

# LIVIN'G

## Brash Thais Open up Nervous Neighbour Laos

Julian Gearing writes from Vientiane

Laos, which laid low during the Indo-China wars, has opened up to its thrusting market-oriented neighbour, Thailand. Now it is becoming nervous that its four million people will be swamped by the brash Thai way of life. The new open-door policy may be bringing benefits but, reports Gemini News Service, there are cultural worries. Even night clubs in remote areas of Laos now play the latest Thai pop songs.



CHANGE OF TUNE  
A Thai pop singer on the banks of the Mekong



Ever since Thai Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhavan launched his plan to change Indo-China from a battlefield into a marketplace in the late 1980s, Laos has seen significant investment by Thai companies. One of the most visible projects is the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge, a joint venture between the governments of Thailand, Laos and Australia. This massive road and rail link is set to span the Mekong river near Vientiane by 1994. It will replace the small, rickety motor-boats which make the crossing at present.

Other infrastructure projects are underway with the help of the Thais, including the improvement of roads linking not just the hinterlands of Laos but also opening

but to accept foreign aid. For much of the last 18 years the country has lived an isolated existence, with its communist government relying on Vietnamese and Soviet help. With the collapse of communism around the world and an end to the old certainties, the Lao leadership has been forced to open the country, if rather cautiously, to market reform, new ideas and foreign investment.

Laos is keen to improve its friendship with Thailand, but as an Asian diplomat in Vientiane put it: "The Lao government does not trust the Thais." Thai culture remains the official enemy, despite the resolution of a serious border dispute in 1988 and an exchange of official government visits. Laos and Thailand still have to tackle two unresolved issues: several disputed points along their long border and the 40,000 Lao refugees that continue to live in camps in Thailand. Bangkok wants to send the refugees home or to resettle them in a third country by 1994. Most refugees are reluctant to move.

ple in Laos are worried about foreign influence. Lao writer Outhine Bounyavong says Thai television threatens the future of Lao literature, adding: "Lao children watching TV are learning more Thai than Lao."

A Thai hotel manager in Vientiane said the Lao people are susceptible to Thai entertainment and the glossy advertisements. He warned: "In the end Lao people will be swallowed up by Thai society."

Partly to offset the overwhelming Thai influence, the Lao government has been more receptive over the last couple of years to Chinese inroads into their country. The authorities appear to be looking to China as the last communist state they can turn to for protection.

China supported the Lao communists in their war against the former Vientiane regime. Relations soured when Laos sided with Vietnam following its 1978 invasion of Cambodia, ousting the Chinese backed Khmer Rouge. Relations began to improve when the late Lao party chief Kaysone Phomvihvan visited China in 1989.

Chinese investment has so far tended to benefit the north of Laos which has largely been ignored by other foreign investors. John Laird, a Western journalist who recently visited the Lao-China border, said business was brisk with truckloads of Chinese goods entering the country.

Brash consumerism is replacing a gentler culture. An open-door policy may have brought benefits, but the Lao culture and way of life could suffer in the long-run.

GEMINI NEWS

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Indian legislators declare war on foreign consumer goods brands. Mahesh Uniyal of Inter Press Service reports

## TNCs Take a Licking

Many members of India's affluent community today wake up to Kellogg's breakfast cereals, gorge on Kentucky Fried Chicken and quench their thirst with Pepsi and Coca-Cola.

Four years of economic liberalisation have deluged India with foreign consumer goods brands that are changing lifestyles across the country.

But a growing body of critics question the wisdom of allowing foreign consumer goods companies into a mainly rural nation where tens of millions of people are too poor to eat properly.

Indeed, in July, the anti-foreign business campaign targeting the most well-known transnational consumer giants marked 500 days with protesters hitting out at Coke and Pepsi.

The Campaign for the ouster of Pepsi and Coca-Cola was launched as a symbolic protest against the entry of TNCs (transnational corporations), said a declaration issued at the end of a meeting here to mark the occasion.

Their ouster from India will give a clear signal to other exploiting TNCs to pack up or face the united might of the Indian people," it added.

The freedom to TNCs to open shop in India was meant to expose long-protected local industry to world class competition and know-how, thereby making it globally competitive.

But firebrand parliamentary opposition leader George Fernandes scoffs at such reasoning, and has been the driving force behind the anti-TNC movement in India. As a government minister 18 years ago, Fernandes had booted Coca-Cola out of India.

Just two months before, politicians from centrist parties — including even some ruling Congress Party legislators — joined the maverick politician in his strident attack on TNCs.

The May session of parliament saw angry lawmakers blasting the twin symbols of western consumerism here in India: Pepsi and McDonald's. The provocation was the forthcoming launch of fast food outlets by Pepsi subsidiary, Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) and the burger giant.

