



Tales from Thailand

I

first visited Thailand back in 2004, at a time when the country barely registered on the chess radar. The trip came about when I asked the then British Ambassador to Greece, David Madden – who by fortuitous circumstance happened to play on my cricket team – whether he had any contacts in the country, as I fancied popping in, as one does, on my way back from China. He did, as it turned out, and a pretty good one – the British Club, in Bangkok, which by coincidence happened to be celebrating its centenary. This venerable institution – an oasis of calm among the hurly-burly of the teeming capital, on a large, central plot of land, gifted by the King of Siam – held all manner of traditional English sporting activities but, alas, not chess. Thankfully the President of the Club, David Quine, was very receptive to the innovative idea of a simul and quickly found over a dozen members who relished the idea of facing a GM. The rest of the places were filled up by inviting players from the established Bangkok Chess Club (BCC), which, at the time, was more or less the only club in Thailand. The evening went superbly well, with a beautiful, large ice-sculpture of a chess piece unveiled at the start (a brave idea, considering the humid cli-

mate). Unlike my esteemed colleague Garry Kasparov, I don't restrict the strength of opposition to Elo <2000, as fly-swatting makes poor spectator sport. I won most of the games, as usual, but local honour was proudly upheld when I dropped the odd half and even full point here and there.

My second visit, this time to the Thai Stock Exchange for two simul, arose from the contact I had made with Kai Tuorila, an expatriate Finn and dynamo of the BCC. As on the previous occasion, the trip was conceived as an add-on to another Far Eastern sojourn. The event was successful, providing not only pleasure for the fans, but also attracting some TV coverage. The sponsorship from the world of finance seemed particularly promising but, alas, as is so often the case, it was unfortunately not to be repeated.

In my unlikely capacity as the national coach of the Islamic Republic of Iran, I paid another visit to Bangkok in 2007, a stop-over en route, from Tehran, to the Asian Indoor Games in Macau. Quite why one would arrange the journey in such a cumbersome manner – other than to provide the officials with an opportunity for a damned good night out – I really don't know. In Doha, the previous year, the top Iranian officials were ensconced – not entirely coincidentally, one suspects – in one of the handful of hotels in the city that served alcohol. By chance, I also stayed in this fine establishment (I should really have been at the Athletes' Village with all the

other coaches, but that is another lengthy story...). When engaged for an important job, I take my responsibilities very seriously, but even I could not help notice that the hotel bar was frequented by a disproportionately large number of young, single Philipinas. Call me deeply cynical, if you wish, for suspecting the guardians of Islamic values of hypocrisy, but let's say I was not in the least surprised when it was suddenly announced, as we prepared to depart Bangkok, we were to be 'unexpectedly' detained a further 24 hours, due to the unavailability of flights...

My four most recent visits have all been in conjunction with the Thailand Open – now in its 12th edition – which alternates each year between Bangkok and other resorts. In 2002, 2003, 2009 and 2011 the tournament was held in Pattaya, which developed rapidly from a sleepy village to provide rest and recreation for American troops during the Vietnam War, and which now surely has a strong claim to be the sleaziest place on the planet. The area around Walking Street, in particular, offers a super-abundance of debauchery, sufficient to attract not a few anonymous GMs, regardless of whether or not a tournament is taking place. By comparison, the red-light district of Amsterdam is rather like a convent.

Of course, Thailand offers far more than base pleasures of the loins – palaces, temples, food and shopping are just a few of the numerous attractions – and this is partly why

the flagship tournament has grown steadily in both fame and numbers from very humble beginnings. The real reason, however, is the great team of hardworking organisers, led by Kai Tuorila, who do a fantastic job with very limited financial resources. Yes, let it be stressed, this is no Gibraltar Open. Sponsorship is increasing, but in a country where 'makruk', or Thai chess, remains more popular, it is an uphill task. What the Thailand Open does offer, though, is a very warm welcome and a wonderful experience for the amateur player. The venues are invariably luxury hotels which, as anyone who has travelled in South East Asia knows, are generally far superior to their European equivalents. My only real complaint, apart from the rather modest prize-fund, is the double rounds. No GM wishes to squander his hard-earned Elo points through fatigue, but it is also hard to understand why any tourist, eager for sightseeing or simply relaxing on holiday, would wish to be chained to the board all day either. Every year I preach the same sermon on the evils of double rounds to Kai. He listens politely, but then explains why it cannot be any different. He is completely wrong, of course, and eventually my good friend will realise it ☺.

In 2012 we were back in Bangkok, at the prestigious Dusit Thani Hotel, home to royalty and countless celebrities over the decades. Jan Gustafsson returned in a bid to defend his title, but the star attraction, this time, was women's world champion Hou Yifan. The Chinese teenager gave a simul at Government House prior to the event and met with Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra – a breakthrough in recognition for what, as I have mentioned, is very much a minority sport. Her diplomatic triumph, however, was not quite matched by exploits on the board. Hou's uneven play, on the back of a disappointing Chinese Champi-

onship, indicated that her phenomenal result in Gibraltar has not yet brought a permanent shift to a higher plateau. She survived big scares against FM Martin Voigt and the veteran Finnish GM Yrjö Rantanen, beating the former and drawing with the latter, and dropped a further half point to the modestly rated Philippino Sander Severino (as did I, in fact). Her dreams of victory, however, only suffered a fatal blow in the seventh round:



Short-Hou Yifan
Bangkok 2012
position after 20...♘c5

The opening – a Queen's Indian – had not gone particularly well for me. My congealed mass of central pawns was vulnerable and unable to advance. I did not fancy the prospect of allowing the very dangerous exchange sacrifice 21.♙g4 ♖xe4!. Lacking any decent alternatives, I therefore jettisoned a pawn.

