An interview at the Foreign Correspondents Club of Thailand

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Despite the competitive nature of journalism, foreign correspondents have found they have a need to come together around their common interests. Moreover correspondents reporting for a home audience often require a space where they can establish a common ground with officials and news sources, where news events are packaged specifically for the benefit of transmission overseas. Generally journalists also find that a place where they can be involved in an informal sharing of information, contacts and discussion of recent events is often essential in a country where they are unfamiliar with the language. For these reasons foreign correspondent clubs have become important sites for the correspondent to affirm and develop their professional identities.

In Asia the first formal foreign correspondent clubs were established in Tokyo in 1945 and soon after in Hong Kong. The history of the clubs can be traced to the fact to ‘cantonments’ for journalists that were established in hotels or boarding houses during military operations a practice that continued in World War II in Asia particularly. Very little has been written about the formation of the clubs in Asia although the Foreign Correspondents’ Club of Japan have published ‘20 Years of History’ on the occasion of its founding anniversary in 1965 (FCCJ 1965). The publication draws together former presidents and current members who produce anecdotal stories about the FCCJ’s past.

The following interview was conducted with Denis Grant about the growth of the Foreign Correspondents’ Club of Thailand (FCCT) which has become one of the biggest in Asia, with an aim to initiate research on this important area of international journalism. The FCCT was initially established in the late 1950s. At this time it was an informal meeting of correspondents when there was cause for it. One former member described the process as ad hoc:
“Sessions were called for at lunchtime on Saturdays usually when a correspondent arrived back in town with a thirst. He would place a few phone calls early in the day to see if it was possible to gather a quorum to exchange notes on what was happening in town or on what he had collected on his travels up-country” (Heinecke 1995 p18). The club wasn’t formalised until 1975. At that time Denis Grant became the club’s president. Grant remains an active member of the club and is still the AP bureau chief in Bangkok a career spanning 15 years of reporting from Thailand.

John Tebbutt (JT): When did you come to Bangkok?

Denis Gray (DG): I came to Bangkok in 1975. I covered the Vietnam War and Cambodia War. 1975 was a watershed year - not only for Bangkok but for the region because in the past the Vietnam War, the Indo-China War, was the big story but of course that was reported from inside Indo-China. There was huge press corps based in Vietnam, a smaller one based in Cambodia with Neil Davis, myself and others and a smaller one based in Laos. Bangkok was sort of a backwater; just a few of the major wire services and one or two other guys had bureaus here, but it was pretty small. If there was a rear base for Indo-China it was probably Hong Kong.

Although in Bangkok there was a little bit happening, Hong Kong seemed more of a focus or a supply base because at that time you could buy all sorts of thing in Hong Kong that you couldn’t buy in Bangkok; for other reasons too, particularly airline connections; and Hong Kong already had an established press corps there. So that Club [the Hong Kong Foreign Correspondents’ Club] and that city had much more of a link to Indo-China just like in Eastern Europe under communism, Vienna was a fall back position for journalists covering that region.

Now in 1975 that changed dramatically. After ’75, when all of us got kicked out of Indo-China, Bangkok, the club expanded from a very small handful of people -- even though virtually every foreign correspondent was a member. Now Bangkok is one of the two or three very big foreign correspondent centres of Asia, along with Tokyo, Hong Kong and eventually Beijing.

JT: So why did Bangkok become so important?

DG: The three Indo-Chinese countries were off limits after ’75, to foreign correspondents and Bangkok was also starting to develop a bit and so people looked around and said well where’s the most convenient place to cover Indo-China. And Thailand had become quite important too. People thought that it would be the next
domino; at the same time there was all sorts of economic expansion
taking place. So everybody who didn’t have bureaus, set up here.

Of course Associated Press [AP] and Reuters were here
already but all the bureaus reinforced their operations and the
Japanese started moving in; there were very few Japanese at first,
but I think they eventually became the single biggest press corps
in terms of nationality. And then there were people like Neil Davis
[Reuters/Visnews stringer/cameraman]. Other media organisations
started having stringers here too. So it was a major development
for the Club.

