

Characteristics of thailand



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Culture has long been a topic of interest in the academic world and has been written extensively on by many sociologists and ethnographers. As individuals from different countries have their own cultural norms and values, there are bound to be some cultural conflicts that occur when people with different cultural background interact with one another.

Thailand has long been regarded as one of the most attractive markets in Asia for foreign direct investments (FDI) due to its many advantages such as its infrastructure, strategic location, FDI policies, government support, etc. (Thailand BOI, 2009). Although there are literatures on about the Thai culture and suggestions, particularly to Westerners, about how to adapt to this unique country, little remains said about how foreign workers as a whole can adapt to the Thai working environment. In attempt to shed some light on the matter, the author shall combine data from past researches about how Westerners should react to the Thai culture, along with more literature that explain the Thai society in more specific details. Lastly, the author shall discuss and analyze his interview data set taken from foreign workers in Company X and present a conclusion.

As this paper's focus revolves around the field of culture, a common understanding about what the word actually entails should first be established. Some examples of definitions have been made by a number of anthropologists. However, selecting from the most popular definitions, the following best describes the meaning of this important concept: Triandis (1994) views culture as interplay of sameness and differences; whereby all cultures are simultaneously very similar and very different. Furthermore, he perceives that as human beings, people share many commonalties and

universals, but as groups of people or societies, we exhibit many differences Triandis (1994). However, the author feels that Ogbu (1988) best defines the concept of culture, as he explains,

“[It is] a way of life shared by members of a population, and that it is the social, technoeconomic, and psychological adaptation worked out in the course of a people’s history. Culture includes customs or institutionalized public behaviors, as well as thoughts and emotions that accompany and support those public behaviors. It includes artifacts-things people make or have made that have symbolic meaning. Particularly important is that the definition of culture includes people’s economic, political, religious, and social institutions - the imperatives of culture. These imperatives form a recognizable pattern requiring competencies that guide the behaviors of members of the culture fairly predictably.” (p. 11).

For foreign workers to enter into Thailand, it would be inevitable that they will come across cross cultural challenges and some culture shock. Culture can have effect on what may seem to be the simplest things in life, such as meetings, greeting, perception of time; but what may seem to be normal to Thais may not be as familiar to foreign workers. This subject is indeed, and has been for a long time, difficult to identify and analyze effectively, as one can dig deeper and deeper into the academic findings and come up with such a variety of opinions and analysis that has to do with culture and its effect in the business world. In this case the author shall choose to focus on the Thai culture, and attempt to aid and produce further explanation to foreign workers wishing to come to Thailand in order for them to be able to better adapt to the Thai working environment.

The term culture shock, which was first popularized by Kalvero Oberg (1960), portrays to the feeling of anxiety and disorientation that people experience when living in another country and culture. In explaining this phenomenon, Jandt (1998) shows 4 stages of culture shock:

Initial Euphoria: Everything seeming new and exciting.

Irritation and hostility: All the focus at this stage is on the differences between one's own home culture and the new culture that they are experiencing.

Gradual adjustment: When one becomes more accustomed and more comfortable in the new culture. In other words, things become more predictable and there are less unpleasant surprises.

Adaptation: The person has fully adjusted and can function in both their own culture and the culture they are currently living in.

The first and second stages of culture shock have some correlations with companies that decide to expand their operations abroad, as each company must overcome cross-cultural boundaries - named "psychic distance" according to Johanson and Vahlne (1977). However, instead of companies, this paper wishes to look at human individuals who wish to work abroad in Thailand.

Psychic distance has been defined as factors preventing or disturbing the flow of information between potential and actual suppliers and customers, in which examples are differences in language, education, business practices, culture, and industrial development Johanson and Vahlne (1977) (p. 24). The

<https://assignbuster.com/characteristics-of-thailand/>

connection between psychic distance and knowledge within a firm is that a firm's managers will tend to be more comfortable towards country markets that they can get to know most easily. Thus, they will avoid countries that are more difficult to get to know - the bigger the perceived psychic distance, the less likely a company will expand into that territory (Brewer 2007).

