Culture Clash and Accommodation: The effects of western influence on Thailand’s indigenous company culture in Bangkok, Thailand

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Executive Summary

The purpose of this study is to investigate how the American culture in American owned organizations located in Bangkok, Thailand is viewed by Thai nationals working in these manufacturing companies. The study was conducted through a series of interviews with senior level managers working in various manufacturing industries in Thailand. Study participants were asked to describe their own experiences and provide their candid opinions regarding working with their American managers or business counterparts in Bangkok, Thailand. Data gathered during the interviews was analyzed and interpreted with the goal of enabling a more complete understanding of how American culture affects Thai culture in the workplace in Bangkok, Thailand.

This study found that Thais felt that they experienced numerous cultural challenges when they worked with or for an American in the American owned company where they were employed. All six Thai participants that I interviewed agreed that working for an American owned company provided an advantage over their personal experience working for Thai owned companies. In short, the participants felt that they were able to learn and be a part of implementing international standards and practices within their respective organizations. While the participants felt the effort to learn and understand American cultural practices within the workplace was worth the stress of trying to effectively communicate and assimilate the presenting cultural practices, they all agreed that for the most part, their American managers or business counterparts were insensitive to the Thai culture and its accompanying conventions. The perceived lack of understanding of Thai cultural practices by Americans is highly disturbing to Thai nationals because the perception is that Americans are disrespectful of Thais and Thai culture. This perception, that Americans demonstrate a lack respect of Thais by not acknowledging their culture, implies that Americans are self-serving and their intentions cannot be trusted.

Mistrust among managers and workers in an organization can foster contempt and derision leading to divisive behavior that is counterproductive to the original intent of the organization. The Thai interviewees advised that Americans should take the time to understand Thai culture and conversely provide training in cross cultural communication to the Thai workers and managers along with their American bosses and counterparts. All the participants agreed that cross-cultural understanding was fundamental to their success and the success of the organization.

Recommendations for future studies may involve more exploration regarding available cross-cultural training programs for Americans wishing to live and work in Bangkok, Thailand including available ongoing cross-cultural communication training for staff, managers and workers. Thai interviewees expressed a keen interest in the West/East exchange of technological knowledge. Perhaps, further investigation of American and Thai operations practices would provide more efficient productivity within organizations in Thailand.
Introduction

This qualitative study will explore how Western culture’s mindset has influenced the existing company cultures in businesses in Bangkok. The theoretical framework forming the basis for this study is “East/West cross-cultural understanding” research. The research design will consist of a total of six “face to face interviews” (Creswell, 2003) with three participants from two businesses sectors: manufacturing and fine and graphics art. The research seeks to identify and explore the key critical influences that affect business relationships between English speaking Thai business people and English language westerners. In doing so, it is hopeful that the research will gain a deeper understanding of how Thai business people view their cultural differences between themselves and English language western countries. Conversely, this information could prove to be a valuable strategic planning tool for American businesspeople who wish to conduct business in Thailand.

In the decade preceding Thailand’s financial crisis of 1997, the consumer driven West’s manufacturing industry’s desire for low cost components spurred the industries quest for low cost labor opportunities in a race to cut costs and gain market share. Thailand’s low cost labor market, backed by generous tax incentives provided by the Thai government, proved to be a fertile environment ripe for development. Once Thailand became entrenched in these global supply chains, they began to feel part of something much bigger than their own businesses (Freidman, 2005). During the first half of the 1980s, labor costs remained low due to the fact that this was a recessionary period and the government kept minimum wage changes below the inflation rate (isic.ucsd.edu/thailandhdd). Primarily agrarian, Thais came off the farms and out of
the rice paddies to join the lucrative job opportunities offered by Western, Japanese and Chinese manufacturing companies in Bangkok (www.wikipedia.org/wiki/EconomyofThailand).

Recovery from the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis relied on exports largely on external demand from the United States and other foreign markets. Since 2001, intent on stimulating the domestic demand and reducing Thailand’s reliance on foreign trade, the new government regime implemented a “dual track” economic policy that combines domestic stimulus with Thailand’s traditional promotion of open markets and foreign investment. Institution of Thailand’s Board of Investment (BOI) provides government support for the development of foreign owned businesses who wish to create joint ventures in designated manufacturing investment zones as well as other businesses particularly in electronics manufacturing, IT and food by offering tax incentives and tax holidays as well as other attractive perks. (www.Wikipedia.org/wiki/Economy of Thailand).

Despite the increasing labor rates, Thailand’s managerial experience, skilled labor, improved infrastructure, mature business practices, generous tax incentives, intellectual rights protection, the 1966 TREATY OF AMITY AND ECONOMIC RELATIONS BETWEEN THE KINGDOM OF THAILAND AND THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA providing equality of benefits to both sides (www.amchamthailand.com/acct/asp/ViewBusDoc.asp?BusDocID=17, 2007) and comparatively low wage earner rates continue to influence Western business investment decisions in favor Thailand over China, currently the most competitive manufacturing market (www.economist.com/manufacturinginAsia, 2007). Negotiations for a Free Trade agreement with the U.S. began in 2004 and have yet to be finalized (www.heritage.org/research/features/index/country.cfm?id=Thailand).
Since the turn of the 20th century, Thailand and America have maintained excellent political relationships.

With the onslaught of the electronics manufacturing business of the early nineties, Americans and Thais threw themselves into working relationships without much thought about how they would work together. While both nationalities have managed to successfully find common ground for negotiating, working and living together, cross-cultural understanding remains a challenge. Geert Hofstede in his Cultural Dimensions studies states that, “Culture is often a source of conflict than synergy. Cultural differences are a nuisance at best and often a disaster” (Hofstede, 2003). It is the interest of the study to examine the clashes and accommodations that exist in cross-cultural business practices between Thailand and America.
Literature Review

Overview of Thai culture

Thailand means "land of the free", and throughout its 800-year history, Thailand can boast the distinction of being the only country in Southeast Asia never to have been colonized. Their successful avoidance of colonization is due mostly to the Thai ability to form strategic alliances with foreign countries. In 1920 after the US gave up on their attempt to colonize Thailand, an American was instrumental in helping them rid themselves of all other foreign strongholds in the country. In WWII, Thailand, commonly known then as Siam, declared neutrality but turned against Germany when America entered the war (Towes & McGregor, 2000).

As far as the Thais are concerned there are three ways of doing things: the right way, the wrong way and the Thai Way that is an integral and complex system of social order standards. Thailand has a strong hierarchy:

- The Buddhist monks
- The king and the royal family
- The military branches that have historically held most of the power in the country
- The Chinese who manage the trade and money industries in the country (the king is Thai-Chinese as well as most high-ranking officials)
- Public servants
- The growing middle class
- Farmers and laborers, and their dependants—the biggest group in the population

A person’s position in the social hierarchy determines his or her ability to hold certain educational degrees and consequently, key positions within a company. If there is any conflict
between social or work obligations, the social obligations will take precedence (Towes & McGregor, 2000).

Ninety-five percent of Thais are Buddhists and religious practices are a way of daily life. One of the teachings in Thai Buddhism is the belief in rebirth whereby every life, human or animal, is only a phase in a cycle and every good or bad deed brings about an appropriate consequence either in this life or in some future life. The belief holds that whatever does or doesn’t work out in this life, will be rewarded or duly punished in the next life. The tenants of this belief system help Thais accept their place in the hierarchy of both life and work. They tend not to seek, to desire or be more than what is accepted within their community hierarchy (Towes & McGregor, 2000).

