

Peter J. Donaldson*

Rugs, Restaurants, and a Revolution

I AM NOT SURE WHEN IT STARTED. I remember the envy I felt when my Fordham College classmates who had spent their junior years aboard returned to school and seemed so cosmopolitan. I wanted their experience and polish. Or maybe the motivating force was Fordham's Jesuit faculty, the best of whom seemed to have been educated at Europe's great universities. Maybe it came even earlier at home from pictures and stories about an absent father who had served in the China-Burma-India Theater during World War II. Whatever the motivating sources, I wanted to see the world. So in 1971, after college and graduate school, my wife Nancy and I moved to Bangkok so I could take up a fellowship at Mahidol University's Institute for Population and Social Research.

Everything I'd read and heard promised that Bangkok would be new and magical. A Thai classmate added a note of realism, but still made the city sound like an enchanting place to live. One of my graduate school professors had spent a year at a Bangkok university and enjoyed it. More important, a graduate school mentor had accepted a position at the same university as I had so I would not be alone.

I am now weeks from retirement. As befits the circumstances, I have been looking back on the forty-plus years since I first arrived in Thailand. In a career marked by ample professional recognition, I was inordinately pleased several years ago by a line in an obscure United Nations newsletter that described me as "well known in Asia." Bingo! I had accomplished what I sought when I was a twenty something undergraduate. Well known in Asia. In some circles to be sure, but still.

The years spent earning the elevated status of well known in Asia had far-reaching personal and professional consequences. Two of my three children were born overseas, and all three lived in Bangkok at various times. They have language skills and a cultural savoir-faire that I lacked when I moved overseas. Because they spent parts of their childhoods abroad, their international sense is more natural and less self-conscious than my own. Even after years in Thailand, it was only occasionally when circumstances—finding my way down a narrow street in Chinatown or en route to a small restaurant in a busy market—would make me feel like a well-informed, bicultural expert, not the fumbling, unsocialized visitor of most days.

A less important yield of my international career is a house decorated with what one colleague calls ethno-plunder—carpets from Pakistan, chests from South Korea, furniture from Thailand, and fabrics from around the world. I have favorite restaurants in Bangkok, of course, but also in New Delhi (Bukhara), Addis Ababa (Castelli), Ouagadougou (l'Eau Vive) and several other cities. More consequential, I have friends and colleagues in all the countries where I have favorite restaurants. Often the appeal of the restaurant is the memory of happy meals with friends (M.E. at Bukhara; Annabel at Castelli; Placide at l'Eau Vive). But more than rugs and restaurants, I participated in a revolution.

* Peter J. Donaldson is president of Population Council.

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In the late 1960s, Thailand was among the Asian countries that identified rapid population growth as a significant drag on economic development. In those days, the Thai population was increasing by about 3.0 percent per year, fast enough to double the population in less than 30 years. Thai officials declared slowing population growth to be official government policy; a national family planning program was established to increase contraceptive use, lower fertility, and thereby slow growth.

When I arrived in 1971, the average Thai woman had almost six children during her reproductive lifetime; today fertility in Thailand averages below two children per woman. The reproductive revolution that took place in Thailand occurred throughout Asia. Women everywhere in Asia, even in renegade Myanmar and North Korea, are having fewer children now than ever before. I watched this demographic transition from a front row seat.

The remarkable changes in human reproduction were brought about by a decline in desired family size and an increase in access to effective methods of birth control. The first was linked to improved child survival, the emancipation of women, and parents' realization that success in the emerging economy called for fewer, better-educated children. The second came from well-organized family planning programs.

I was a foot soldier in this reproductive revolution. When I was first in Thailand, I was part of a team studying the effect of community volunteers who served as recruiters for the national family planning program. Later I worked at the Ministry of Public Health in the research and evaluation unit of Thailand's national family planning program. After four years, I moved to Seoul and the Korean Institute of Family Planning, where I conducted research on fertility patterns. After Korea, I worked at US institutions that focused on ways to increase the coverage, quality, and cost effectiveness of family planning programs. I was one of thousands working in the global movement to increase reproductive health and rights and help slow population growth. One project led to another and one position led to the next. The result was an international career involving collaboration with specialists throughout the developing world.

When I arrived in Bangkok, I was not a movement person. I had gone to Thailand because living there promised to be an exciting experience that would give me the polish and sophistication I associated with my European trained classmates and professors. I was motivated not by changing the world but by changing myself. Over time, I used my technical skills to spread family planning, which improved the health of women and their children, promoted their rights, and slowed population growth, thereby contributing to economic development.

Thailand and other Asian countries did develop, helped by lower rates of population growth. Fewer births meant fewer child dependents relative to the size of the labor force, which freed up resources that could be directed to capital investment and to improvements in education and health.

Forty years ago in Thailand, only 20 percent of young people attended secondary school; today almost all are in school. Life expectancy increased from 60 to 75 years. Per capita income increased six times in constant dollars, going from under \$600 to almost \$3,500. Not all Thais shared in these

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changes, but the country and its people have been transformed for the better. It was a thrill to watch and be a small part of this revolution.

Despite its many achievements, Thailand failed to build a political process to match its economic success and social changes. Six weeks after we first arrived, then Prime Minister Thanom Kittikachorn declared martial law. In those distant days, no one anticipated that Thai society and its economy would be transformed while politics would remain in a rut of self-interested factions and damaging conflicts. The most recent coup occurred last May. The country is now ruled by a military dictatorship that holds power by intimidation, locking up even smalltime critics, censoring the media, and taking advantage of people's anxiety about an eruption of internecine violence. All this saddens those who care about Thailand.

I was remarkably lucky to have enjoyed a career that fulfilled my hopes and helped leave the world a better place. The good fortune my career represents required just that—good fortune. My family avoided all but routine problems. I was helped by a wife and three children who respected my work and liked international travel and living. Nurturing colleagues and supportive institutions employed me, put up with my shenanigans, and rewarded my work. I am retiring on my own terms, which is another indicator of my good luck. So too is the satisfaction of being well known in Asia.