

Bizarre Thailand

Jim Algie's new book takes readers off the well-rutted roads of Thailand's tourist hotspots into the darkest and sexiest hinterlands. Here, for your reading pleasure, we present Jim's fascinating story about the original Siamese twins, Chang and Eng

FOR the past 17 years American expat and journalist Jim Algie has been kicking down the door to mysterious Thailand, venturing to areas that foreigners rarely venture, and shedding light on aspects of Thai culture that foreigners often find difficult to understand. You'll find plenty of evidence of this in *Bizarre Thailand*, a collection of some of Jim's best stories which have been revised and updated for today's readers. Covering everything from fish fights and fortune telling, to body collecting and ghost hunting, the book highlights Jim's knack of making the bizarre accessible, and provides a fascinating portal into everything that's weird and wonderful about this beguiling kingdom.

In the following excerpt, Jim and his former partner, Anchana, travel to Samut Songkhram to chart the history of Chang and Eng – billed the 'Eighth Wonder of the World' when they arrived in New York in 1829.



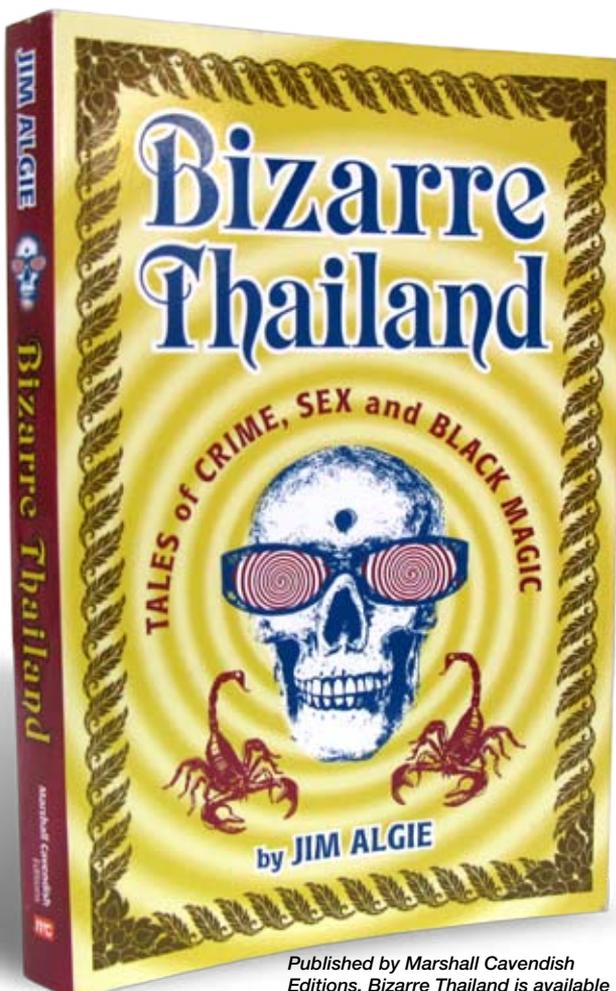
Double Lives: Searching for the Siamese Twins

BECAUSE of their brotherly bond made flesh, and their astonishing, perfectly synchronized acrobatics, the original Siamese twins Chang and Eng were billed as the 'Eighth Wonder of the World' when, at the age of 18, they arrived in New York in 1829. For the next decade, they performed for packed houses all over America and Europe in circuses and on freak-show bills with other human oddities, such as the 'Amazing Wolf Children of Australia.' Chang and Eng were twice managed by the infamous showman P.T. Barnum (There's a sucker born every minute.), Herman Melville scorned them as a monstrous metaphor for conflicting passions which reside within the same body in *Moby Dick*; and they put on private spectacles for Queen Victoria and Russia's Czar Nicholas II.

Although they shared no internal organs, and were often derided as a fraud, the brothers were actually joined below their breastbones by a ligament about eight-centimetres long and four wide. Otherwise, they both had normal limbs and were healthy. Through their performances - walking on their hands was a showstopper - the twins were already wealthy before they turned 30, and they tried to retire to a family and farming life in the American south, soon to be torn asunder by the Civil War.