The Thai people adhere to the tenets of national loyalty. From the speech entitled “The 21st Century: The Rise of Asia” on 26 November 1996, former prime minister of Thailand H.E. Gen. Prem Tinsulanonda explains that confronted with obstacles, the Thais have dealt with these problems with a certain degree of success because of the belief in the life and Buddhist Philosophy of “Adherence to the middle way of moderation, perseverance, tolerance of differences and adaptation has been its (Thais and Thailand’s) strength”. The middle way keeps Thais on a path between extremes in life and reduces conflicts. Thais who adhere to Buddhist teachings are much respected (Towes & McGregor, 2000). Tolerance of differences creates a climate of non-judgment of other’s religious belief systems, sexual orientation, personal habits, or social conduct. However, the Thai’s apparent disposition of tolerance should not be confused with indifference. Thais care deeply about the protocol that is the structure of their culture and are offended deeply when Americans are derelict in Thai etiquette.
Touted as the “land of smiles”, Thailand adheres to a strict protocol of politeness. The smile is a symbol of their peaceful nature, but it is also a symbol of self-discipline and control of one’s temper. While doing business in Thailand, a foreigner’s understanding of protocol can make or break a deal. In the hierarchy, foreigners are considered part of the rich, elite class. This class distinction requires the person to assume certain responsibilities such as: employing Thai nationals, caring for the sick, giving generous amounts of money to the poor (farm and labor class), riding in the back seat of the car if you have a driver, dining with your own class, ignoring laborers holding very low skilled jobs (monetary support and accolades are given behind the scenes to the laborer’s supervisor who passes on the praise), personally paying for company parties—in fact the richest person generally picks up the check in a restaurant or pays for damages in the event of an automobile or any accident. Being generous, smiling, calm, respectful, groomed and modest will earn the respect that will mitigate the foreigner’s ignorance of the intricacies of Thai protocol (Towes & McGregor, 2000).

Definition of Organizational Culture

According to Schein in his book *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, culture of a group can be formally defined as “a pattern of shared basic assumptions that was learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems” (Schein, 2004, P.17). The methods of socialization and “how things are done” are taught through stories, shared legends and myths.

Thailand’s culture maintains its distinctive qualities perhaps due to the strict belief system of Buddhism commonly held by nearly the whole population and the loyalty they share for their benevolent king. Icons of the Buddhist religion are everywhere and foreigners of all
persuasions are invited to participate in daily rituals. Present in every business and home is a Buddhist altar. Daily rituals, customs and religious holidays provide solid reinforcement of the common belief system (Towes & McGregor, 2000). Most men and some women at one time of their life spend a year in the monastery as a practicing monk or nun.

However, over the last decade the infusion of western culture into the capital, Bangkok, has obviously left its mark on the Thai culture with internet cafes, easy access to mobile phones, I-pods, a variety of international cuisine offerings, western fast food chains, new Thai fast food chains, numerous theaters showing currently released movies in English language, extravagant shopping centers, modern sky train system and more casual, trendy, fashion forward clothing styles. Handicrafts have an artistic individual quality—a minute shift from the repetitious pattern method of the last generation. Thai and Western cultures are becoming blurred (Askew, 2002).

**Geert Hofstede’s Cultural Dimensions**

In a study of international company culture, Geert Hofstede along with IBM, analyzed a large data base of employee values scores of more than seventy countries. From his initial results, Hofstede developed a model that identifies four primary *Dimensions* to assist in differentiating cultures:

I. **Power Distance (PDI)** — extent that less powerful members of an organization expect that power is distributed unequally

II. **Individualism (IDV)** — versus collectivism, the degree that individuals are integrated into groups

III. **Masculinity (MAS)** — versus its opposite, femininity, refers to the distribution of roles between genders or how solutions to problems are found. Masculine = Assertive and Feminine = Modest and Caring

IV. **Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI)** — deals with a society’s tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity.

A fifth dimension was added, Long Term Orientation (LTO), for Shinto and Buddhists societies after the original study, and it was applied to twenty-three of the fifty original countries
in his study. Based on *Confucian Dynamism*, this fifth dimension deals with virtue, regardless of truth. Values associated with LTO (Long Term Orientation) are thrift and perseverance; values associated with STO or Short Term Orientation are respect for tradition, fulfilling social obligations and “protecting one’s face” or making sure you do not put yourself in an embarrassing situation. Both positively and negatively, values of this dimension can be found in Confucian teachings (Hofstede, 2003).

**Thailand’s Cultural Dimension Ranking:**

In his analysis of Thailand, Hofstede explains how he uses his rankings to define the characteristics of the country’s workforce culture. He asserts that Thailand is somewhat unique from other Asian cultures with its two highest rankings being equal at 64—Power Distance (PDI) and Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI) (Hofstede, 2003).

The high Power Distance (PDI) is indicative of a high level of inequality of power and wealth within the society. This condition is not forced upon the population, but rather accepted by the society as a part of their cultural heritage. The ranking of 64 is slightly lower than the Asian average of 71 (Hofstede, 2003).

The equally high Hofstede Dimension ranking of Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI) indicates the Thai society’s low level of tolerance for uncertainty. In an effort to minimize or reduce this level of uncertainty, strict rules, laws, policies, and regulations are adopted and implemented. The ultimate goal of this population is to control everything in order to eliminate or avoid the unexpected. As a result of this high Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI) characteristic, the society does not readily accept change and is highly risk adverse. The Thailand rank of 64 is slightly higher than the Asian average of 58 (Hofstede, 2003).
Thailand's lowest Dimension is Individualism (IDV) at 20. The low score indicates the society is *Collectivist* as compared to *Individualist*. This is manifest in a close long-term commitment to the member 'group', is that a family, extended family, or extended relationships. Loyalty in a collectivist culture is paramount, and over-rides most other societal rules and regulations. The Thai society fosters strong relationships where everyone takes responsibility for fellow members of their group (Hofstede, 2003).

Thailand has the lowest Masculinity (MAS) ranking among the Asian countries listed at 34, compared to the Asian average of 53 and the World average of 50. This lower level is indicative of a society with less assertiveness and competitiveness, as compared to one where these values are considered more important and significant. This situation also reinforces more traditional male and female roles within the population (Hofstede, 2003).

Thailand is predominantly Buddhist, with 95% of the population practicing the religion of Buddhism. The precepts of Buddhism include leading a moral life, being mindful and aware of thoughts and actions, and developing wisdom and understanding (Hofstede, 2003).

Due to the philosophical similarity of Buddhist and Shinto societies, these countries that are predominately Buddhist or Shinto have been consolidated for the purposes of this study conducted by Hofstede. These countries have the closest correlation with Hofstede’s Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI), which is the same correlation that the majority of Catholic countries have demonstrated (Hofstede, 2003).

**U.S. Cultural Dimensions Ranking:**

The high Individualism (IDV) ranking, 91, for the United States indicates a society with a more individualistic attitude and relatively loose bonds with others. The populace is more self-reliant and looks out for themselves and their close family members (Hofstede, 2003).
The next highest Hofstede Dimension for Americans is Masculinity (MAS) with a ranking of 62, compared with a world average of 50. This indicates that a dominate characteristic with most Americans is a higher degree of gender differentiation of roles. The male dominates a significant portion of the society and power structure. This situation generates a female population that becomes more assertive and competitive, with women shifting toward the male role model and away from their female role (Hofstede, 2003).

There are only seven countries in the Geert Hofstede research that have Individualism (IDV) as their highest Dimension: USA (91), Australia (90), United Kingdom (89), Netherlands and Canada (80), and Italy (76) (Hofstede, 2003).

The United States was included in the group of countries that had the Long Term Orientation (LTO) Dimension added. The LTO is the lowest Dimension for the US at 29, compared to the world average of 45. This low LTO (Long Term Orientation) ranking is indicative of the societies' belief in meeting its obligations and tends to reflect an appreciation for cultural traditions (Hofstede, 2003).

The next lowest ranking Dimension for the United States is Power Distance (PDI) at 40, compared to the world Average of 55. This ranking is indicative of a greater equality between societal levels, including government, organizations, and even within families. This orientation reinforces a cooperative interaction across power levels and creates a more stable cultural environment (Hofstede, 2003).

The last Geert Hofstede Dimension for the US is Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI), with a ranking of 46, compared to the world average of 64. A low ranking in the UAI (Uncertainty Avoidance Dimension) is indicative of a society that has fewer rules and does not attempt to
control all outcomes and results. It also has a greater level of tolerance for a variety of ideas, thoughts, and beliefs (Hofstede, 2003).