I was president for those years and I saw a huge expansion
of the club from sort of a drinking place where people get together
once in a while to a big clubhouse and a structure and so on, new
constitution and the whole bit. In fact a lot of the stuff that is still
being done there was instituted by myself and Neil Davis and the
earlier Presidents; the Wednesday night thing at the club and all
those kind of things were instituted in that era.

**JT:** So what was behind the FCCT’s development? Was it just
the energy of the new people or was there a sense that it is
important to expand the club because of the way things are
developing here?

**DG:** Part of it was just more and more people coming in. I
remember when I took over as president. I walked in and asked,
“Well, where’s the treasurer’s books?” And a guy opened this
drawer and he pulled out a wad of bills and things like that. Not
that I’m a great manager or anything, but I said: “Look we’ve got
to get organised guys”. So I drew in some good people for the
board and we hired a manager and we started looking around for
a new clubhouse. We just had to do it otherwise it would have
been a total disaster. We had permanent residence at the Oriental
Hotel until they booted us out because they were destroying that
wing. We had to find a new place, so then in turn we had more
members and had to get more money and get better organisation
and so it just mushroomed. In terms of foreign correspondents
the actual membership started growing naturally. But then when
we needed to look around for a clubhouse, we needed a big drive
to try and draw others in, - diplomats, business people - to be
able to pay for the clubhouse so we could have a permanent
residence.

**JT:** When you were looking for new members how would you
target people?

**DG:** Again it was fairly natural. When we started getting more
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programs and becoming much more professional we attracted people naturally. Because a lot of us had come from Indo-China and that was the big story around here the FCCT became virtually the only place in town where there were serious professional programs about Indo-China. We had movies, all the documentaries that were being made, diplomats would give briefings, the whole bit and we really became a very professional club. Because a whole group of us had come out of Indo-China and our job was to watch Indo-China, that immediately became a focus, and a lot of diplomats and some businessmen and academics were naturally drawn to the club because of the programs.

And then of course we were out to recruit people as well. While we would have always liked to have more Thais, we tended to target expatriates and long-time residents here. The correspondents joined naturally. We didn’t even have to target them, but the diplomats and foreign business people were approached and eventually, as you can see, we have quite a few Thais now. Serious working clubs with a place of their own are largely subsidised by non-journalists. I don’t think there is any foreign correspondents’ club in the world that has its own functioning premise that can exist from money from journalists alone. It has to go outside. So our ratio here is with spouses, well I’m not sure, maybe 200 journalists and spouses and close to 800 non-journalists. In Hong Kong the ratio may be even higher, and Tokyo also.

JT: Is there a high turnover of foreign correspondents?

DG: I think in general there is a fairly high turnover. For example Reuters and AFP rotate their bureau chiefs every two years. I’d say four years would usually be the maximum stint. I’ve been here for a long time because AP generally has a policy that if you’re happy and you’re doing a good job they’ll leave you. In this region there has been a lot of AP first-timers who have stayed a long time. Of course there are a few here, stringers and the like, who just want to be in Thailand or in the region. People like Neil Corbett, who strings for AAP and The Australian; he’s married to a Thai. Neal Kelly has been here since 1975. John MacBeth was here for ever and ever with the Bangkok Post and the Far Eastern Economic Review now he’s in Jakarta. In general correspondents, including Australians with the ABC, tend to rotate every few years.

JT: Does the club play an induction role for new correspondents?

DG: Some yes, some no. It depends. In the old days more so maybe because the expatriate community was smaller, Bangkok had less
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traffic - very important you know - so it tended to be a closer knit community. Foreign correspondents saw each other more often; now it’s not quite as regular. But for some it does. Every week I get passing journalists as well as new guys, who come in and say “Hey, is there a foreign correspondents club here?” They go over there and they meet other foreign correspondents and they get information, so it still serves that purpose but probably less so now than it did earlier.

JT: Is it important that they have a way of acclimatising and setting themselves up?

DG: Yeah but it depends again. For example we have a new guy here, our News Editor came from Johannesburg recently. He doesn’t really need the FCCT in that all his press cards, etc., were done by our office; his home and all that are all taken care of by us. But certainly it’s going to be valuable for him. Last night, for example, he was with two or three people who from our office who went over there to listen to the forum on Pol Pot.