Johanson and Vahlne (1977) and Brewer's (2007) are analysis about companies entering new markets, but their notions are still applicable in the sense of foreign workers living and working in Thailand. Much of the problem of culture shock stems from the lack of understanding within a particular country. The more difference that is perceived between the Thai culture and the foreign worker, the more psychic distance he or she would tend to feel against the Thai people. This would inevitably lead to the feeling of isolation, loneliness, or even hostility perceived in stage two of Jandt's (1998) culture shock phases. If the foreign worker is not integrated into the Thai organizational community, then any work that must be done together with Thai workers and foreign workers will not be at its most productive stage, as the best output comes when there is group cohesion and good synergy.

The aim of the research is to help foreign workers in Thailand better understand Thai culture and lessen the third stage of culture shock, along with promoting a smoother transition and adaptation to the Thai working environment and working better with Thais. By understanding more about the Thai working environment, along with the norms and unique culture, foreign workers can be better suited and prepared to adjust themselves to a new working environment, and lessen the chances of any conflicts occurring in the Thai work place.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Barriers to effectively adjust to a national culture

One main problem that prohibits understanding of another culture is an ethnocentric orientation, which is using one's culture as the standard for judging other cultures (Cavusgil et al, 2008, p. 128). As most people have been brought up in a single-world culture, they cannot help but have a one-sided view of the world – which is a result of an ethnocentric view that believes that one's own race, religion, or ethnic group is somehow better or superior than other cultures (Cavusgil et al, 2008). Therefore, in order to overcome this cross cultural barrier, foreign workers are suggested to have a Polycentric orientation, which is a host-country's mindset where one has developed a great affinity with the country in which one is in – or the best option having a Geocentric orientation, which a global mindset where a person is able to understand any culture in the world and combines an openness and awareness to other cultures (Cavusgil et al, 2008).

Understanding a new culture – in this case Thailand – essentially requires effort from the foreign workers if they wish to get a better grasp and understanding of the Thai culture. However, doing so may be easier said than done. Although in this paper we shall be focusing on foreign workers, some aspects that may help expatriates adjusting to Thailand may have some relations to what other foreign workers may have to deal with. Barsoux et al. (2002) states that the “ interaction adjustment” is the most difficult for expatriates because it requires them to learn the host country's behavior patterns and their ways of communication, along with how varieties of relationships are handled – which differs depending on the country, but, nonetheless, also applies to the situation of foreign workers coming to <https://assignbuster.com/characteristics-of-thailand/>

Thailand. This task would be particularly hard to achieve if the expatriate does not speak the local language, as the only way to fully understand a particular culture is through its language (Valdes, 1987).

2. 2 Hofstede's Dimensions of Culture

Geert Hofstede, a Dutch cultural anthropologist, has been considered to be one of the most acclaimed academic writers who throughout the years has been cited numerous in the field of cultural studies. Through a statistical analysis of questionnaire data sets conducted with several hundred IBM employees from 53 countries, he was able to discover a pattern that indicated national cultural differences and similarities among his subjects; and how such characteristics can be generalized and grouped together to graph different human behaviors and motives - best known as Hofstede's theory of cultural dimensions.

In a preliminary attempt to conceptualize the Thai culture and put it in writing, the author shall initially start with the findings of Hofstede and how he has identified his initial four cultural dimensions that explain each country's national culture - in this case, Thailand. In doing so, it should help the reader slowly build up an understanding of the overall picture of different aspects of the Thai culture, which would later be complimented with more detailed explanations. Check again if the ranking of the data is from Hofstede 2005 or earlier

Although still important, it should be noted that Hofstede's research can only be used as a general guide to the understanding of the Thai culture. His research does not provide sufficient understanding on how to manage a

multicultural organization or gain a deeper comprehension of any particular culture. Therefore, extra literature relating to Thailand and its people shall be integrated into the review of Hofstede's theory in order to fill in more gaps and further explain some of the more specific characteristics of the Thai society.