From the table below, the contrast between value systems as determined by Hofstede is more obvious. Thailand’s high Power Distance (PDI) rating contrasted with US’s low rating indicating that Thais will be open to the wealthier nation’s business acumen. Likewise, the low rating of the US indicates the business style will seek to stabilize the given business culture through cooperation.

While Thailand with its high Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI) ranking will want to know the rules to avoid making mistakes, the low ranking of US will be open to and respectful of the protocol. However, because the Thai’s view of Americans as an elite hierarchy they will not expect Americans to conform or follow their traditional code of behavior.

Thais and Americans are polar opposites on the Individualism (IDV) ranking with Thai’s society as Collectivist, preferring group decision making while the US is glaringly individualistic. As managers, Americans do well since they fit neatly into the hierarchy system of leadership. Should an American work at a lower level like washing windows or sweeping the floor, he or she will not be respected and the situation might become chaotic.

The Thai low ranking in the Masculinity (MAS) category indicates a traditional patriarchal kinship system. The king of Thailand is the most prominent model of this paternal role and hierarchal respect for elders, elite class and authority figures. American managers will be viewed by their Thai workers as a father figure who will take care of them. Deviation from this position risks compromising their trust.

Perhaps it is this juxtaposition of Long Term Orientation (LTO) ranking between the Thais and the Americans that explains the attraction of the West to Eastern countries. The low
US ranking indicates an appreciation for culture and tradition and Thailand is steeped in rich cultural customs.

**Table 1: Geert Hofstede’s Cultural Dimensions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cultural Dimensions</th>
<th>World</th>
<th>US</th>
<th>Thailand</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PDI (Power Distance)</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UAI (Uncertainty Avoidance)</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IDV (Individualism)</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAS (Masculinity)</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LTO (Long Term Orientation)</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Understanding the business culture and applying the proper use of this knowledge will reduce the level of frustration, anxiety and concern and yield more successful results in the organizational endeavor. Hofstede states that, “we all tend to have a human instinct and tend to think that we are all actually alike on the inside, but we are not” (Hofstede, 2003). Luckily, the ways that Americans perceive, imagine and understand Asia, its culture, and its people has increasingly received scholarly attention (Klein, 2003). Initiated by historians the field of Asian American studies is widespread. Numerous Silicon Valley’s electronics manufacturing businesses have sent many business executives and their families to Asia and particularly Thailand to work and live, inspiring intrigue in Asian culture. Southeast Asia is one of the world’s most important growth opportunities; an area sometimes called “the Asia America is ignoring” (Kanter 1996).
Thailand’s Business Style: Trust and Tradition

Asia’s emerging middle class has generated a class of business people sometimes referred to as the “West’s Oriental Other” or as “Westernized or Globalized Yuppies” preoccupied with the same consumer items that are associated with their Australian, American or British counterparts (Pinches, 1999). Predominantly Chinese heritage, Pinches attributes this industrious group of middle class Thais to their forefather’s predilection to assimilate into foreign cultures—behavior that has served them well for centuries as they traveled and emigrated throughout Asia as well as nearly every country in the world (Pinches, 1999).

Weidenbaum details the phenomenon of Asia’s family-run conglomerates. He asks the question, “Why have family-owned conglomerates founded by ethnic Chinese become key economic factors throughout Asia?” The answers are trust and tradition.

A notable economic change is taking place overseas led by Chinese business families, or what Weidenbaum calls the Bamboo Network. He asserts that this is one of the most important economic developments since the end of the Cold War and it is occurring with little notice in Southeast Asia (Weidenbaum, 1999). In Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Taiwan, Singapore, Vietnam, the Philippines and the Coastal Zone of China the family run business that has been a tradition for centuries is now firmly embedded globally in the form of family owned conglomerates (Kanter, 1996).

Valuable lessons for Western businesses can come from learning how these families came to dominate and to propel the economies of Southeast Asia. With little more than the shirts on the backs, the founders of this Bamboo Network typically fled China at about the time when Chairman Mao Zedong proclaimed the founding of the People’s Republic of China on October 1, 1949. Like an army of Horatio Alger, folks succeeding through the strength of their own efforts,
they worked hard in their new homes, saved most of what they earned and then put it all into their own businesses (Weidenbaum, 1999).

The founders of these overseas Chinese businesses are an intriguing breed. They typically started with little wealth, building their family enterprises from scratch and working, saving, and reinvesting at prodigious rates. The Confucian ethic is alive and well in the *Bamboo Network*. The family is the basic unit of management. This provides loyalty, flexibility, speedy decisions and low overhead. It also breeds a crucial business element: *trust* (Weidenbaum, 1999).

Traditionally, the head of the family makes the main decisions. Within the organization, the flow of information is tightly controlled. The amount of company knowledge given to a specific subordinate depends on the degree of trust that the leader has in the individual. Most, if not all, of the top management positions are filled by family members. Other strategic posts are usually reserved for close relatives and for those who have worked for the family for long periods of time. The authoritarian leadership style seems to work because of the moral authority of the founder and his unrivaled experience (Weidenbaum, 1999).

Typically, one generation of family leadership passes on control to the next. The advantage of these management chains is that these companies have not had to downsize to stay competitive because they never upsized in the first place. Due diligence is not about an endless array of studies, memos and meetings with a large and expensive retinue of lawyers, accountants and investment bankers. It is a conversation among trusted friends and relatives. Kinship, dialect and common origin from a clan or a village provides the basis for mutual trust in business transactions in the network; even when conducted at great distances (Weidenbaum, 1999).

A common core of values is remarkably persistent: notably hard work, conscientiousness, loyalty to superiors and trust among family and friends. The resultant certainty and informality
facilitate business transactions over or around governmentally imposed barriers. These enterprises have unique abilities to avoid dealing with government regulations and restrictions because of their ability to shift money, people and resources from one country to another (Weidenbaum, 1999).

The typical Bamboo Network enterprise has a low profile, which reduces the likelihood of becoming a target of public criticism or governmental action. These enterprises serve as middlemen, making components for someone else. The owners know the key government officials of the countries in which they operate and they are great deal makers. Yet they do not produce or market any major consumer product and Weidenbaum claims that, “they therefore have little experience in managing large manufacturing operations”. For instance, these conglomerates are much better at real estate than in automobile production; much better in hotels than in aircraft production (Weidenbaum, 1999).

Synergies between East and West may be difficult to arrange, and trying to transform an informal Chinese enterprise into a bureaucratic, Western-style corporation will likely fail. Still, partnerships can be mutually beneficial if the players appreciate the differences in each other's operating methods. There is no question that the ethnic Chinese business can offer essential entree to leading growth sectors of Asia.

There is no doubt that the Bamboo Network will survive and prosper. Ownership in these companies will move into the hands of the new, Western educated generation. To be seen is how they will exploit the tremendous possibilities that arise from combining their unique cultural characteristics with modern management and advanced technology. The major remaining question is whether the American-educated younger generation of Thais can successfully combine the best of the East and the West.
The shortcomings of the family-run businesses of the *Bamboo Network* are not to be underestimated, especially their low-tech nature, limited marketing capability and inherited management styles. Nevertheless, China and Southeast Asia are the booming part of the global economy. We must know more about them because they can be our customers, suppliers or competitors—and likely all three (Weidenbaum, 1999).

Weidenbaum advises, “There is much that Western businesses can learn from the *Bamboo Network*:

- First and foremost, family business is alive and well. While the largest United States corporations are downsizing and spinning off their divisions, the human scale of a family-based enterprise can be a great advantage.

- Second, keeping overhead low and making speedy decisions are essential in the global marketplace. You don't need big staffs if the key people are competent and have the authority to act.

- Third, trust is a key advantage. It can bridge great distances and overcome all sorts of obstacles. If you can trust the honesty and competence of your key people, you will save time and money (Weidenbaum, 1999).

**Conclusion**

In his introductory chapter, Pinches cautions, “when culture is used in analysis, it is often given a simplistic and deterministic role” (Pinches, 1999). Askew’s definition of Thai culture is, “Thai culture is the framework of idioms and practices that act to structure relationships, define identities, and inform the strategies of groups and individuals towards the attainment of power and prestige” (Askew, 2002). Understanding of these idioms is accessible through analysis of the context in which these practices are played out. The Thai culture with its idioms and practices
have interacted dynamically with changes in economy, introduction of new products, foreign cultural influence and lucrative trade, East/West education options, and the emergence or rearrangement of new societal hierarchies such as the new rich and Thai/foreign relationships.

