

# The Politics of the Thai Table

## Food, Manners, Values

By Michael Herzfeld

Many readers have probably wandered into a Thai restaurant somewhere in North America or Western Europe, ordered a plate of *pad thai*, and scooped it up with a fork held in the right hand.<sup>1</sup> They have probably viewed the offerings on the menu somewhat nervously and then perhaps tried a few other dishes—as long as they were not too spicy. Mouths on fire, they have ended the meal with a comforting Thai dessert, often mango and sticky rice or a sweet pudding, and washed the whole thing down with glasses of Singha beer and water. They want authenticity—but not too much authenticity.

Savvy, self-aware travelers who have visited Thailand might notice a few telling differences in Western Thai restaurants in comparison to what they saw in the country itself. They are likely to notice that they are paying perhaps eight times the price they would have paid in Thailand for their *pad thai*—which is considered street food there. The dish was “reinvented” as a unifying device by a twentieth-century dictator who based it on a Chinese dish (the name means “Thai stir-fry”). A relatively bland and uncomplicated dish, it also lent itself to the international promotion of Thai cuisine. They might also notice that some of the ingredients added by hand in Thailand, such as raw bean sprouts, scallions, and crushed peanuts, are already mixed into the dishes in front of them. They might also remember that in Thailand, they never saw anyone forking up that noodle dish—certainly not with a left hand—but instead saw Thais using a fork to push a little at a time into a spoon held in the right hand. If they ate their *pad thai* at a roadside stall table or noodle shop, they might have seen some people using chopsticks—but never, as opposed to the scene in their local American Thai take-out, asking for green curry and only rarely ordering chicken with basil and hot peppers. Chopsticks are for noodle stalls and “Chinese” restaurants.

In fact, despite stern warnings in some of the guidebooks and websites,<sup>2</sup> most travelers miss these delicate nuances of Thai table etiquette with their subtle intimations of class and ethnic differentiation; some Thais ignore them too. Educated Thais sometimes deny that such manners are important, although there are numerous etiquette books and articles (some of them written in English for the benefit of foreigners). This suggests that Thais may sometimes pay more attention to how foreigners eat than to their own observance of the rules, but such apparent casualness is also part of a larger cultural pattern. From language—“We don’t really have a grammar” for the Thai language, but “That doesn’t sound like real Thai!”—to social relations, notably the tension between extremely formal hierarchy and notions of loose social organization, Thai culture seems especially prone to striking contradictions between formal hierarchy and the appearance of social ease and relaxation. On one hand, foreigners are frequently warned about the offense that can be caused by sitting in a way that reveals the soles of one’s feet, treating printed material with disrespect, or crumpling banknotes with the monarch’s portrait. On the other hand, the language is full of expressions indicating indifference to formal manners and obligations, like *chang man thoe*, “Just let it go,” and, more famously, *mai pen rai*, “It doesn’t matter,” and Thais often tell foreigners about such stances with considerable pride.

Such responses to foreign visitors, especially those from the former Western imperial powers or Japan, apparently reflect Thailand’s paradoxical and ambivalent relationship with colonialism. Thailand claims never to have been colonized, yet the country often embraces Western-derived cultural and polit-

ical practices and historically used these practices as part of a sustained campaign to present itself as *siwilai* (civilized) and thereby to ward off self-justifying invasion by the “civilizing” European powers.<sup>3</sup> Thai food is distinctive, but Thais are aware of, and sometimes exaggerate, the caution with which most foreigners approach that food. Thai restaurateurs in the US often find that *farang* (European-looking foreigners) cannot handle the level of spice that characterizes much cooking in Thailand, and when faced with the real thing, they become angry and declare it inedible! They have therefore become understandably reluctant to serve food as hot as it would be in their homes, fearing an embarrassing and perhaps expensive scene.