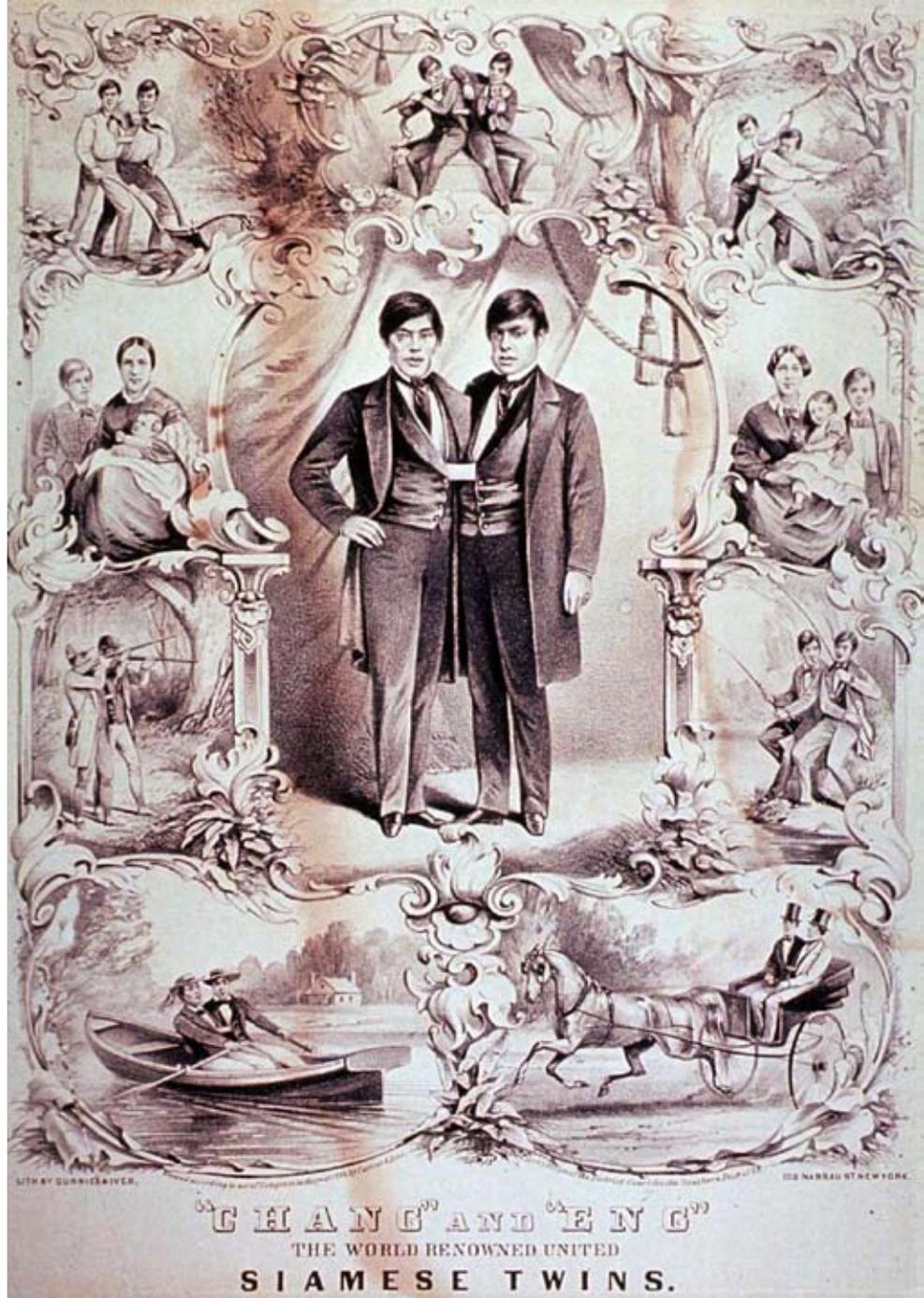
Over the last decade, their dramatic history has been the inspiration for a pair of much-lauded literary novels - *Chang and Eng* by Darin Strauss and *God's Fool* by Mark Slouka - along with a Singaporean musical helmed by Thai expatriate Ekachai Uekrongtham, who also directed and co-wrote the 2003 film *Beautiful Boxer* about the transsexual *muay thai* fighter Nong Toom.