The complex network of the Thai socio-cultural system deserves comprehensive analysis to fully grasp the nuances of foreign cultural interaction. To do otherwise would risk considerable oversimplification or a misinterpretation of Thai value orientations. Particularly in Bangkok, there are pluralities of cultural patterns that intersect and coexist: in particular the subculture of the bureaucracy—a particular hybrid of tradition and modernity—coupled with the strength of Chinese patterns of family affiliation and business organization within the Sino-Thai elites and the middle classes (Askew, 2002). Understanding these cultural paradigms will ultimately bridge the gap of combining the best of the Eastern and Western cultural business practice that will provide a climate for greater success in business negotiations and performance.

An old Mandarin proverb offers a final note of caution: "If you think you understand, you don't really understand".
Methodology

Purpose

There is no question that Thailand plays an important role in linking western values with eastern norms. Strategically located in the center of Southeast Asia, Thailand has been a melting pot of cultures since the Middle Ages when borders were blurred and foreigners were wandering the world laying stake to Asian real estate. Thai people’s tolerant nature, coupled with the shared values imbued by Buddhism, has allowed the culture to grow while maintaining its unique integrity.

A few comprehensive studies of Thai culture are available. As Thailand as a business partner becomes more coveted by the US, the importance of cross-cultural relations information will become essential to ensure the probability of business success.

It is my hope that through personal interviews using open ended questions, I will be able to better understand how Westerners are viewed by Thailand’s managers and workers. In this discovery process, I hope to uncover valuable information that could be shared with organizations intending to create or improve their business climate working with Thais.

Method

The phenomena of the *Influence of Western Culture on Thailand’s Culture in Businesses in Bangkok*, will be studied from a grounded theory approach; a qualitative method of research. Grounded Theory methods consist of systematic inductive guidelines for gathering, synthesizing, analyzing, and conceptualizing qualitative data to construct theory, (Smith, 2004). This method is appropriate for this study since it will be focused on gaining an understanding of the subjective experience of the Thai view of the influence of Western culture on Thai culture.
The qualitative research design will consist of a formal semi-structured interview process where the researcher will ask six selected participants to answer certain pre-defined questions along with possible follow-up and clarifying questions that arise as the information from the participant unfolds. The interview may be modified during the interview to fit the participant’s unique experiences.

Participants will be interviewed individually. Each interview will be recorded in its entirety, with the permission of the participant, and it will be transcribed by the researcher or a third party transcriber. The researcher will review the data, develop codes, and define emerging themes and relevant categories. Data will be compared and contrasted and conclusions may be drawn. A hypothesis may be formed for later evaluation.

Site

The site for this study will be at a location suitable for the participant, possibly their office or a prearranged meeting site in Bangkok or the US if the participant meets the requirements.

Sample

The sample will be six functional technical managers that are Thai Nationals with a good command of the English language. The criteria for the sample group will include: High level manager—Director or above, Good English language skills, Experience working with American or other Western English language country. Hopeful will be an equal gender, male/female, and ratio.
Access and Sample Selection

Participants will be sought through personal contacts and business associates in Bangkok. Presently, I have managed to attain the commitment from two Thai nationals who wish to participate and reside in Bangkok.

Other participants will be identified through referral and networking with business associates in Bangkok. I will confirm that each individual meets the criteria for the study and place those who do on a selection list. Those who do not meet the criteria will be advised accordingly and thanked for their consideration.

Participant Introduction to Project/Invitation to Participate

Participants will be selected from the list of interested individuals who met the criteria in the confirmation process. If more than six people qualify, priority will be given to those who have the most experience working with Western companies. Participants will be invited to participate in the proposed study via email invitation:

1. After identifying the potential list of participants, an individual email will be sent to each potential participant. (Refer to sample email correspondence in Appendix B.) Candidates will be invited to respond via email or telephone directly to me or my contact in Bangkok, if they choose to participate.

2. Participants who respond affirmatively to the invitation to participate will be contacted by me directly via phone, email or contact in Bangkok to schedule a face to face interview date, time and location. Phone interviews are not an option since I will be observing body language and facial expression as part of the interview process. A consent form (see Appendix C) will be forwarded to them for their review prior to the scheduled date of the interview.
3. The person to be interviewed will sign and return a copy of the form prior to the meeting or if that is not possible, the interviewee will be asked to sign it prior to our proceeding to the interview.

Confidentiality and Anonymity

All information given by study participants is confidential and individual contributions are anonymous. All data will be stored in a secured, confidential location accessible only by me and a third-party subscriber. Each participant will be identified on the tape by first name and participant code only.

All data and notes will be kept in a locked cabinet in the researcher’s home office for the duration of the research process. All tapes of interviews will be destroyed upon completion of the final paper.

Voluntary Participation

Participation in this study is completely voluntary and participants are free to change their mind at any time and choose not to continue even after signing the consent form.

Informed Consent

Human participants will be protected in accordance with the ethical standards taken from the APA Code of Conduct (2002). Informed consent documents emphasizing confidentiality will be given to each participant and discussed in detail prior to the interview. The researcher will verify that the participant understands the documents and the process. Participants will be given time to read and sign the consent forms. The researcher will assign pseudonyms (participant numbers) to each participant to insure confidentiality and anonymity. All code notes and participant identifications will remain anonymous.
All participants who respond affirmatively to the invitation to participate will be requested to sign the informed consent form. The consent form explains the above, that participation in the study is voluntary and that participants are free to change their mind at any time, even after signing and submitting the consent form. The form confirms that the information provided during participation in the study will be confidential and anonymous. (Refer to Appendix C.)

**Debriefing Procedures**

At the conclusion of the interview, individual participants will be given the opportunity to debrief with the researcher, to ask questions or express any concerns they may have. I will respond to their questions and concerns at that time. If, at any time, after the interview session participants wish to address any outstanding issues or questions regarding the interview or final report, they will be invited to call or email me directly to schedule a follow up session. A summary of findings will be made available to them if they request one.

Participants will be invited to contact the JFK University Project Advisor if they have questions or requests for additional information regarding this study and the interview process:

Sharon Mulgrew, M.P.H. – Organizational Psychology Project Advisor/JFK University

Email: SAMulgrew@aol.com

Telephone: 510-450-0378

**Interviews**

Data collection will consist of in-depth semi-structured interviews with six individuals who met the criteria. Each participant will be interviewed once with the possibility of a follow up phone call for clarification or expansion of a thought or view expressed by the participant. All questions will be open-ended and will be asked in a non-leading neutral manner that allows
the participants to express themselves in their own words. (See Appendix D for an outline of the primary and possible follow up questions.)

In the interviews, the participants will be asked a line of questioning that will describe their experience with working with Western businesses:

Sample Questions:

- What is your position and scope of responsibility in your company?
- Please explain how you interface with Westerners that you are doing business with or want to do business with.
- Tell me about a time when you were working with a Westerner and you did not understand what he or she was trying to tell you.
- How do you think Westerners view Thai people?
- How do you think that Western culture has made an imprint on Thai culture?
- What changes in Thai culture have you seen over the last ten years? Twenty years?
- How has Western culture changed how you conduct business?
- What advice would you give a Westerner about conducting business in Thailand that would improve both parties understanding of each other?
- In your organization, if you could change one thing, what would that be?

Each interview will be recorded, with the written permission of the participant and will be transcribed by the researcher or a third party transcriber. Field notes will be recorded at the end of each interview.

**Researcher Bias**

The researcher conducting this study has a bias toward the personal attributes of Thais because of her work experience and her past personal interface with Thais in a business capacity.
Current affiliation with Thai business managers is nil. Through networking with personal contacts, interviewees will be identified therefore; name of interviewees will be attained through social network. She is aware of this bias and will remain open to all data as it is presented. Due to the criteria of the research method, bias awareness is particularly important and an awareness of that bias will be maintained by the researcher.