Even speaking Thai does not always get a foreigner genuine Thai food at first. I have been asked by Thai wait staff whether I really meant the food to be hot *baep thai* (in the Thai way). In one restaurant where I managed to persuade a waitress that I meant the food to be prepared in that way, I discovered when the check arrived and I saw her notations in Thai that she had told the kitchen that this customer was a *khon thai* (Thai person). I am actually British. While visitors to Thailand are more likely—though not necessarily more pleased—to be treated to the full-blown blasts of Thai spice, most Thai restaurateurs who deal with tourists have learned to be similarly cautious.

Avoiding embarrassment is vital, both in service provision and in the presentation and consumption of the food itself. I do not mean to suggest here some rigid distinction between appearances and reality; for Thais, appearances are very much a part of the social reality, and they can make a huge difference between success and failure. The key principle, reminiscent of Western middle class respectability but also emanating from the highest quarters of Thai society, is that of restraint—a sign of those who have wealth and knowledge.<sup>4</sup>

Thailand has long been concerned with the subtleties of ingestion, but it is also a country where display—what historian Peter Jackson calls the “regime of images”—is centrally important and causes an everyday concern with appearances in dress, comportment, and speech style.<sup>5</sup> “*Phuud bao*” (speaking softly) not only *is* but also *displays* a type of self-restraint. Food, too, lends itself particularly well to creative display. Only Western Thais adopt the formality of distinguishing between appetizers and main courses. But there are other exclusions. For example, one should not order street-style noodles at a formal dinner dominated by curries and stir-fries. It is important to produce visually appropriate display matched by rich provocations to the nostrils and tastebuds. Likewise, the internationally famous *pad thai* would rarely be served at a formal dinner; noodles do not usually have a place at the formal table.

Predictably, Thai food changes in form and content as it travels overseas. In recent years especially, food has served as an instrument of national self-projection, a process that sometimes receives strong institutional support from the central authorities. The business-oriented but populist administration of Thaksin Shinawatr—prime minister from 2001 to 2006, when he was overthrown in a military coup—made some effort to promote Thai cuisine overseas. This official version of the dish, however, tended to be remarkably bland. Middle class Thai views of spiciness as lower class and official Thai promotion policies converged, contributing to a global taming of one of the world’s hottest cuisines.

Yet the food that most Thai people still prefer is often extremely spicy. Curiously, the most important source of this spiciness originated outside the country. What Thais call *phrik thai* (Thai pepper) is not the ubiquitous *phrik khii nuu* (mouse droppings pepper) at all, but ordinary black pepper. Portuguese and other traders apparently introduced the chili to Siam, as it was then called. Today, the *phrik khii nuu* is the motor that drives the sensation-tingling properties of much Thai cooking. Other chilies abound in the markets and on the table; they are eaten raw, pickled, stir-fried, and dried. These peppers are highly visible, with the result that many foreigners in Thailand fear that they will not survive their lunch. Even if their choice of *pad thai* also turns out to be liberally laced with powdered, extremely hot red pepper, they have avoided a much hotter dish, one that also figures in the street food repertoire: *kwaytiaw phad khii mao*, usually translated as “drunken noodles” and consist-

ing of broad, flat rice noodles cooked with shrimp or meat and liberally laced with phrik khii nuu, green peppercorns, garlic, and basil—a truly explosive and popular treat.

Clearly, then, intense taste is central to the Thai understanding and enjoyment of food. There are two contexts in which mild tastes are explicitly promoted: Buddhist values and Chinese identity.<sup>6</sup> In the former case, the linkage with higher-class attributes is clear: an educated upper middle class frequently emphasizes orthodox Buddhist ideals. Claiming to eat milder and sensorily less-exciting food serves as the Thai equivalent of Indian “Sanskritization,” the process whereby higher status is claimed by what we might call “conspicuous non-consumption,” as when warrior-caste Hindus in India stop eating meat as a way of achieving Brahman status.<sup>7</sup>

Such moves also have ethnic implications within the larger frame of Thai national identity politics. For the Chinese, who have historically suffered some discrimination in Thailand—though less than elsewhere in Southeast Asia—a preference for milder tastes harmonizes ethnic identity with class ambition, and it does not escape notice that, at the highest level, foods specifically marked as “royal” are generally less spicy than run-of-the-mill Thai dishes. And while the food of Bangkok’s Chinatown (Yaowarat) is often much spicier than Chinese food in the West or even in much of China, some middle class Bangkok people will plead Chinese origins as an explanation for avoiding the very spicy food preferred by, especially, country folk.