As a result, the steady trickle of foreign and Thai visitors to the twins' hometown, in the eponymous capital of Samut Song-



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khram, has become more torrential. Still, Siam's most famous citizens are not mentioned in any of the major guidebooks to the kingdom and even the promotional literature of the Tourism Authority of Thailand for the province includes nothing about them.

Fascinated by their legacy, and these sins of omission, Anchana and I went in search of relics from Chang and Eng's past. Much of the twins' early life is still a matter of conjecture. Both the musical and the two novels are accurate, however, in documenting their birth in a floating riverside home, 70 kilometres southwest of Bangkok, during the rainy season of 1811. If the old bamboo-and-thatch floating homes have long since been replaced by a Caltex oil refinery and some fish sauce factories, traces of the maritime life Chang and Eng once led (their father was a fisherman) are still high water marks in the country's smallest province. Head down the roads beside the Mae Khlong River near their birthplace to see fishing trawlers on the water and boatyards along the banks. Workmen - pounding, polishing and patching - cling to ten metre-high scaffolds of bamboo hanging from the sides of trawlers. And the stench of rotten fish will make you squint.

A few kilometers north, past tiger-prawn farms, salt flats

and ornate temples, is Don Hoy Lot, where the river's mouth kisses the Gulf of Thailand. Here, the banks are crowded with enormous wooden restaurants up on stilts. And the seafood is as famous as the crab-eating macaques that scamper across the mudflats around dusk in search of their staple diet.

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But what sustained the twins in their most despairing hours? In the opinion of Kent Low, the musical's composer from Malaysia, it was the unconditional love of their mother. This motif has played well in Asia: the musical is the longest-running theatrical work in Singaporean history, was well received in Bangkok, and also became the first English-language musical ever staged in China towards the end of the millennium, where the composer told me, "We were treated like rock stars."

Today, every Thai person knows who the Siamese twins are. But most would not recognize the names Chang and Eng. In Thai, the twins are known as *'In Jan.'* It's an auspicious name, meaning 'Earth Moon.' But it does lead to the common misconception that they were one entity. Not so. The brothers had very different demeanours: Chang was gregarious and playful, whereas Eng tended to be more withdrawn and studious.

In Thai history books, children learn that the brothers were the favourite performers at King Rama II's court. Renowned as a patron of the arts and comedy troupes, the monarch often had them perform at the Grand Place in Bangkok. It has been speculated that his patronage saved them from the wrath of superstitious villagers. Like the twins, King Rama II was also born in Samut Songkhram, where a park featuring a museum of the monarch's personal effects, a garden with 100 different kinds of plants mentioned in Thai literature, and an open-air stage for annual performances of masked dramas on Thai Artist's Day, February 24, is named after him in the provincial capital.

As adolescents, Chang and Eng helped provide for their hard-luck family by raising ducks and selling their eggs. Bigger than chicken eggs, and with a darker yolk, duck eggs are a crucial ingredient in the piquant seafood salad called *yum*, in rice porridge, and, when mixed with coconut milk and sugar, in many Thai desserts. The brothers would also have known how to make one of the province's specialties - 'thousand-year-old eggs.' To preserve them, the duck eggs are boiled in salty water and left for a week to soak. They are then wrapped in rice husks and earth and packed away in a box for up to a year. Even today, local fishermen take a good supply of them on long journeys for protein.

Along one of the province's many canals, we stayed in an old-fashioned Siamese-style house with a verandah overlooking the water. The roofless shower outside in the garden was overhung by the cannonball-sized fruits of a pomelo tree. This was one of the 'home-stays' run by local families in the Amphawa District. Along with appetizing local meals, Moo Baan Song Thai also offered boat tours of a floating market, fruit orchards, Wat Amphawan Chetiyaram where King Rama II's ashes are interred, and a nocturnal outing to watch fireflies.