**Limitations**

The findings of this study will be tentative. The sample size and procedures for participant selection are appropriate for qualitative research. They will not, however, due to the small scope of this study, support generalization to a larger population consensus. All interviewees will be Thai nationals with Thai language as their first language. Interviews will be conducted in English language, the interviewer’s first language. Interviewer’s Thai language skills are virtually nil. Possible conflicts with English language definitions/translations. Thai’s tend to be conflict avoidant and therefore might be reluctant to provide candid and specific criticism of Western culture. The social networking’s of participants might strengthen or detract from the accurate assessment since they might be talking amongst themselves to ascertain a consensus of Western culture.

**Data Analysis**

This is an exploratory study. Data from interview transcriptions and field notes will be categorized and coded. Interviews will be transcribed and field notes maintained. Data and field notes from each interview will be coded and categorized. The researcher will pay particular attention to patterns that may develop and apply additional codes and categories accordingly, if applicable.
Three interviews will be conducted first. They will then be analyzed to discover whether or not additional questions are necessary to improve the data and to determine what questions would be added or changed for the remaining three interviewees.

Each interview will be analyzed separately. Upon completion of all six interviews, they will be cross-analyzed. Similarities and differences will be noted. Patterns will be coded to identify common themes. When information is in response to probing questions outside the standard questions, the researcher will indicate that in the analysis.

Each of the participants will be described and quotes taken from their interviews will be applied to illustrate common themes and responses.

Conclusion

Upon completion of this study, it is hopeful that information regarding the sensitivity of the influence western culture has on Thai culture will contribute to a better understanding of working relationships with Thais and Asians in general.
Results

Purpose of Research

Using grounded theory, in 2007, I conducted interviews of five participants at their respective factories in order to identify and understand the Thai manager’s view of working with American companies and the effects that American culture has had on the Thai culture and related work styles. Participants are all senior level managers and working for American companies located in Bangkok, Thailand. Prepared questions were asked and responses recorded, transcribed, and then decoded to identify recurring themes as well as individual ideas.

Participants

Criteria that all five participants met are:

- They are Thai nationals
- Manager level position
- Employed by an American company in Thailand
- Work with Americans either as a peer, subordinate or Thai counter-part (training to replace an American manager)
- Fluent enough in English to give English responses to the questions
Table 2: Participants involved in the Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P1 Procurement Manager-Food Manufacturing</td>
<td>30-40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2 Office Manager-International Philanthropic Organization</td>
<td>30-40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P3 Factory Manager-Food Manufacturing</td>
<td>30-40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P4 Vice President Operations-Electronics</td>
<td>50-60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P5 Owner: International Export</td>
<td>50-60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participant Responses to Questions

**Question 1:** *What* changes in Thai culture have you seen over the last ten years? *How* do you think that Western culture has influenced these changes in Thai culture and in Thai business overall?

A shift from family owned business serving primarily the Thai marketplace to mega western corporate concerns serving the international community has created more jobs, incentives for higher education, opportunity for greater monetary rewards and major behavioral adjustments for Thai nationals as they experience and learn the fast-paced western style standard of doing business.

This shift has presented many challenges to Thais as they blend the various western cultures with tenets of their steadfast culture. American culture has proved to be a formidable challenge as Thais seek to accommodate their new corporate guests and their companies in their country.
Findings

- **Pressure from Competitive international community to change from family business model to international corporate model and standards**

  America’s capitalistic presence in Thailand has provided opportunities as well as headaches. P1 explains, “In terms of general business in Thailand, the management style becoming more like a commercial company. Before, the businesses were more family businesses with everybody working very closely like brothers and sisters.” She further explains, “People are beginning to look outside of their organization for different management styles, instead of my son and my niece and my nephews are going to look after my business next so every management level or position will be filled by my family”. Family businesses are now looking to international opportunities and seeking managerial and tactile talent from outside their respective clans. P5 concurs, “The change in Thai business is the force to move from family type business to more international level.” Still, each Thai boss holds a somewhat paternal view of their workforce. P3 reports that, “I see the people like friend, family, when I work with them and they respect me.”

- **Shift in Thai work culture**

  However, the shift from the security of the family’s business to competitive western owned businesses established a new climate and work culture that demands a departure from the customary Thai work ethic. P1 points out that, “Now they are more commercialized, people interaction less personally, more business-like communication, like, this is my responsibility, this is your responsibility, if there is any problem, this is not my responsibility, this is your responsibility, that sort of thing.” The familial communal work experience enjoyed by Thais in the past is being replaced by narrow focused job descriptions and individual work tasks. Workers find they now own their jobs where in the past, the task was shared and no one in particular was
Culture Clash and Accommodation

responsible for the success or demise of the assignment. Instead, it was the owner that received
the recognition and praise and he or she would selflessly demur their success and confer the
praise to the whole group or company.

P5 reported a shift from a loyalty to people to a loyalty to the success of the company and
the opportunities the company provides, “In the old time, people would hang around as long as
they liked the boss regardless of the bad time or good time. Nowadays, I will be with company as
long as the company (is) in secure position.”

- **Interest in Western Business Culture seems compelling because western culture is
  perceived to be more advanced than Thai Business Culture**

“I think they (Thais) want to become more internationalized. Basically, they want to
understand how the Westerns work and why are they so successful in certain ways. I’m not
saying the Thai style are wrong, a lot of family businesses have been very successful. I guess it’s
just the way westernization comes into the country”, says P1. The Thai culture is steeped in a
hierarchal tradition that has persisted over many centuries. For some, working for an American
compny is a chance to become a member of the international community.

- **Western Companies offer standards and more attractive amenities**

Aspiring to sustain a competitive edge and attract top Thai talent, American companies
built state-of-the art factories and provided new technologies and training, cost of living
allowances, transportation to and from work, uniforms, breakfast and lunch, sports field for
football, clean restrooms and work environment, health insurance, vacations, severance packages
and above average pay rates. Participants report that Managers were reimbursed for additional
education and were offered highly attractive salaries and perks. P4 tell us, “The Americans made
a nice facility and most of the managers were American and I was a manager along with Dr. S
and many other Thai managers. The nice thing the Americans bring are standards. We (American company in Thailand) pay more than the Thai companies so the Thai workers are very happy. We give them (daily workers and female office staff and managers. Managers, for the most part, do not wear uniforms) uniforms, health benefits, transportation, cola, and free lunch—I think you enjoyed lunch here today.” P5 adds, “American change in Thai business is the force to move from no standard to good standard! Business employees are being treated better. (There is) good improving in sanitary issue even though a long way to go for a real good standing (standard) living of life.”

- **Western culture offers a more open communication style**

  Some Thais say what they appreciate the most is the American open communication style. P2 shares this insight about working with Americans, “I’ve got to tell you a little bit of my background because when I was 18 I got a chance to go to America as an exchange student so before I worked for Thai companies for one year and when I work here I feel more comfortable because when I have a problem I can talk because in Thai culture sometimes we have to keep our mouth shut. We cannot say everything but here, I will say 90% if I have a problem I will tell them. I think America(n) is more supportive. I really enjoy working here. P3 cautions, “Thai has a strong culture, a good one you have to keep it but there’s a lot of things are not good you have to do a better way.” Thais are committed to self-improvement and the overall improvement of their co-workers and their country. They want to be heard by their managers and know their input is valued.
Summary

The answers to question 1 by participants (P1-P5) revealed some pros and cons about their personal experience with working with American companies. In summary, findings are:

- Thai awareness of cultural differences: Thai traditional, patriarchal kinship system v. American rugged independent nature and the accompanying accommodating verses assertive work styles.
- Thai desire to learn western business and international standards—American open, forthright style is appreciated. American emotionally charged obsessive, self-centered style is not appreciated.
- Thai’s have had to adjust to American “ownership” or personal merit work style verses the Thai collective support style with no personal ownership. In other words, the possessor of the job owns (is responsible for) the success or failure of the project.
- Thai’s are willing to accommodate the western culture and work style because the high value the Thais place on western education, training and exchange of knowledge with new technologies supersedes the often difficult accompanying work style expected of them by their western managers.
- Thai personal experience living, working and attending school in America is viewed by Thais as a huge advantage with trying to understand the American mindset and their ability to effectively interpret American behavior. Further, Thais with an American education feel they are better equipped to help co-workers understand the motivation and intent of their American bosses and the work these bosses are requesting/requiring.
Culture Clash and Accommodation

Question 2: Please explain how you interface with Americans/Westerners that you are doing business with or want to do business with?