Thus, higher-class and urban identities are marked by combining more “Buddhist” ideas about taste with more “European” styles of consumption. Now, it is certainly true that many educated and upper class Thais—including several good friends of mine—ignore the rules *and* enjoy spicy food. Their freedom of choice indicates a degree of social privilege; they find—or at least consider—themselves outside the formal structure of etiquette, at least to the extent that a version of “reverse snobbery” kicks in. This is also especially true of academics, who sometimes develop an affection for Chang beer with its higher alcoholic content, fizzier taste, and more intoxicating effect than those of Singha or locally produced Heineken. Chang beer, which is advertised in a nationalistic manner that irritates some intellectuals, is nonetheless embraced by others as a mark of identification with the working classes, among whom it is a popular drink.

While spiciness seems to have a somewhat ambiguous social implication, for a foreigner it can also serve as a mark of having attained at least a minimal degree of Thai culture. The same is true of the rules of etiquette. These look entirely Western at first glance—the utensils are of European origin—but they often put the hapless foreigner at a social disadvantage. That inversion of power is characteristic of hospitality around the world because offering food gives the host, at least for a brief moment, a claim to moral advantage.

The moral advantage in turn reflects larger social attitudes, and the attitude to foreigners in this regard is generally an extension of general class attitudes. The ability to handle spicy food is seen by some Thais as a test of “Thai-ness” in its most intimate and sociable form, even among those whose high class status might lead one to expect that they would avoid it. Western foreigners who can handle the intense spice are praised, not for their daring or toughness, but, quite explicitly, for their skill. At stake here is the capacity to adapt to the non-touristic, everyday dimensions of lived Thai culture. But if spiciness is locally viewed as quintessentially Thai, why is blandness associated with high status? The answer is not simple, and it has to do with the ambivalence many Thais express about what really makes them Thai.

Non-aristocratic Thais who prefer highly spiced food identify with regional and rural traditions or members of the working class. As in many other societies, spice—once regarded as the prerogative of the aristocratic and the wealthy—has become a way of making a little food go a long way; moreover, the physical demands it makes on the body are also associated with forms of masculinity—ostentatious physical prowess and rough manners—that are often considered characteristically working class. In Thailand, as we have seen,

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these characteristics also clash with Buddhist injunctions against over-exciting the senses. What are poor people to do? They can hardly afford the luxury of genteel self-denial that is the mark of self-conscious social climbing. Thai gastronomy mirrors larger, real-world dilemmas, and that also incorporates a very un-Buddhist enjoyment of meat and fish. Real vegetarian restaurants are relatively rare, and the basic source of salt, corresponding to the East Asian soy sauce, is *naam plaa* (fish sauce). Many dishes from northeastern Thailand are rich with dried shrimp; and snacks such as roasted crickets and even sweets containing pork are everyday pleasures. For the poor, the choice of mild and vegetarian food can be a financial strain.

Spicy food, moreover, encourages the consumption of alcohol which is also disapproved by devout Buddhists. Nuts laced with chili are a favorite snack to accompany alcoholic drinks. The real world is spicy, too; the high drama of Thai films about sex, ghosts, and murder and the Thai newspapers’ habits of spreading pictures of bloody crashes and killings over their front pages speak to an excitation of the senses that belongs to that imperfect reality.