The first of 30 KFC parlours opened in the southern city of Bangalore in June. McDonald's will open the first of its 60 outlets next year.

Professor Arun Kumar of the Centre for Economic Studies and Planning of New Delhi's Jawaharal Nehru University also has doubts about the know-how consumer TNCs are supposed to bring.

"Are they coming in critical areas where technology is desperately needed? This is not really the case," he says. India could have done without such know-how, argues Kumar, adding that in several cases, the TNCs are bringing dated technology.

Moreover, the TNCs have freedom to repatriate profits from their Indian ventures. "The drain from the economy could increase unless they start exporting in a big way," he says, citing the example of Pepsi's well-publicised export obligations.

Pepsi was allowed in India in 1989, two years before the liberalised economic policies were announced, on condition of exporting a part of its produce, creating local jobs and technology upgrades.

## Recreation of the Wild West

by Nico den Tuinder

My editor is quite a headache. She always wants me to write, even when I am too busy (obsessed, she calls it) with my own routine work. I usually tell her I have no inspiration. Write about this. Write about that, she then almost orders me. Write about the tourist places of Bangladesh.

Cox's Bazaar? No. A bizarre place: a beach resort without a night life. The Sunderbans? No. There is a ban on it: the travel agent first reduced the number of days of my trip, and then raised its price. Mainamati? Hum. Impressive piece of rubble. Eastworld? Yes! The famous themepark.

A recreation of the Wild West: free enterprise and the rule of lawlessness. Entrance fee: Taka 0.00. Opening hours: round the clock. Where: along the banks of the river Buriganga.

Also known under its historical name Dhaka. Main attractions: shootouts, lynchings, train robberies, mob fights, bomb attacks.

After entering the park, you should take its toy train. The armed gang of robbers numbering about 30 to 40 men will stop it by blocking the tracks. For about one hour, they will loot the valuables of all the daytrippers.

Genuine gun-battles are regularly staged around the Lake of Pearls. When you are lucky, you can witness scores of youths armed with cut-rifles, revolvers, home-made

bombs and other weapons locking into a fierce fight in one of the buildings. Everywhere they leave heavy blood-stains and bullet marks. The real thing!

In the Latin Quarter survival of the fittest is the rule. That is what the inhabitants learn from their books. In between reading them, they apply the noble principle.

At the House of Justice the gang of about ten armed men will be waiting for you. They take the law into their own hands, and shoot at pleasure. When you have an enemy, just invite him to Eastworld. Customer satisfaction. That is the park's motto.

The dreadful price of demanding toll is the theme of Monk's Corner. Every day about 12 o'clock, a mob will seriously beat up a supposed extortionist.

The poor clash with the oppressors in Narayan's Market. Every day about fifteen persons, including two policemen, are injured in clashes between the two parties.

When you want to take a break after all these excitements, go to Garden City, at the outskirts of the park. You can have lunch in one of the many restaurants there, or go shopping for a useful thing. However, the gang of extortionists may explode several bombs, injuring several shop assistants. The price of your shopping can be high.

Courtesy two days of newspaper reporting.



## Sex Symbols: Not Always Dumb Dolls

by Fayza Haq

May be fifty years ago when sex symbols were nothing more than mere omphs and oohs, the heroines on the screen were expected to do nothing less than to display their overblown and over-grown curves and be finished with it. To show off their raw flesh: that's what they were expected to do.

Now the sex symbol represents a changed concept. It's not the body which matters but the motivations which manifest the implications of the rich anatomy.

Or to be more elaborate, it is the character which evolves itself into a multi-dimensional personality in

which sex remains the prime generating force. It's not just brawn but brain as well which matters now. Or to be more precise, it is the sex-ridden psyche which plays the trick.

Now take for example Ursula Andress, who appears as a wayward moll in the 'Red Sun'. She is naturally a gorgeous model who looks ravishing in every possible camera angle, as clad from the finest of silks and fur to mud-spattered rags and leather thongs.

Her sexy voice, tantalising pose and hour glass figure draws crowds from every strata of society. The character she depicts is perhaps

not complex, but flat and type and may have been projected with mere gestures.

Ursula is the typical stunning blonde who does not have to make much of an effort to attract attention. She fits into the fights — personal and group as much as in the role of the beauty in the tart house.

But Raquel Welch in 'Hannie Caulder' is different: She is a magnificent figure of a woman who has a hot seething temper, cynicism and bitter memories. She is seen fighting tooth and claw in a man's world.

Her cat on a hot tin roof act clearly dominates the antagonists, who are little else besides male chauvinists — who consider a female almost like some cattlehead — to be bought and sold at the male fancy.

Raquel with his spittfire ways survives the struggle of the fittest and comes out the victorious golden girl with all honours.