As Thai nationals take positions within American companies located in Thailand, they begin working and combining the two very different cultural mindsets. Previous concepts, impressions and beliefs about Americans and the American superior or hierarchal culture are rocked and grounded as Thais experience the American business culture in its raw, unadulterated form. In summary, findings are:

Findings

- **Adjustment issues with Thai/American social hierarchy protocols in the work place**

  Thais struggle to adjust and accommodate their American boss and the American’s ignorance or disregard of Thai cultural protocol in the workplace. P2 states, “So even if you are a boss and you are young and you have your co-worker older, you have to listen to your co-worker not just everything from your opinion.” In Thai hierarchal work style, it is important to maintain respect for elder co-workers. P2 goes on to say, “For example here, I am younger than Katin (company maid) and if you look at the position I have with her I can tell her “you do this” but some things I cannot. I cannot order her but I can ask her for a favor. Sometimes she interrupts me but I cannot say ‘I am busy’. Because she is older and I cannot upset her. I would be not polite.”

  A complex hierarchal code is embedded in Thai culture. This code demands respect for age and elders, position in the company and social position, i.e. wife, husband, child or relative of managing director, familial patriarchal hierarchy and job duties. P2 explains, “But still I confirm that Americans are more open than Thai because if you come to work and you have your co-worker who is older than you some things you cannot say, you have to respect them and I can
see here the president is really young, she is 30 something, and the other volunteers are mostly 50 and up but I can see that when they have a problem they listen to the president but Thai not always.”

- **American and Thai assumptions regarding respective social and cultural norms transform when they begin working together**

As Thais get to know their American bosses and counterparts better, they find that not all Americans are the same and that their original perceptions regarding Americans, the American culture and individual personalities is altered as they build relationships with each other. P1 explains, “My idea was that I think that all Americans were nice, you know, I think all foreigners nicer than Thai, but when I work here I got a chance to see many people coming in and going out so it’s just like the same, Thai or American, we have good people and we have bad people.” Americans are being assessed on their own merit. P5 states, “What I found out when work with American, they seem not to prepare themselves in trying to understand the local culture first, but rather want to implement the American business style as soon as they can. They tend to forget about worker level, who are Thais and (who) have difficulty try to understand American culture.” American business style is to ignore Thai cultural formality and move right to business as usual; American style.

- **The opposing communication style of Americans and Thais present a disturbing social challenge**

American bosses encourage communication and sharing ideas. P2 says, “Here I would say I work in the American way. We talk more and we discuss more, if we have a problem.” P2 goes on to say, “But if we are in a Thai company, sometime you just do whatever your boss tells you to do, but you will not go to your boss and say “Hey, I think this will not work, I have a
problem with my job. Not many people will do that.” American work style is more open and interactive than the Thai work style which is formal and hierarchal with clearer rules of order. P3 states, “In our company I see a lot of people just follow what someone is saying. Thai people are not open much about what they think about work. They just try to follow what the boss tells them to do or say in a meeting. If they disagree and they don’t speak up in the meeting they should go talk to the boss after that. They can, but they mostly don’t.” Thai hierarchal decorum is tenacious even though their opinions are sought and encouraged by management. P4 explains, “Americans are impetuous. They need everything right now and then it changes and they expect us to jump on it. We jump and it changes again. Commitment means nothing. They will commit to anything and then try to make it happen. Always in a hurry. If they don’t get it done in time or can’t get the material, then it is just the way it is. Take it or leave it!”

- **Buddhist religion plays a part in defining the ethical culture of Thai people**

  Thai Buddhist culture affects Thai business practices and Buddhism with its teachings is a large part of Thai culture. P4 states, “We are Buddhist and so we always want to do the right thing. That is our culture. You Americans have no culture.”

  Thai culture is fastidiously defined while American culture is not easily identifiable. P5 explains, “The impact from Buddhism teaching to work place is not what I see from the Buddhism teaching but rather the beliefs that actually is to not really Buddhism teaching such as the exact time to do a thing such as the blessing ceremony. Those things that I see to have impact in conducting business in Thailand are (that) people believe in exact time to open factory, to start operate the machine, etcetera. People believe in having blessing ceremony (includes correcting incorrect placement of entrances, objects and the people working in the building) to get rid of all evil from the company rather than the purpose of making merit. People believe in right location
or right direction of things around you such as working table (correctly placing a table that the worker will be using that will guarantee optimal success) rather than what you should do to get your job done correctly. It is more like Fung Sui.” An essential component of a Thai business is the right placement of the building, entrances and everything in the building to ensure all evil is removed.

- **Thai/American cultural differences with respect to decision making in companies**

  P4 states, “I am used to working with Americans and what I like is that they are direct with what they want to say. They are very confident and do not mind making decisions. They will also admit to making a mistake and change the plan to make it right. Thais are reluctant to ask for clarification regarding a task, but will seek help from their own work class. As a collective, they will decide how they should proceed with the task. Making a mistake is very difficult for the Thai worker because they lose face and become embarrassed easily when they are in the spotlight.”

  P3 states, “Thai will not say until it is really, really tough. They will try to solve their problem by consulting with their friends before they ask their boss (for help).” Speaking up and asking for clarification of a task or project remains a difficult for Thai workers. Preferring to maintain a hierarchal protocol, Thais will try to either work out their problem alone or they will go to their co-workers for an explanation. P2 says, “The Thai worker will not say anything and try to do the job but when it goes wrong they worry. I tell them, ‘go and ask the American and they will help you’. It is getting better, but still difficult for Thai person. It is not our custom to ask.”
• The incentive to bridge the Thai/American cultural gap is strong

Both Americans and Thais value knowledge and education. American companies bring new technologies from the west to share with Thais keen on learning new skills and methods.

P5 states, “I found also that American boss is more open in giving you knowledge when compare to Thai boss.” The incentive to create or improve working relationships is strong for many reasons. P1 reports that “a lot of Thai investors are looking for western management skills, so that a company will go off and find a contract person to come in. (They) like ‘Know-How’ to teach their Thai employees so they are starting to be more open in the way they do business.” Thai investors seek ways to impart western business style to their Thai managers. P4 states, “I am very much enjoy working with them as I have a chance to discuss with them openly of my opinion.” Thais enjoy working with Americans because they feel they can be frank and open with their opinions and that their opinion is encouraged and respected. P2 states, “Here I would say I work in the American way. We talk more and we discuss more, if we have a problem.”

Education, new technologies and training methods that American companies provide and encourage is an attractive feature and incentive to work with or for American companies. P1 states, “To become more organized our manager brought us Microsoft Outlook program and we all must use it. It is difficult at first but now I like it. We are more organized. It is better than before.” P4 tells us that, “If a manager wants to have a higher education, we will pay as long as it is related to their work. We also provide training in our training center here at our facility. Our daily workers prefer to stay here.” “Generally, if I want to go to a seminar”, says P5 “my boss will agree. It is no problem.”
Summary

The answers to question 2 by participants (P1-P5) revealed some pros and cons about their personal experience with working with American companies:

- Thai issues with Thai/American social hierarchy protocol in the work place: American’s ignorance or disregard of Thai cultural social protocol, a complex hierarchal code embedded in Thai culture.

- American and Thai assumptions regarding social and cultural norms change with direct working experience: Both Americans and Thais find their original cultural beliefs of the opposite culture change as they begin to work with each other.

- Thais find that American bosses encourage communication and sharing ideas, that the American work style is more open and interactive than the Thai work style that is formal and hierarchal with clearer rules of order. Thai hierarchal decorum is tenacious even though their opinions are sought and encouraged by management.