Real-life temptations, however, can also be turned to meritorious ends. Ill-gotten wages can support poverty-stricken parents; food can be given as alms to monks or shared with guests and the poor. Generosity and compassion are also virtues, and conviviality is highly prized. Spicy food laden with fish or meat is not only a form of self-indulgence; it is also a way of easing the pains of everyday working life with social pleasures. In Thailand, using restraint when being offered spicy food rather than self-perfecting rejection is the appropriate response. Outright refusal can seem clumsy and perhaps hurtful, whereas at least a symbolic display of restraint is both socially gracious and ethically modest. It is for this reason that when Thais settle down to a shared meal, they generally first eat a spoonful of plain, unadorned steamed rice before tucking into the tastier dishes. Politely starting with rice signals consideration for one’s fellow diners. Thais are certainly also sensitive to, and enjoy the much subtler distinctions among different qualities of rice; here again, restraint rather than ascetic renunciation, is the watchword. They also usually avoid pulling the shared dishes of food toward themselves, preferring to lean across the table, even briefly in front of other diners, to whom they show respect and generosity by placing food on their plates before ensuring their own access to the goodies.

There is no Thai equivalent of *bon appétit*. The key term of appreciation for good food is *aroi*, usually translated as “delicious,” and Thai hosts and servers often ask, “Is it aroi?” Answering with detailed criticism would be about as appropriate as responding to an American waitperson’s self-introduction by stating one’s own name and shaking hands. Thais seem to be genuinely concerned that their guests enjoy the food and make no bones about emphasizing the pleasures of taste in their inquiries, but they do not expect analytic responses, much less negative ones.

Unlike hosts in other parts of the world, however—Southern Europe, for example—Thais do not commonly insist that their guests actually consume huge amounts of food. Generous provision rather than forced consumption is the privilege of the genial host; a guest, on the other hand, who eats too greedily looks rude rather than appreciative. The guest’s smiling acknowledgment that the food is indeed delicious is sufficient recognition of the host’s moral authority. And while Thai males, especially wealthy businessmen and politicians, often emphasize their financial power through lavish displays, the appearance of satisfied appetites is more important than its literal achievement. Even here,

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however, matters are not entirely unambiguous: some Thais, especially women, seem to feel that over-ordering and then leaving a great deal of food uneaten is wrong, both for its implications of greed and because it entails a waste of animal life, and may remark that an especially conspicuous waste is shameful.

Ambiguity, to be sure, leaves a lot of space for play. People everywhere like to show, sometimes by inverting or stretching the conventions, that they know and control these rules but are not dominated by them. Anthropologists today are less inclined to write about structures and rules, and they will usually pay closer attention than they have in the past to those who appear to challenge established conventions. In this shift, they have also had to pay much closer attention to the role of ambiguity—the humorous, the unsaid, and inuendo. Because the gastronomy and etiquette of Thailand are both elaborate, they inevitably permit and even encourage considerable ambiguity and thus lend themselves to creative manipulation, including the frequent and entirely self-aware adaptation of Thai ingredients to imported materials such as Italian pasta. This adaptability has a long history; the tomato, for example, is known as the *makheua tet* (foreign eggplant). Thai gastronomy prefers creativity to a stifling commitment to literal authenticity.

Food can thus provide a context for play, as can conversation and even something as apparently routine as table manners. There is an interesting parallel here with language: Thais engage in a great deal of verbal play, often in the form of rich punning. The resulting capacity to bring ambiguity to the fore is especially useful in a society where strongly hierarchical values vie with an equally powerful sense of democratic entitlement and where social rank is consequently both important and a source of deep unease. Thus, when Thais observe the rules of strict etiquette at the table, it is not always entirely clear that this signifies submission or complaisance. Just as an exceptionally high *wai*—the gesture of two palms pressed together in respectful greeting—can be either totally self-abasing—especially before royalty—or entirely ironic, so all conventions of table etiquette must be read in context. This is why farang are well advised to follow those conventions in as literal-minded a way as they can manage. If they fail to do so, they are unlikely to be able to plead anything more exonerating than sheer ignorance because, unless they are fluent speakers of Thai, they can hardly claim to have been merely playing. Moreover, the Western origins of the utensils used do not mean that Western rules apply—that would be a real confusion of form and content. The polite observance of *siwilai* (civilized) and *riap roi* (neat) behavior constitutes a more effective way of conveying appreciation in Thailand than the heavy eating that is encouraged by one's hosts in some Southern European countries. In effect, it says, “Yes, I understand that these are Western utensils, but I also understand that Thais have created their own rules for their use, and I intend to respect those rules.”

