



Mai Pen Rai-NOT! A Lesson in Thai Culture

Description



"Mai pen rai" is a very common Thai phrase you may hear during your vacation to Thailand. But the phrase is NOT a profound lesson in Thai culture.

"Nevermind" might be a good translation. But not good enough our internet blogosphere. Thailand bloggers, especially those who know little about Thai language and culture, seem intent on infusing this simple phrase with deep psychological and cultural meaning.

I say phooey!

What Does It REALLY Mean?

The meaning of “*mai ben rai*” is quite simple and straightforward. It means “never mind ” or “that’s alright”. In context, it may carry a sentiment to the person spoken to of “Don’t worry about it.” Regardless of its precise context, the phrase is used for the less serious events in our lives.

Here’s some of my recent real life examples of saying the phrase:

I told my grand niece recently that she couldn’t come with us on vacation to Kuala Lumpur because I wanted her to go to her new school’s orientation. With a sad face and disappointment, she replied, “*mai pen rai*.” (Translation: “That’s OK.”)

I bumped into a stranger at the market today and said “kaw-tote” (excuse me). The person replied “*mai ben rai*”. (Translation: Never mind) No big deal.

One of my pillow makers showed me a few yards of fabric that she had miscut and told me she had no idea on how she had made that mistake. I responded “*mai pen rai*”. (Translation: Don’t worry about it.)

Silly Cultural Attributes of a Simple Phrase

Unfortunately, the tourist industry along with a few deluded Thailand bloggers, have given the phrase sweeping cultural meaning, even to the absurdity of claiming Thai culture is defined by the phrase. Just listen to these grandiose quotes from the blogosphere:

“Be aware that mai pen rai is a deeply ingrained, pervasive societal trait and not merely a phrase.” [www.travelfish.org/beginners_detail/thailand/91 “Phrases Every visitor to Thailand should know: Mai Pen Rai”]

Another blogger wrote:

“From my experience traveling in Thailand last year, I found Thai people to be incredibly generous and friendly. They are also very laid back, do not get easily agitated or angry, and are always smiling. I quickly discovered that “Mai Pen Rai” isn’t just a commonly spoken phrase, but rather a philosophy of life.”

[kpitingolo.blogspot.com. “Why Mai Pen Rai?”]

Wow. So this simple little phrase according to these non-Thai people has become a “pervasive societal trait” and a “philosophy of life”. Huh? Well I can assure you that would be news to Thai people. And I can also assure you that Thais will not be thrilled at the crude stereotyping by foreigners to their culture.

A grand crescendo of silliness was reached in this next profound declaration from the blogosphere:

“The phrase mai pen rai is a key element of Thailand’s culture, one of many elements which contribute to the carefree nature of the people of Thailand “The Land of Smiles”.

[www.pattayaunlimited.com/thailand-land-of-mai-pen-rai/ “Thailand Land of Mai Pen Rai”]

So now our little Thai phrase has become “a key element of Thailand’s culture”. I guess it’s right up their with Buddhism, family and the King in cultural importance.

Finally, here’s an insulting whopper I found in our beloved blogosphere:

“Mai pen rai sums up life in Thailand and the attitude there in general. This famous attitude is what allowed the Thais to keep their cool and get back on their feet after the devastating losses of the Boxer Day tsunami.” [thailandtrips.info “Mai Pen Rai”]

To be generous, the above quote is hogwash. Thai people recovered from the tsunami with hard work and strength through their remaining family and religion. The grandiose psycho-babble about the deep meaning a “*mai ben rai*” had nothing to do with post-tsunami recovery. I dare the writer of the above comment to go up to a Thai family grieving the death of a loved one and utter “*mai pen rai*”. Trust me, the response would not be a Thai smile.

Stop treating Thais like your pet dog.

It appears that bloggers about Thailand feel the need to imbue a bevy of cultural stereotypes on Thai people through their fantasies about the deep meaning of this simple phrase.

These bloggers refer to Thais as “very laid back”, “always smiling”, “carefree”, and worse yet “happy-go-lucky”. After 20 years of living and working with Thai people, I find none of those stereotypes to be even remotely true.

I recently read a travel brochure for Jamaica and it described Jamaicans with the very same words our Thailand bloggers use for Thai people. When I was a kid, that’s how TV portrayed many Mexican characters-carefree, happy-go-lucky and very laid back. And of course everyone knows that Filipinos and Costa Ricans have smiles plastered on their faces 24/7 and don’t have a worry in the world because they’re “happy-go-lucky and carefree”.

Phooey! Complete and utter PHOOEY!

Sorry folks, but describing a whole culture as “laid back”, “carefree”, “always smiling” and “happy-go-lucky” is condescending and belittling at best. And to hang these grandiose cultural pronouncements about Thai culture on the phrase mai pen rai is just plain stupid and shows a superficial interaction with Thai people.

Let me indulge you with just one more brilliant blogosphere quote:

[I]f you came to befriend a Thai, the most common and used word that you will hear from him or her is “MAI PEN RAI”. It is being accompanied with those sweet smiles that you definitely cannot resist but to smile back. [a.northernthailand.com “What is Mai Pen Rai?”]

The most common words in my Thai household are “What’s for dinner?”, followed by “Hurry up!”

I don’t want to be a downer, but in everyday life, Thai people seem to smile about as much as any other ethnic group I’ve known, including my own. I suppose the above blogger would have us serve

watermelon and fried chicken if we have black folk over for dinner.

Giving *mai pen rai* vast cultural importance is just plain ignorance about Thais and their language.

Get into a car wreck that's your fault with a Thai driver and see if he's smiling and will utter the words "never mind". Go bargain ocean freight rates with a Thai business and see how happy-go-lucky they are. Utter the words "*mai pen rai*" to a person who's just been diagnosed with cancer and see the reaction you get. You get the point.

Why do people (bloggers) need to use a completely erroneous and condescending cultural cookie-cutter to describe Thai culture? Answer: Because eventhough these bloggers may live in Thailand for a time, they remain strangers to Thai culture.

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