Even without booking a tour all we had to do was sit on the verandah and watch a portal into the past open before our eyes. In the early morning, with birds gossiping and fish splashing, monks in saffron robes paddled down the canal, just as they have done for centuries. The Buddhist faithful congregated on rickety piers to put plastic bags of food in the monks' alms bowls. A short time later, a wizened old woman in a conical hat paddled by to serve us steaming bowls of noodles right on the waterfront. Because the canals and weather worn buildings of wood have been so well preserved, the Amphawa District won a UNESCO prize for Cultural Conservation. Those enticements, and a 'floating market' in the early evening (yet to be watered down by mass-market tourism), have made the capital a favourite escape for weekend parolees from the concrete prison and workaday world of Bangkok.

After breakfast, I asked Anchana if she'd ever learned about the twins from Thai history books. She said she had, but did not know much about their later lives. I explained how they married sisters in North Carolina, adopted the surname of Bunker, and sired 21 children.



Anchana looked quizzical. So I told her about Darin Strauss' novel, *Chang and Eng*, and a middle chapter entitled 'The Mysteries of the Bridal Bed' that details how the twins lost their virginity. After their wedding in 1843, the conjoined brothers agreed that when one of their wives was in bed with them, the other brother would go into a trance and try to be mindless.

When he was sleeping with his wife, Sarah, for the first time, Eng thought, "I felt my wife had become a strange part of me, not integrated fully - but not fully only because this new part of me was experiencing its own pleasure. In my hand, her hand, trembling and weak, her fingers hooked around mine - and the only way to describe what I experienced is as a new-sprung void in my chest, sucking out a solitary life's worth of loneliness and wanting now to be filled with something new."

Anchana's next question was whether their children were normal. To find out, we visited the museum dedicated to them, four kilometers from the centre of Samut Songkhram city. Outside the museum stands a statue of the twins alongside a full-scale replica of their floating home. Even though it was early on a Friday afternoon, this sporadically open and frequently shut museum was closed, necessitating a flurry of increasingly angry phone calls from Anchana to local authorities in order to get them to open it for us. No wonder so many Thais fear the flare-gun tempers of the Southerners. But her persistence paid off; they came down and opened it for us.

This was the most pitiful museum I have ever seen. Even Hitler's final bunker must've been a cheerier place. Half of the old posters and photos were propped up against concrete pillars and the bare concrete floor was salted and peppered with bird

droppings. Whatever its shortcomings - and they are legion - the gallery of fading images provided some touching glimpse into the twins' personal and professional lives: their wives, their children, their one-time manager P.T. Barnum, and a few of their old circus posters. Most of their kids looked normal and healthy. The portrait of their two lovely daughters - Eng's Kate, who looked Asian, and Chang's Nannie, who looked American - was particularly heartrending when I read the caption detailing how both daughters died of tuberculosis at the age of 27. The true sideshow connoisseur will not want to miss the promotional photos for their final, disastrous tour in 1866 after the Civil War had devastated their farm in North Carolina and their slaves were freed. By that stage, the twins were already in their 50s, their star had dimmed, and Chang, once the gregarious wisecracker of the duo, had become a gloomy alcoholic. Eng, a lifelong teetotaler, was repulsed by his brother's habit, partly because the alcohol had a physical effect on him, too. Doubly defeated, their performances became erratic and they made little money.

The officials assured us that thanks to a recent visit by some of the twins' distant relatives, who had promised additional funding, the museum would be undergoing extensive renovations. I hope that's true. As it stands now, the local prejudice against the twins, and the superstitions surrounding them, have barely changed in almost two centuries.

For many visitors to the province, the highlight is an evening ride via long-tail boat to see the nesting grounds of fireflies. Motoring along the dark canals, a fan of light from the boat illuminated long-abandoned houses on stilts and bats swooping across the water. In places the foliage was so thick, it blocked

out the sky and moon. This trip into the swampy heart of Siamese darkness was suddenly lit up as the mangrove trees growing out of the muddy banks blinked on and off with thousands of fireflies making quicksilver flashes.

