingdom's rich cultural heritage, traditional visual and performance arts, music and architecture.

The National Museum Volunteers are a group of foreigners living in Thailand who have banded together over the past 42 years to donate time and resources to assisting the department in its conservation efforts.

The department celebrates the centenary of its establishment this year, which also happens to mark the 500th anniversary of the arrival of the first Europeans in Siam. After capturing Malacca in 1511, the Portuguese made their way up to Ayutthaya shortly thereafter. Relations between them and the Siamese were good for many years, a state of affairs attributed to the fact that Portugal dispatched an envoy to the court of Ramathibodi II that same year to reassure him that it had no territorial ambitions in this country.

But things haven't always been so amicable between Thais and Europeans.

Claire Keefe-Fox, director of Alliance Francaise in Thailand, told a tale of tense Franco-Siamese relations, dwelling in particular on the Paknam incident of 1893 when three French ships were fired on by a Siamese fort at the mouth of the Chao Phraya River.

Keefe-Fox speculated as to whether the French had an interest in extending their colonisation efforts westwards from Indochina, but wrapped up her talk on a more harmonious note, focusing on the cross-cultural exchanges that Alliance Francaise has been facilitating here over the past century.

Five hundred years in the making, the day's programme could scarcely have been delivered with more panache and intrigue. Perhaps most interesting for foreigners grappling with Thai attitudes to international visitors and expats was Chris Baker's address, "Farang, outside people, whiteskins: Westerners in Thai eyes over 500 years".

Baker, a former lecturer in Asian history and politics at Cambridge University, gave some sharp insights into just how the guava myth might have developed over the years.

Tracing the trajectory of Siamese impressions of Europeans from the very first intrepid Portuguese arrivals to the more recent influx of Singha-toting, MBK-tramping tourists, Baker's conclusion was astounding.

Over the past five centuries, the Thai perspective on Europeans has, he claimed, remained largely unchanged.

The bullet-point list presented during his slideshow read hilariously but seemed devastatingly accurate: no big impression; European things more interesting than people; rude and comical; problem for Buddhism. Tying together the fact that foreigners were depicted in Ayutthaya-era murals as mercenaries in the army of Mara (traditional arch-enemy of the Lord Buddha), the punitive measures imposed by Western financial institutions on Thailand after the 1997 collapse of the baht and the image propagated by "beer barons" flying the flag for various European nations in the bars of Pattaya and Phuket, Baker's survey was wide-ranging and profound.

The symposium offered up a veritable feast of ideas, provided masses of food for thought. From Thavatchai Tangsirivanich's superbly researched talk on the cartographic representation of Siam to MR Chakrator Chitrabongs' treatment of the impact of European education in Thailand, it became clear that European influence in this country has indeed been somewhat greater than Baker's checklist would have us believe.

The afternoon session saw Miguel Castelo-Branco deliver an in-depth analysis of the Portuguese-Siamese Treaty of 1820 and Caroline Link, of prominent local firm B. Grimm, reflect on just how much German and Thai corporate cultures have had to offer one another.

From exploring the dangers of life for Dutch traders based in Ayutthaya to examining the Russian connection to Siam, the symposium revelled in the breadth and significance of the relationship between Europeans and Thais.

The day's proceedings climaxed with the naming of the top farang in Thai history, as decided by all those in attendance. (See Life page 3 for the results.)

The symposium attracted a capacity audience. If that impressive turnout suggests anything, it's that the next five centuries of European-Thai relations are equally full of promise.

Did you know?

You can subscribe to free e-newsletters and receive e-mail alerts when other people leave comments in articles after you did. [Click here](#) to take full advantage of the alerts!

About the author



Writer:
David
Seidler
Position:
Writer

Keep this article in your social bookmark:

- [Delicious](#) [Digg](#) [Reddit](#) [Stumbleupon](#)
- [Technorati](#) [Twitter](#) [Republishing permission](#)
- [Print this](#) [E-mail this](#)

Bangkok Post : News | Business | Opinion | Travel | Leisure | Tech | Entertainment | Auto | Life | Teen | Guru Bangkok
Services : Article search | Job search | Forum | Classified | SMS news | Read e-paper | Digital print page | Read Bangkok Post
Post Today : Home | Local news | Finance | Investment | Leisure | Business | International | Sports
Post Publishing PCL : Corporate info download | Subscribe newspaper | Online advertising | Web suggestion | Corporate contact
© Copyright 1996-2008 The Post Publishing Public Company Limited | Privacy policy | Help | Sitemap