JT: It’s the professional forums then that provides the nucleus for the club.

DG: Right now I would say the most important function the FCCT serves is to provide programs, that’s number one.

    Number two, we are seen by the Thai government as an important force here. If they want to talk to foreign correspondents or the community in general they go straight to the Club; they may want to make major announcement, maybe they are unhappy with our reporting and so on. We, in turn, are a fairly effective lobbying force for the foreign correspondent community. If they want to put some screws on us about visas, or if there’s some problem or other then we act as a group. We carry weight and that’s important. It’s something we built up after ‘75. We invited every Prime Minister to speak to the FCCT and now it’s almost a tradition for the Thai government. The second or maybe third speech that a new Prime Minister gives is at the FCCT. Usually the first one will be at a Thai venue but soon after they come in they speak at the Club. So we’re definitely well known by the Foreign Ministry, by the Prime Minister’s office, and that’s very important.

    But the least important for the club at the moment is the social role, and that is probably different for the club in the 1950s, when it began, as that was probably the main function of the club. Again I think mainly because of the city’s traffic and because there are so many competitive social venues now, people don’t use the
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club very often now as a gathering place. When we were at the *Dusit Thani* [a well known five-star hotel in Bangkok] there was a lot more socialising. In Hong Kong, for example, you go to the Club every night at 6 o’clock. If I’m in Hong Kong I drop in there and I know that I’ll meet nine or ten friends and foreign correspondents who will be there.

**JT:** There a larger expatriate community there (Hong Kong) isn’t there?

**DG:** Yes but probably a smaller foreign correspondent community. I think it’s factor of Hong Kong being a different kind of town. Going out to hotels is very expensive. It’s easier to move around -- again traffic. For lots of reasons it tends to be traditionally more of a social place. We’re traditionally seen in the region by other foreign correspondents as a very professionally oriented club. We do far more professional programs here than either Hong Kong or Tokyo by a long shot. Occasionally they invite someone to address a luncheon at the Foreign Correspondent’s Club in Hong Kong but it’s sporadic. Every week we’ve got something; every Wednesday there’s a panel discussion, a movie, a speech, so we’re seen as the professional club. Hong Kong is the social club. Not just in terms of going out and drinking. The Hong Kong club serves a very valuable function. If you do go there you meet your buddies and you talk about business or exchange news. We don’t have that informal interchange like we used to any more; meeting fellow correspondents, diplomats and businessmen at the club doesn’t happen quite as often. If there’s no function there’ll be three people there.

**JT:** As President in the mid-seventies what were some of the activities you or the committee would do?

**DG:** Well we would have a board meeting every week. Then of course organisation of programs was very important. We had a lot of programs on the Khmer Rouge because access to Cambodia was impossible and of course we were reporting stories on issues like refugees. So we had a lot of programs on what was happening inside Cambodia. As well as, of course, Thailand. Prime ministers would come and speak to us and we had cultural events. One of the biggest programs of all time was with a former prime minister, who has since died, who was a very famous renaissance man. He was a classical Thai dancer, and he provided his whole dance company to come to this huge hotel to dance and he would stop them and explain the movements of the Thai dance to us. And, of course, we had social programs such as river cruises and an annual
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ball, things like that.

JT: Was there any welfare aspects for foreign correspondents in that period?

DG: The professional stuff has always been there; the standing up for the rights of foreign correspondents and so on. But welfare as such, well of course, we would help people from time to time we’d waive their dues and stuff like that. Actually helping people set up formally? No. Informally yes, all the time; people call me and other people around.

JT: Something like a club can become a very personal thing for some people; they feel they have a personal investment in its development and in the way that it’s organised. It becomes a focus for their passions. Have you noticed any of that?