In his most recent book, co-authored with his son, Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) explain the cultural dimensions (see appendix for Thailand's cultural rankings) as follows:

2. 2. 1. Power Distance (PD)

High PD countries tend to exhibit a tall hierarchy in their organizations with large differences in salary and status. Subordinates highly respect their bosses and do what they are told. Inequality is expected, and may even be desired in some cases. An example given by McCann and Giles (2007) shows that young workers in an organization perceive their interactions with older workers to be more problematic compared to their interaction with their peers, as the older workers were seen as more "non-accommodative" and superior - making them feel obligated to be more polite and respectfully avoidant in their communication tactics (e. g. holding back their opinions). Moreover, in such scenarios communication is almost always one way (top to bottom), and the manager is always expected to know more than his subordinates; input or feedback from subordinates is seldom practiced and may in fact be seen as somewhat impolite or disloyal (Javidan & House, 2001).

As Thailand is ranked as a High PD country, the status differences are often large (Sriussadaporn and Jablin, 1999) compared to Low PD countries that have a flatter hierarchy system, in which subordinates and supervisors are viewed as closer together and more interchangeable, but not identical (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005).

2. 2. 2. Individualism vs. Collectivism

Thailand is characterized as a collectivist country in which people belong to a strong cohesive group that they believe will protect them in return for their loyalty to the group (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005). This type of patronage, or kinship, system is based on relationships between people that revolve around favors and reciprocity that give great importance to kindness and sincerity, in which personal links and family connections are valued to be of extreme importance (Holmes and Tangtongtavy, 1995). Collectivism can also be seen in the Thai people's belief of social harmony where everyone is always consciously, or even unconsciously, making the effort to avoid any personal conflict with others (Nakata and Dhiravgin 1989; Sriussadaporn and Jablin, 1999; Knutson et al., 2003), which also fosters and supports the concept of "kreng jai" - later explained.

In his research, Hall (1976) made a distinction that characterized cultures to be either "low context" or "high context". Low-context cultures rely heavily on verbalization and emphasis on the delivery of verbal messages - expressing one's self clearly, logically, and as convincingly as possible (Hall, 1976). In other words, Low-context cultures tend to value expertise and performance, and tend not to beat around the bush (Cavusgil et. al, 2008).

High-context cultures, such as Thailand, are the opposite. They tend to focus on non-verbal messages and prefer indirect and polite face-saving style that emphasizes a mutual sense of care and respect for others (Cavusgil et. al, 2008, p. 136). Interestingly Hall's approach is very closely related to Hofstede's individualism and collectivism cultural dimension, which has been further explained by Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey (1988) that cultures that have been labeled by Hall as " High-context" are considered to be " Collectivists" in Hofstede's theory, and vice versa. Hence, Thailand is considered to be a High-context and a Collectivist culture. This may also help explain why it is difficult for Thai people to say " no" when one may feels disagreement or is unable to carry out an order. Moreover, as maintaining harmony is the center focus of a Collectivist culture (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005), showing bad emotions such as frustration, impatience, frustration, anger, or irritation is seen as disrupting the social harmony and is considered relatively rude and offensive (Sriussadaporn and Jablin, 1999; Knutson et al., 2003).

Also part of the characteristics of Thailand's high-context (Hall 1976) and collective culture (Hofstede and Hofstede 2005), it was found that young people seldom speak up - which may have stemmed from childhood as students do not express their opinions in class as much because quietness is also considered a virtue in the Thai culture (Knutson et al., 2003), which is also the case with younger people not disagreeing with older people in organizations (Boode, 2005; McCann and Giles, 2007; Javidan and Dastmalchian, 2009) - further supporting Smutkupt and Barna's (1976)

findings that any doubts or contradictive thinking in one's mind are very rarely communicated openly in the Thai culture.