21.♙xc5 ♙xc5 22.♙g4 ♙xe3+ 23.♙h1 f5?!

Inexperience. One has to know when to defend actively and when to defend passively. This is a time for passive defence. There was no harm in play-

'Hou Yifan's diplomatic triumph was not quite matched by exploits on the board'

ing 23...♖cd8 24.♙e6+ ♙h8 25.♖f3 ♙c5 26.♖h3 g6, as checkmate is not at all imminent. Certainly Black will have to endure some pressure and abandon the plan of queen-ing a pawn for a while, but it is not clear how White can achieve anything.

Long-term Black is sitting pretty.

24.♙xf5



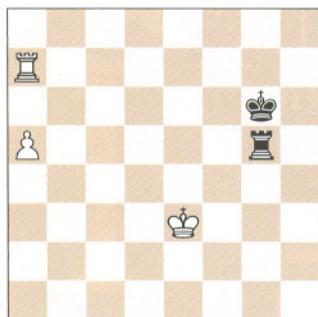
24...♖cd8?

But this is too much. Yifan obviously intended to sacrifice the exchange, but then changed her mind. During the game I thought it was total crap, but actually 24...♖xf5 25.exf5 c3! is still not so clear.

25.e5 ♙h8 26.♖e4 ♖c5 27.♙xh7 Black's game is in total ruins. My technique for the remaining moves was very far from optimal but, with such an overwhelming advantage, it was beyond even my talent to let slip the win.

27...c3 28.♙g6 c2 29.♖g2 ♙xf4 30.♙xc2 ♖e7 31.d6 ♖e6 32.♖de1 g5 33.♖f3 g4 34.♖f2 ♖h6 35.♖xg4 ♙xe5 36.♖xe5 ♖xf2 37.♖h5 ♖xd6 38.♖xh6+ ♖xh6 39.♖c8+ ♙g7 40.♖c7+ ♖f7 41.♖g3+ ♙f8 42.h4 ♖hf6 43.♙b3 ♖f1+ 44.♙g2 ♖f6 45.h5 1-0

The early front-runner, perhaps a little surprisingly, was the Indian IM M.R.Venkatesh, who started with an impressive five straight wins. However, after he succumbed to your columnist on the white side of an English Opening in Round 6, the lead changed hands irrevocably. I effectively sealed victory with a slice of good fortune in the penultimate round:



Short-Amonatov
position after 68. Rxa7

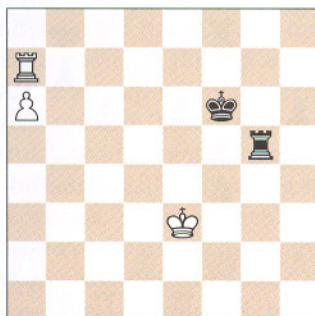
I had squandered a substantial if not to say decisive advantage in the middlegame, and through some further imprecise endgame play rather ineptly stumbled my way here. Many readers will recognize the key elements of the Vancura position, whereby Black draws by attacking the a-pawn from the side and checking the king away from supporting the a-pawn. By coincidence, imme-

diately prior to this tournament I had been coaching in Kuala Lumpur and, on the very first day, had shown my pupils this essential defensive method. Little did I imagine that the basic position would appear so soon...

68... Rf6?!

This doesn't actually lose, but it is a big step in the wrong direction (believe it or not, in a number of lines Black needs to control the h-file!) and shows that my opponent – Tajikistan's finest player and rated over 2600 – did not have the vital knowledge at his fingertips. Instead something like 68... Rb5 would do fine, followed by switching the rook to the f-file as the white king approaches. If 69.a6 Black plays 69... Rb6!. Incidentally, Anatoly Karpov gave me a rather annoying practical demonstration of this idea in Game 3 of our 1992 Candidates' match – a game I botched up completely.

69.a6



69... Ra5?

Now it was already difficult. The only move to hold was 69... Rd5! – which is not at all easy when you have been under pressure for hours, you desperately need a cigarette and you are down to 30 seconds a move.

70. Ra8!

The only winning move, preventing the black king from approaching the pawn.

70... Ra4 71. Rd3 Rg7 72. Rc3

By a most improbable coincidence, I had also shown my Malaysian pupils a nearly identical position from the rightly-lauded *Nunn's Chess Endings Volume II*. The only difference was that the white king was worse placed on c2, with the black rook on a3. There Black to move can only draw by ... Rh3!! – which is almost impossible to find, unless you know it. Here, though, Black is busted.

72... Rf4

Trying to head back to the Vancura position, which I suspect all along had been in Amonatov's mind – albeit a touch hazily. It is all too late now. Smug in the knowledge of how to win, I was able to instantly bash out

73. Ra7+! Rg6 74. Rb7 Ra4 75. a7 Rf6 76. Rb3 Ra1 77. Rc4 Re6 78. Rc5 1-0

The white king meanders down to b8. Perhaps there is something to be said for endgame study after all? ■

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