On the way back to our canal-side hideaway, I imagined the two young twins watching the fireflies beam their SOS of loneliness some two centuries before us, as I explained to Anchana the ending to Darin Strauss' novel. In spite of all the bad blood between them caused by Chang's alcoholism and Eng's embitterment, twinned with their mutual poverty, when Eng woke up in the middle of a cold January night to find his brother dead beside him, the final act of his life was one of reconciliation. It was witnessed only by his wife Sarah:

"He twists away from her- he draws his brother closer to him. Eng takes his twin into his arms: This is the image Sarah keeps of her husband for the rest of her life. Eng dies."

Although Strauss has used poetic license to recreate their final hours, it is true that the brothers died within hours of each other. An engraving on the side of twins' statue outside the museum in Samut Songkhram shows that even in death they could not escape the morbid voyeurism that turned their lives into a lifelong sideshow: Their corpses were sent to a hospital in Philadelphia for an autopsy and the doctors made a plaster cast from them. But the connecting ligament, which helped to bring them from a floating hovel to the court of King Rama II, from being the 'Eighth Wonder of the World' to family men and farmers, was never severed.

The original Siamese twins are buried in a double coffin in North Carolina.



Q&A: Jim in focus

What inspired you to write *Bizarre Thailand*?

All the stories started out as questions. What is that dollhouse for spirits? Who is the executioner? Why would someone build a resort in the northeast based on a 19th-century Nevada ghost town? Where is the town where tortoises are held sacred

and treated like pets? But all these questions are puzzle boxes that lead to more and more quandaries and conundrums in amazingly tolerant and difficult to comprehend Thailand.

Chronicling Thailand's dark and sexy side since 1992, you must have a lot of material at your disposal. How did you decide which stories to update and include in the book?

It was a matter of trying to make the six sections in the book - crime, misadventure travel, erotica, strange celebs, weird wildlife and the supernatural - be as coherent as possible. Some stories, like the Vegetarian Festival, have been done a lot now, but I had an original angle on it, while other tales, like going out with the 'Body Snatchers' for a night of collecting corpses, had enough of a personal slant, and gore galore, to make it worthy of inclusion.

Of all the stories in the book, do you have a particular favourite? If so, which one and why?

It might just be the one on the Forensic Museum and the cannibal whose preserved corpse is the centerpiece, because it was the first truly bizarre feature I did here in the late 90s and I followed it for about 10 years: interviewing forensics experts, screenwriters and even an old cop from Chinatown to draw a different bead on See Uey and what the

military battles between China and Japan were like, as well as the lay of the land in 'Green Lantern Lane,' Bangkok's tenderloin of the '50s.

Which story did you find most shocking to pursue and why?

The most disturbing one was based on the visit me and my ex paid to the fertility shrine in Bangkok. It's studded with phalluses made as offerings to a Fertility Goddess in the hope she will grant them a child or help them to rise above impotence. Those incidents are far too racy to recount here, but they're laid bare in the story called "Erecting a Tribute to a Fertility Goddess."

In "Nang Nak: the ghost of Thailand's past," you try your best to see a ghost but fail. Have you seen one yet?

Those incidents from the Fertility Shrine seemed to have a paranormal dimension to them. What attracts a lot of creators to the supernatural is that ghosts are such multi-purpose metaphors. There are Dickens' ghosts of Christmases past, present and future. There's a brilliant track by Mike Scott of the Waterboys called 'City of Ghosts' about all that's changed in his beloved Dublin. Then there's the ephemeral nature of erotic love in 'Nang Nak' and many Japanese horror films. Ghosts are the shape of our fears, desires and fantasies. So they're not really alive, but they can never die either.

Any plans for a *Bizarre Thailand 2* in the pipeline?

Sort of. For my next book, I'm putting together a collection of my prize-winning short stories and some new tales and novellas that incorporate many similar elements of crime, erotica, Asian horror, punk rock and the country's most infamous serial slayer, except that they're run through a Marshall amplifier and cranked up a hundredfold. The tentative title is "Twisted Tales From Thailand." As always, I am addicted to alliteration; it's my most venial vice.

Read more about Jim at www.jimalgie.com or www.bizarrethailand.com