

“Have you eaten yet?”

I opened the door to the back seat of our Grab car (the SE Asia equivalent of Uber or Lyft – usually up to a \$4 ride anywhere in the city). Ellen got in first and slid across. I followed. As I closed the door I heard the driver say “Have you eaten yet?”

Silent thoughts. Did he just say what I think he said? I think so. Why does he care? I spoke up and said “Yes.” And wanting to show a desire for politeness, I then quickly added “Have you?” No answer. We drove off.

One of the challenges we knew we would encounter as we arrived in Thailand was the language. Learning Spanish seemed easier because we could read the words and the pronunciations were pretty standard once you learned the vowel sounds and how to roll your rrr’s.

Thai is a beautiful language but very different. Different letters, different alphabet, different vowels and consonants. Different in that much of the language is tonal – meaning if your voice rises at the end of a phrase it may mean one thing, if it drops it may mean another thing. So with the help of various websites, YouTube and lots of patience we are trying to learn one new phrase at a time. The simplest is the greeting. It sounds like this: “Sa-wat-di”. If you are a woman you add “ka” if you are a man you add “krup” to the end. The universal language is smiling!

The Thai culture has a strong desire to connect and be hospitable so that foreigners will feel comfortable. We have been in many Grab cars and they will have a playlist for us to listen to of the most current music in the US – think Taylor Swift (Ellen’s comment alone). Thai people will attempt to use any English they know as an expression of hospitality.

On one of our recent walks, we stopped at a little roadside fresh fruit stand. We purchased 4 of the sweetest, juiciest clementine oranges. It was our joy to support this dear lady in her business. A couple days later we returned to the same fruit stand. To our surprise, she remembered us. Once again we chose 4 clementine oranges and when she brought our change, she opened the bag and added another orange as a way to express her thanks for us returning to her stand.

Oh yes, “Have you eaten yet?” About a week after this encounter as we continued our language studies, we read that a common greeting among Thai people is to simply ask “Have you eaten yet?” Today it is simply a conversation starter. Once upon a time I wonder if the question also meant that if you haven’t eaten yet, you are likely to be invited to eat.

What a beautiful land with such beautiful people, where family, community and hospitality have deep roots and creative expressions.

“Have you eaten yet?”

A friend,

Roger and Ellen