Genevieve Bujold, in 'Anne of the Thousand Days' as the quick-witted and hot-tempered willful minx, the second wife of Henry VIII, as played by Richard Burton, wins the audience over with her spontaneity, vivacity and initial joie de vivre.

Her tricks and tantrums are lapped up by our audience as was Elizabeth Taylor's in 'The Taming of the Shrew'.

Genevieve's face and figure are more that of a pixie's than a Miss Universe's but she certainly queens it over the entire story.

Even her beguiling waywardness as an adolescent Anne has a charm of its own. Barbarella and more recently Kluge has Jane Fonda in different and difficult roles, both as sex sirens of a form with diverse psychological overtures.

It is not mere curves and a cute face or even an Oscar award but acting with feeling and a genuine pitch which go to make much difference. Glamour and prostitution had been dealt with endlessly on the screen but Jane Fonda does it with a flare and flam-

boyance of her own. 'Soldier Blue' has Candice Bergman with her sunburnt blonde and soap-and-water appeal despite the volley of her sailor's lingo which gave her the tang of a Spanish pepper rather than the character of just a 'white woman' with an Indian lover who is naive, well-meaning and raw young ingenue in tow.

Fresh, frank and full of vitality Candice Bergman overshadows the rest in the cast too easily.

More recently, Sarah Miles in 'Lady Caroline Lamb' depicts the liberal and liberated spirit in women that will not be cowed down by hypocrites and prejudices of the society. Misunderstood and mishandled, she still comes out of the trials and tribulation like some lost and wounded sparrow rather than a bold brazen hussy, as accused by hundreds.

The sex symbols today are no longer dumb. The dolls are essentially walkie-talkie by conception of the directors and script writer.



Walk like an Egyptian

## Strangers in Our Life

by ASM Nurunnabi

Few of us realise that strangers can enrich our life. There is sometimes a lurking suspicion in us which makes us tongue-tied in front of people we don't know. Except in situations which clearly demonstrate that any initiative on our part to get to know a stranger who comes our way may be detrimental to our interest in some way or other, it is felt that knowing how to meet people with ease, even though they are strangers, enables us to widen the circle of our acquaintance and enrich the fabric of our lives. Life is so full of variety and surprises that an encounter with some strangers may rank among the most memorable events of one's life — a constant opening of gift boxes, with no idea of what is inside. Indeed the charm of a stranger may lie precisely in the fact that we don't know him.

I remember an event in the past on board a ferry's dining compartment when there was no ferry on the Meghna river. At a table sat a foreigner who beckoned me to sit on a vacant chair before him. After preliminary introduction, I came to know that he was a Canadian engineer connected with a foreign-aided chemical project in a rural area through which a beautiful and serene river flowed. In course of conversation, he was effusive about the scenic beauty of that place with small sail-fitted boats sailing in the calm waters. To prove his point, he showed me a number of colour photographs depicting some beautiful aspects of the riverine scene. Those photographs testified to his sensitive and artistic mind. I complimented him on his keen artistic outlook. Thus the person I never met before enabled me to appreciate some aspects of the natural beauty of our country side, which we normally take for granted.

There is also another side to an encounter with a stranger. It may so happen that we may say things to a stranger that we have always wanted to say, but never dared mention to family or friends and thus see our-

selves through new eyes. With luck, a chance meeting with a stranger can also result in a life-time friendship. I felt extremely intrigued when I read a sign in a park of a foreign country: 'There are no strangers in the world; only friends waiting to be met.'

We can learn to make the most of an encounter with a stranger if we adopt some of the following approaches:

1. Ask questions. Many interesting conversations ensue with a query. If you ask a stranger "What is a day in your working life like?" he will usually respond enthusiastically.
2. Talk about surroundings. If you have an active curiosity, you will always see something to remark on.
3. Say something about your companion. Once I sat beside a smart young man in a doctor's chamber. I casually remarked: "How can such a healthy fellow like you be ill?" He said that he was suffering from an eye infection and since he was an amateur pilot, he thought it urgent to have it treated quickly. He even invited me to fly with him in his plane on a joy ride. I took him at his word and thereby got the unusual experience of thrill by flying over the city in a small plane of the flying club.
4. Be a good listener when the stranger talks. Half of a good conversation lies in the listening and there can be no real dialogue without it.
5. It is important to remember that people are as curious about you as you are about them and you can add to their lives as they add to yours.
6. Comment honestly on how you are feeling. If we speak honestly about ourselves, the other person will feel free to say what he is thinking.

In this context, a psychologist remarked: "There really is something wonderful about every imperfect, mixed-up, uncertain human being. In the light of this remark, when you talk with a stranger, you have before you a marvellous puzzle. What kind of person is he? What sort of story does he have to tell?"

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Model stars to movie stars?