- Buddhist religion plays a part in defining the ethical culture of Thai people in their business practice—Thai culture is fastidiously defined while Thais feel that the American culture is not easily identifiable.

- The opposing communication style of Americans and Thais present a disturbing social challenge: while American bosses encourage communication and sharing ideas, Thais prefer to not ask questions and instead work out issues with co-workers. Thais do not like pressure, but prefer clear, defined timelines.

- Cultural differences with decision making: Thais are reluctant to ask for clarification regarding a task, but will seek help from their own work class and as a collective; they will
decide how they should proceed while it is perceived by Thais that Americans make
decisions easily, don’t mind making mistakes and will effortlessly modify their decision.

- The incentive to bridge the Thai/American cultural gap is strong: both Americans and Thais
value knowledge and education, American companies bring new technologies from the west
to share with Thais keen on learning new skills and methods.

**Question 3: How has American/Western culture changed how you conduct
business—changes you like, dislike, what things interfere and/or you avoid?**

Company demands for productivity causes Thais and Americans to work harder and become
mindful of accommodating and combining the ethics and work styles of the two cultures.
However, there are hardships as the two cultures clash in principle and behavior differences.

**Findings**

- **American independent work ethic versus the Thai conformist work style**

  The American work style encourages the person to think independently and use initiative
while Thai culture is more paternal and encourages conformity and compliance from workers. P1
says, “With the western style of working, especially the American style, it’s “this is your task
and go off and do it and give me a report on your progress.’ So basically we are given the
freedom to complete that task and they are there and they guide you. In the Thai style it is like
the parents and the kids, ‘this is how you should do it, you’re doing it wrong’, that sort of thing. I
think, for me, western style teaches you more how to be creative and (use) initiative.”

  However, Thais are uneasy with an independent work style and prefer more Thai style
guided tasks. P1 states, “There is a lot of resistance to change. They are not really scared of
change; they just want to know ‘if I change, what is the outcome of that change? Is my job going
to be better?’ Some might be insecure and have questions in their minds before they actually change but once they know ‘this is how I’m going to do the job’ and say ‘I have a good idea of how to do the job’ and your boss says ‘Ah, you are very good!’ That encourages them and they say okay, this isn’t so bad, I can figure out how to do this job’ and they come out with more ideas.”

The Thai worker is cautious about change and is concerned about how they will be affected. With reassurance, they begin to adapt and enjoy the independent work style. The downside that P5 observes is that “Western business style also causing the problem of ‘not my responsibility’ attitude instead a good team work as sometime an individual performance is more important that team work performance.”

- **American directness is appreciated but emotional outbursts are difficult for the Thai worker**

Americans lack of control of emotions is viewed as culturally impolite and not respected. P2 says, “I think sometimes they (Americans) are too direct, like, if they are in a bad mood or they just want to get something done really quickly they express their emotions directly. Thai(s) control their emotions more.” Thais will not share their emotions directly leading American bosses to think all is well. P2 goes on to say, “But actually I think I like the American way more than the Thai way because Thai keep their mouth shut and they talk behind your back. But American will just tell you and it’s done, it’s over, they don’t talk behind you.” When the Thai begins to understand the American’s forthright nature, they discover that the outburst is not necessarily directed at them personally. The issue can be resolved and everyone can move forward. P3 states, “I like the western culture when boss is telling you to do it but if I disagree I
can tell him what I think but if he says “Do it!” Okay, we can do it. But we cannot have an open mind to share the idea.” Problem solving can be a contentious process.

- **There is an inequality of responsibility and opportunity for Thais working in an American firm**

  Thais feel that their American bosses are reluctant to hand over responsibility to capable Thais. P5 says, “I also dislike the attitude that Thais is un-trustable. Sometime at same level, expatriate will have more authorized (authority) than Thais.” Thais begin to feel that opportunity for advancement is quashed. P3 tells us, “We do the same job but we do not get same pay because we are not white—just kidding—but we do not have same as the American even when we do the same job. It is not fair.”

- **Blending the Thai and American business culture is challenging: individual work or education experience in America is an advantage for Thai workers/managers**

  Thais that have business experience in America are able to help both their Thai and American counterparts understand each other’s cultural differences. P4 states, “I have avoided becoming one of them (American). I like to keep my Thai values. That keeps me interesting (to Americans). I think I understand them more than they understand me. That is my advantage.” As a senior executive in the company, P4 is able to bridge the cultural gap and help both Thais and Americans understand each other better. P5 says, “I, myself, grew my career with Americans, so I must say American culture did not change how I conduct business but rather taught me how to conduct business.” The participants, P1, P3, P4 and P5 all agree that their experience and education in America made a big difference with how they are better able to work with Americans in an American company in Thailand. P5 explains that she earned her bachelor’s and master’s degrees in American schools in North Carolina and spent summers with Thai and
American friends visiting National Parks thought the US. P1 attended school in the US and still spends time there with her aunt who resides in the states. She reports that her daughter is now attending high school in the US and is living with her aunt.

**Summary**

Company demands for productivity causes Thais and Americans to work harder and become mindful of accommodating and combining the ethics and work styles of the two cultures. However, there are hardships as the two cultures clash in principle and behavior differences. In summary, findings are:

- American work style encourages the person to be creative and use initiative while Thai culture is more paternal and encourages conformity and compliance from workers. This shift is appreciated and presents challenges. Thais feel Americans directness is good, but emotional outbursts are undignified. Thai workers feel better about change when they get a lot of support and confirmation they are on the right track.

- Inequality is felt by Thais: the belief is that they cannot be trusted to do an equal job as their American counterpart.

- Personal experience working in America is an advantage: Understanding American culture is an advantage for Thais with bridging the cultural gap because they are able to help co-workers who do not understand as well as they do.

**Question 4: How do you view the future of Thai/Western business relationships?**

Thai participants remain optimistic about future relationships with western businesses.
Findings

- Thais and Americans enjoy working together overall and view American companies as a good opportunity for Thai nationals

Participants feel that working relationships with Americans are positive for the most part. P1 states, “I hope we will be working with western companies in the future for a long time. They like talking to us and joking with us. We have opportunity with western companies.” P2 adds, “I think now Thai understand Americans more than in the past. I think Thai like the American way.”

Thais now have more experience with working with American companies and wish to find other jobs within American firms. “As we have the bulletin board, for the many looking for a job, 99% of them will come to me and say, ‘I just want to work with Americans.’ I am serious!” (P2). P2 says the prevailing view of Americans is positive, “Thai think that Americans are the best. They think Americans are more generous and kinder than the other nationalities.”

- American companies bring new technologies and good jobs to Thailand

Overall, the western influence has been seen as positive by providing more good jobs, money and advanced technology to Thailand. P3 says, “Western business is good. It’s good for the people to have new technology and good jobs. We need more jobs and more money to take care…pay taxes and go to the mall.”

P3 also alludes to the influence western business has on Thailand’s socio-economic structure with higher taxes and shopping malls. P5 explains that the future relationship with American firms is sound. “The future of our relationship with westerner is good.” P2 says, “You can ask any Thai person, they would rather work for an American company. I am not kidding.”
• Both Thai and American businesses profit from American companies in Thailand

Western companies have enjoyed a sound and profitable relationship with Thailand. P4 explains, “It is profitable for companies to work in Thailand because the labor rate is cost effective and Thais get along well with Americans. Yes, we will be working together for a long time. P5 says that Thais are learning international standards for doing business: “There will be more and more Western styles business companies in Thailand as export become one of important business activity. Exporting business will require the exporter to follow what the importer needed. International standard will be implemented more and more. Thai people will try to improve themselves to be able to work better with international standard requirements.”

Thailand’s growing international export market encourages Thais to learn international and/or western style business practice. This shift in business perspective from national to international marketplace drives the interest in implementing international standards that American companies freely share.

• Broader use of the English language brings Thais and Americans together

American companies place a high value on Thais fluent in English. P5 states, “Use of English language will increase tremendously; this will help to improve the communication understanding for both parties. English literacy for Thais translates to better communication and more opportunity in the international community.