DG: Well I did, because I was president so I was very deeply involved. I spent almost as much time as the FCCT president as I did at my job; that’s why I had to pull back. I know one correspondent who has dropped out of the Club in protest and has never rejoined, although he takes plenty of advantages of the club when we have any activities. When the Burmese invited the Foreign Correspondents’ Club for a special tour of Burma he was there and a lot of us were pissed off because he is very anti-club. But I do in some ways respect his point of view because he feels that at some point the club stopped being a real club for journalists and became too much of a general club. His idea of a foreign correspondents’ club is a bunch of guys and girls, you know genuine foreign correspondents, getting together in a pub every Wednesday and talking business. The premises are not that important. He would’ve liked a smaller, restricted club and if you want to invite outside speakers then that’s fine but basically keep it very tight, hard core with sort of a pub kind of atmosphere and don’t have a fancy clubhouse with audio visual and this and that.

I respect that kind of attitude but, for different reasons, it was impossible to go that route. I was one of the decisions makers to say that we couldn’t have that kind of atmosphere, as much as I appreciate it. Basically it was a matter of economics. If you want your own premise you can’t have five guys because none of us had a million bucks to throw in for premises. So you need to attract outsiders, you need to attract a wider community if you want to have a permanent place. If you want to invite diplomats you can’t invite them down to a Patphong Road pub. But I sort of respect his point of view, there’s always been that strand in this community.
JT: I guess the formation of the club is relatively recent history so those options are open if someone wants to make it an issue.

DG: Yeah, it’s difficult now because we’ve invested so much money in this Club. You can’t just sort of shut it down and give everyone a refund. But that’s been the history of all these clubs: Hong Kong and Tokyo; I don’t know about Sydney, but Washington DC, New York. All the clubs I know have had to go a bit big because they have to have the membership base. The argument is that a few guys meeting at a pub is not going to make you a very big force with the Thai government.

JT: So there is a certain level of status, that’s important and here the professional aspect of the club comes into it.

DG: Right. I mean, I’m not big on status, but it helps if the guys in the Thai government know where they can locate you and you have administrative section there, they know who to call, they know where to send a fax and if you have a nice clubhouse that you can invite people to. If you didn’t have that you would lose that standing which we have with the Thai government so that’s another argument against that other kind of trend. I still see a lot of merit in the other way because our club, well it’s lost a lot of that cohesion among the foreign correspondents. I guess part of that is this town. If the same group of people were in Vientianne, hell, we would be together every night, there would be no problems with that, but in this town it is very difficult.

JT: So there is a sense at that earlier time for the club that, as you said, Bangkok was thought to be the next domino. It was like it was at the edge of something. Was that why sharing information and being up-to-date was so important?

DG: Oh absolutely, because it had that feel. It was like Nairobi. I spent two years in Africa covering Rwanda and Somalia and I went to Nairobi. I had the feeling that Nairobi was like Bangkok was in the mid-seventies – sort of a rear base. All the foreign correspondents were very close, sharing information every night because they were all covering Rwanda and Somalia. Bangkok had that same kind of feel and it doesn’t have that quite now because, you know, it’s much more dispersed. We have the bureaus back in Indo-China now; it’s opened up again.

JT: And, economically, Thailand began establishing itself in the region at that time.
DG: Yeah that’s right. In fact there would be two sort of waves that since ‘75; the patterns are very clear. One is post-’75, with the huge jump in the number of foreign correspondents based here as well as those coming in for short assignments. Then since the mid-eighties, in the last ten years, there has been a major influx of guys who cover business. For example, we have five guys next door for Dow-Jones; Bloombergs have come in; the economic magazines have come in, Far Eastern Economic Review has increased its staffing because of the economic news; Reuters has increased its staff. You can see it: business, business, business. Guys are just covering the stockmarket here. Before, there was no stockmarket.

If it’s possible to do it statistically the number of economic stories that by foreign correspondents being sent out of Bangkok in 1978, I’d venture to say there would be less than 6 a day, maybe some days zero. Today AP-Dow Jones, Reuters and Bloombergs combined, probably send several hundred stories a day just out of Bangkok - never mind the Japanese, never mind the Australians.1 It’s just a total different environment here. So those were the major trends in terms of foreign correspondents.

It is obvious why this would happen in Bangkok, the economy has grown so much. It’s unbelievable what has happened in this country over the last 20 years. People are making a lot of money here so other people want to know all about it. ■

Notes:

1 This interview was conducted prior to the currency crash in Thailand and other Southeast Asian countries in 1998.

References:

Grant, Denis (1996) personal communication.