2. 2. 3. Uncertainty Avoidance (UA)

Broadly defined, people in High UA countries tend to be more emotional than other countries, and are more motivated by their “ inner nervous energy” (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005). As Thais are ranked as having high UA, one of the ways they reduce their uncertainty in everyday life communication is through their proper use of pronouns and postures to show respect, deference, politeness, and closeness towards others (Sriussadaporn and Jablin, 1999). This can also be seen through their use of silence to avoid uncertain confrontations with other people - especially with the more senior people (McCann and Giles, 2007). Moreover, as a result of this high UA ranking characteristic, Thais generally tend not to readily accept change and are relatively against taking risks (Swierczek and Ha, 2003).

2. 2. 4. Masculinity vs. Femininity

Thailand has the lowest Masculinity ranking among the Asian countries, which indicates that they show a low level of assertiveness and competitiveness compared to other countries in the region (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005). Sriussadaporn and Jablin's (1999) research shows this with their observation that Thais do not truly express their own opinions as much as they deserve to due to their non-dominant and non-assertive characteristics. This may have derived from or have some indications to their Collectivist and confrontation avoidance nature in the findings of McCann and Giles (2007) attributed to the complex Thai hierchical system and their expected respect for the older generation.

2.3 The Thai workplace environment

Words that could describe the Thai management style and its working environment, or business culture, are the following: compromise, slow, centralized, seniority-based, relationship-based, conservative, and family-based (Adams and Vernon, 2004). These terms seem very much to stress the maintenance of harmony in the company – being non confrontational and accepting the differences of inequality.

As stated earlier, Thailand is traditionally a high power distance country (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005), which makes Thai society a segregated one with distinct unofficial class groupings and little chance for mobility across the class lines – also applying to the workplace environment (Komin, 1995; Lawler et al., 1995). Interestingly this type of class system in Thailand, is very much reflected in the organization and management of family-owned companies and enterprises according to Lawler et al. (1995). In other words, the need for a formal or set of rules in management may not be as high of a priority as the environment produced by the Thai social system has a great influence in defining the interaction between peer-to-peer and worker-to-worker in a company setting YES ACCORDING TO THE INTERVIEWS.

In the largest firms in Thailand, family connections has served as a foundation for building international trading companies and has been a very important aspect of understanding the Thai working environment, which has been characterized by Isarangkun Na Ayuthaya and Taira (1977) as “management by entourage”. In other words, it conveys the concept of the importance of knowing the right people to get the job done and having connections in the right places. However, this concept becomes less

manageable as a company grows and requires being more responsible for its accountabilities, more professional managers are needed - creating a hybrid of Westernized practices in a traditional Thai family enterprise (Lawler and Atmiyanandana, 2003).

In the aspects of companies that are family enterprises, HRM practices are very much influenced by traditional Thai values and their social practices compared to the everyday management theory (Bertrand et. al., 2008). In other words, professional managers in the HRM field are found to be very rare in family enterprises, even ad hoc, along with HR planning and the systematic analysis of employment issues are found to be virtually absent in such organizations (Lawler et al., 1989). So how are the employees controlled? The answer is through a complex hierarchical class system that has been deeply rooted within the Thai culture (Adams and Vernon, 2004). - also conveying that employees with lower positions react to people with higher managerial levels out of a sense of duty rather than according to the rules and regulations set by the company (Knutson et al., 2003). Moreover, this can be seen through the use of the complex Thai language between superiors and subordinates.

EXPLAIN SOME OF THE IMPORTANT “ JAI” WORDS: KRENG JAI, NAM JAI, SBAI JAI.