In polite society, an exception to the use of spoon and fork may occur in the many Bangkok restaurants specializing in northeastern (Isaan) food. These offer middle class urbanites the opportunity to enjoy relatively exotic food or, in some cases, to celebrate their own rural, northeastern origins. Isaan people still often eat with the right hand, using the characteristic sticky rice to pick up sometimes quite slippery or soup-drenched morsels of meat, fish, and vegetables. Some Bangkok residents attempt to demonstrate their knowledge of Isaan culture—commonly treated with condescension as a primitive form of Thainess—by ostentatiously eating in the same way. And when foreigners seem reluctant to engage in this direct bodily contact with their food, the reaction is often an amused observation that the farang clearly have some way to go before embracing the true essence of what it means to be Thai.

Here, in a classic instance of reverse snobbery, ostentatiously returning to the simplicity and earthiness of the nation's traditional culture becomes a demonstration of something superior to the “civilization” brought by the West. This symbolic inversion of global power relations also fits the current idioms of political correctness in Thailand, where terms like “local knowledge” and “participation” have been popularized by the media and the educational establishment. Indeed, one hears these words frequently used by well-meaning middle class people, at least some of whom would probably be horrified at what full political participation for working class people might entail or at the violent shift in perspective that a genuinely local knowledge of the political institutions of the country might bring in its train.

Thai meals, then, are a tug of war between convention and individuality and an arena for experimenting with social attitudes through both the indulgence and the discipline of the body. Even the political life of the country displays contradictions and tensions that reflect similarly contradictory social attitudes. These sometimes shatter the official image of Thailand as “the land of smiles.” In the first half of 2010, for example, clashes between pro-military and pro-establishment “yellow shirts” and the populist, pro-Thaksin “red shirts” peaked in the streets of Bangkok, provoking a sharp military crackdown. Such confrontations have their origins in the deep inequalities of Thai society, inequalities that are often disguised both by traditions of grassroots democracy and by the affable assurance that all is peaceful, harmonious, and, above all, non-confrontational.

Tensions between hierarchy and informality thus appear everywhere, from major political events to everyday habits and practices. For those who are trying to understand these tensions, there are surely far worse places to start than with the etiquette and culinary esthetics of Thai meals. Given the beguiling, varied flavors of Thai food, few points of entry could be more enjoyable or more revealing of the complexity of the country's cultural values. ■

### NOTES

1. Or *phad thai*, which is more consistent with the transliteration used in this article.
2. See, for example, “Thailand—Thai Language, Culture, Customs and Etiquette,” *Kwintessential*, accessed July 14, 2011 and <http://bit.ly/7RytMp>, and “How to Have Good Table Manners in Thailand. “Thai Etiquette Explained,” *Tasty Thailand*, June 14, 2011, accessed November 3, 2011, <http://bit.ly/tg65EW>; there are several such sites.
3. Michael Herzfeld, “The Absent Presence: Discourses of Crypto-Colonialism,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101 (2002): 899–926; Thongchai Winichakul, “The Quest for ‘Siwilai’: A Geographical Discourse of Civilizational Thinking in the Late-Nineteenth-Century and Early-Twentieth-Century Siam,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 59 (2000): 528–549.
4. For a particularly useful account of the origins of Thai notions of respectability, see Maurizio Peleggi, *Lords of Things: The Fashioning of the Siamese Monarchy's Modern Image* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002).
5. Peter Jackson, “The Thai Regime of Images,” *Sojourn: Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 19, no. 2 (2004): 1–39.
6. I have discussed some of the ideas presented here in detail in “Serving Ambiguity: Class and Classification in Thai Food at Home and Abroad,” in Kwang Ok Kim and Ok Pyo Moon, eds., *Tasteful Trends: Identity, Power and Mobility of East Asian Food* (Oxford: Berghahn, forthcoming).
7. The term was first popularized by the Indian sociologist M.N. Srinivas, *Religion and Society Amongst the Coorgs of South India* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952).

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