

Seeing Yellow

What is it with All Those Shirts?

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Step out of your house on a Bangkok Monday and you're immediately engulfed in a sea of yellow polo shirts. It's as mystifying as it is overwhelming. Why, in a country rich with exotic and precious textiles, has the simple yellow t-shirt become the de-facto national outfit?

If you're a Westerner who's done a bit of traveling in the East, you're sure to notice that many countries have traditional clothing that sets them apart from other nations. In Japan, the kimono is a full-length traditional garment worn by men, women and children. When I visited Pakistan last year, I saw many men wearing the salwar-kameez, an ensemble that consists of loose fitting trousers and an extra-long shirt, while some women wore a burqa, a long outer garment that covers everything but the woman's eyes. Even some European countries have their well-known traditional outfits, like the kilt in Scotland for example.

So what is it with the Thais and their yellow shirts?

Well, to call it a fashion phenomenon would be to trivialize it. Unless you've been living under a rock (or outside of Thailand), you have to know that Thais love King Bhumibol Adulyadej. The longest reigning monarch in the world, he is the only King most have ever known and is seen as a father figure to the Thai people. His subjects honor him in a variety of ways, but the simplest one is by wearing a yellow shirt.

For last year's Diamond Jubilee celebrating the 60th Anniversary of the King's ascension to the throne, special yellow polo shirts and t-shirts with the royal



emblem on the front were produced, and like images of the King around town, one doesn't have to go far to spot someone wearing this item. Many of the shirts even contain messages for the wearer to pledge their allegiance to the King ("I Love the King" and "Long

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Live the King" being the most popular). And when an official yellow polo shirt is not available, a simple plain yellow one will do, because if you're wearing yellow, the message is still the same: you love the King.

If one really wants to see a throng of yel-

low-shirted Thais in full force, Mondays are the best time to do it. Since King Bhumibol was born on Monday, December 5th, all Mondays in Thailand have been deemed the prime day to show your love and loyalty for the King. If you want to join in, the shirts are not hard to find. It seems that every store, market, neighborhood bazaar, gas station, newspaper stand, coffee shop and street cart has them for sale, for about 200 Baht, and by the sheer amount of yellow shirts I see on a daily basis (not just on Mondays), I'm starting to think that the King has outsold the Rolling Stones and their never-ending Bigger Bang Tour in shirt transactions alone.

Shirts aren't the only way to get one's feelings for the King across. Buttons can



also be worn, the royal emblem can be used as wallpaper for your cell phone, and special credit cards can be ordered from local banks emblazoned with messages of support for the King. Queen Sirikit even has her own blue shirt with her emblem on it. I often see people wearing these around town, but not as much as the yellow shirt.

All of this adoration can seem confusing to foreigners, especially Americans like me

who can get easily disillusioned with political rhetoric. But after living with it for a year now, I feel that it is a good thing. Thailand is in political turmoil these days and deep division is stressing the country's social fabric. Against this backdrop, the King is an all-powerful force of stability who exists on a spiritual realm far above the ugly world of politics. A Democratic Party supporter can pass a supporter of the outlawed Thai Rak Thai party on the street and if they're both wearing a yellow shirt, they have a connection that transcends their disagreements. If a leader can inspire that kind of unity, then more power to him.

Long Live the King!

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