This emphasizes on the importance of social harmony can be seen with the proper linguistic uses that must be used in everyday life when addressing people of different status (Knutson et. al., 2003). Where English has one word, “ I”, as the first person pronoun, and one other, “ you”, for the second person pronoun, Thai speakers must choose from up to 9 commonly used

forms for the first person pronouns, 8 second person pronouns, and 5 third person pronouns (Iwasaki and Preeya, 2005). In addition to these variety of words, Cooke (1968) has listed up to 27 first-person pronouns, 22 second-person pronouns, and 8 third person pronouns, which include language used with royalties and specialized terms used by specific people (i. g. Buddhist monks have specific terms to address themselves and others). This would all depend on the politeness or closeness the speaker wishes to convey, and depending on the status of the other person who is involved in the conversation.

Specific uses of language and conflict avoidance are some very specific characteristics of the Thai culture that conveys to the collectivism and high context society explained thus far. If, however, a disagreement should arise, Thais will look for indirect means for their resolution - usually through third parties or by "intense" private talks (Lasserre and Probert 1996; Lawler and Atmiyanandana, 2003).

Kreng jai, is one of the most difficult concepts of the Thai cultures for foreigners to understand (especially for Westerners), which has been defined by Komin (1991) as,

The concept of time in Thailand is somewhat more lenient than in other countries. Foreign workers have sometimes found this aspect of the Thai culture to be the hardest to adjust to - unless the foreign worker himself has the same attitude towards time. Mainly speaking, punctuality can at times be seen as unimportant when going out or having socials with friends. However,

foreign workers have found that Thai are very punctual when it comes to meetings and appointments with their superior.

2. 4 The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

The notion that language and culture can be interlinked may not be obvious to us at first, as we, being native speakers, may not be conscious how we say things, and why we say it the way we do in our own languages. However, Jandt (2001) suggests that a person who has learned a second language, or has grown up speaking more than one language, may become aware of the different ways each language allows the speaker to describe and grasp the reality we live in. It is these different perceptions one has of reality that Jandt (2001) believes to be the same differences in culture - making the relationship between language and culture resembling mirrors to each other.

This relates back to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis that says cultural elements can be seen in a language's vocabulary and grammar (Whorf, 1956). Harley (2001) supports the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis in that it shows how a culture's or country's language determines the structure of the speaker's thought process. That is to say, language affects the way humans remember and the way people perceive the world. If a language has a rich vocabulary for certain notions and concepts, then it makes it easier to describe those ideas in that particular language (Whorf, 1956). Thus, ideas, notions, or things that are easily described in a language must be important to the culture (Jandt, 2001). The two main ideas comprising the Sapire-Whorf hypotheses starts with the first being linguistic determinism, which is the idea that the form and characteristics of our language determine the way in which we think, remember and perceive; and the second, linguistic relativism, which is the

idea that as different languages map onto the world in different ways, different languages will generate different cognitive structures (Harley, 2001, p. 81).

Although there are studies relating to the intricate nature of the Thai language (Komin 1991; Chantornvong, 1992; Komin, 1995; Knutson, 1994; Knutson et al., 2003), there has yet to be an establishment between the numerous words that contain “ jai” (heart) and the way Thais think and perceive others.

It can seem a bit daunting or even a tedious endeavor for a foreign worker to deal with such vicissitudes of the different nuances of the Thai culture.

However, the most important aspect to bear in mind is the relationships that Thais hold so dear towards one another, and the mutual understanding one has towards the other person (Komin, 1995; Knutson et al., 2003). For Thais, the heart shows sincerity, and thus so many words are derived from it to express the different feelings one has. In order to test whether or not this may be true, the author has conducted and compiled data set from his interviewees.

Moreover, having to express oneself in another language means learning to adopt someone else’s reference frame (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005, p. 328). In other words, by understanding and speaking the local language, one is better able to understand the national culture. With no knowledge of Thai, a foreign worker is likely to miss out on a lot of hidden nuances and subtleties of the Thai culture, and may result in being left as a relative outsider. One of the examples given by Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) is the

subtleties of humor, which varies amongst different culture and is very specific sometimes to one culture.