Summary

The answers to question 4 by participants (P1-P5) explain their view of the Thai/American future relationships. In summary, findings are:
Participants feel that working relationships with Americans are positive for the most part because they feel that there is mutual respect and enjoyment from each other’s company.

Overall, the western influence has been seen as positive by providing more good jobs, money and advanced technology to Thailand as well as joint venture opportunities for Thai and American businesses.

Western companies have enjoyed a sound and profitable relationship with Thailand and Thais value the exchange of knowledge in the areas of international standards and business practices.

American business demand for English speaking Thais: English literacy for Thais translates to better communication and more opportunity in the international community.

**Question 5: How do you think Westerners view Thai people and Thai business?**

Participants feel that Thais and Thai culture is not fully acknowledged and understood by their American managers. Further, they feel that their culture is not respected.

**Findings**

- Westerner’s lack understanding of Thai language, i.e. context and idiom, and acceptable cultural behavior

Western managers sometimes have difficulty understanding Thais as they are attempting to communicate in English and in their frustration, will display an emotional outburst. P1 states, “The westerners want to teach us a lot of new things. Sometimes they get angry and slam things. This is bad form in Thai culture. Our GM does not speak Thai language very well and he can get confused about what we are trying to tell him. He is big boss. I don’t care that he is bigger than
me, but others worry about their jobs. My English is pretty good and I am the purchasing manager so we communicate quite well.”

Patiently, the Thai manager will control his or her emotions and try to help co-workers manage the shock from the anger directed at them. P4 states, “The Americans think they understand Thai culture, but they don’t. We are a Buddhist country and very tolerant of many points of view. Americans think we understand them, but mostly people are just being nice. I understand Americans and when one of our managers gets upset over something that was said to them by an American manager, I say well, we just have to understand that they are in a hurry and do not take the time to be polite. We work it out.” For Thais, it is important to know that it is part of the American culture to be in a hurry and sometimes in too much of a hurry to be polite to their Thai workers.

- **Thais maintain a hierarchal standard among Thais, but are able to retain a peer to peer relationship with Americans at any social-economic level**

Thai hierarchal protocol is expected in the workplace. P2 explains, “And in the workplace, if someone is going upstairs and I have something that needs to be upstairs I can ask a volunteer (American), ‘will you please bring this upstairs with you?’ No problem. But Thai will not do that, if they are older. I would not ask. So I think that’s good when people help each other out equally.”

When working in the office, Americans in Thailand tend to maintain an equality posture—unlike Thais which can tend to be arrogant commensurate with position. P2 tells us, “The first year I worked here, one volunteer, her husband worked at the embassy, I think he wasn’t an ambassador but the other position... an attaché I think. And she comes in and she’s just like you, normal American. And later I knew that she was a very high position. In Thai if you are
the wife of someone who has a high position you don’t act like that. Thai would have a driver, they would dress up and they would talk to you like, you know, you know what I mean.” If a Thai person holds a high socio-economic position, it would be evident with the way they speak, their bearing and dress although, there are some exceptions, but always, respect is expected and given.

Opportunity for advancement and high level positions within western companies has improved over the past ten years and future prospects are optimistic. P5 reports that “Ten years ago it can be said that Westerner view Thai people and Thai business that we are so behind in people, technology and business styles. However, it is the proof now that Thais is able to learn and improve themselves as more and more companies have no hesitant to have Thais for the top position.” P4 briefly describes the merits of Thai/western enterprise, “Thailand is an opportunity to expand the global economy of the world. We offer a safe place to work and the people are willing to learn and advance. Thailand is an opportunity.”

- **Thais are concerned that westerners may be taking a unequal advantage of their expertise and exploit their cheap labor rates**

  As Thai managers take on more responsibility for the company’s success or failure, some notice that compensation for Thais and westerners is not equal. P3 says, “My pay is good. If I was doing a job like western people were doing it, they would be paid more, much more, by the company. I would like them to consolidate, not only Thai people but western people too (doing the same jobs). But some western people working like that, they are suspect in the company—I still see them but they are paid a lot more money than Thai.” Advancement to top positions is not accessible. P3 adds, “We cannot be manager because we don’t have blonde hair, blue eyes, I’m joking.”
Summary

The answers to question 5 by participants (P1-P5) explain their view of the Thai/American future relationships. In summary, findings are:

- Westerner’s lack understanding of Thai language, i.e. context and idiom, and acceptable cultural behavior presents a problem with Thai managers and staff in the workplace. An outburst of anger by anyone, but particularly by western managers, causes Thais to become worried about their performance and ability to keep their jobs.

- Thais maintain a hierarchal standard among Thais, but are able to retain a peer to peer relationship with Americans at any social-economic level. This double standard is prevalent complaint throughout Thai culture and is bothersome to Thais that work in American companies and have acculturated American values.

- Thais feel that westerners take a unequal advantage of their expertise and exploit the available cheap labor rates for selfish gains. Some Thais see that they are getting less pay than their western counterpart for the same job. Also, top positions may not be available to Thais but held chiefly by westerners only.

Note: Because as my participants pointed out, Q6 & Q7 are so similar, I have combined the findings from both questions into the following key themes.

Question 6: Given these changes and influences, what do you think is the best way for Thais and Westerners to work together?

Question 7: What advice would you give a Westerner about conducting business in Thailand that would improve both parties understanding of each other?
Advice is readily and enthusiastically shared by the participants of this study about how Americans can improve their working relationship with Thais in their respective organizations. Thais and Americans/westerners have been working together for many years now in Bangkok, yet the blending of the two cultures in companies still have basic behavioral, philosophical and cultural obstacles to unite.

Findings

- **Communication is key and westerners who wish to work in Thailand should learn the language and understand the Thai communication style**

  It was recommended by all the participants that learning and understanding Thai language by westerners wishing to do business in Thailand is key to facilitating good communication. P1 (Q7) says, “It is about communication. Thais and western people need to understand each other. When we say yes, we are thinking and hearing what you are saying. We are not used to giving our ideas and we are not sure you want to hear what we have to say.” P3 (Q7) adds, “Western people should learn the language if they want to work here. P5 (Q7) adds, “Accept that English is not a native language of Thais, thus making sure that both parties well understand the conversation is very important in getting the job done correctly.”

  Taking the time to ensure all participants in a project understand the objective and method is key in any organization anywhere in the world. Thais expect westerners to communicate better so everyone is successful. P1 (Q6) explains, “They (Americans) should learn our language and they will be able to understand us better. We like to help other people and we like to help western people learn about Thai people and Thai culture. Western people are usually too busy. They want to work all the time and are always worried. This makes Thai people worry
that they are not doing a good job. We need to communicate more. It is all about communication…” and (Q6) “We are not used to giving our ideas and we are not sure you want to hear what we have to say. Thais need a lot of support. It is best to tell them they are doing well. I try to do that so my people will feel secure that they are doing the right things.” P5 (Q6) explains further, “Find the best ways to be able understand and listen to each other better in order to make sure that the instructions or requirements are fully understand for correct business action. Example: by nature Thais have tendency to be too shy to accept that they do not understand something during the conversation but rather go afterward either to the person or others. This kind of things I do believe it has cause unforeseen problems in doing business as the person then do not fully understand what he/she should do.”

- **Thai participants advise westerners that learning and understanding Thai culture is another key element that will help to bridge the cultural gap**

  ‘P1 (Q6) says, “This is our country. Western people should learn our culture if they want to work here.” P5 (Q6) advises the westerner: “Patience and tolerance. Americans can be very quick to judge and make decisions without all the information. There is a way to ask people to get things done.” P2 (Q7) adds, “They have to learn some Thai culture that maybe causes culture shock. When I first worked here and I had so many bosses in my room. One lady, she was a committee member and she used her feet to point at a box and she said “Natalie, what is in that box?” Pointing with your foot is a taboo in Thai culture.

  Controlling emotions is another key element of success for westerners in Thailand. P5 (Q7) says, “Majority of Thais people do not like shouting and yelling in office. For Thai people good manner show class of people.” P2 (Q7) explains, “To work here, I think maybe they control their emotions and many Thai cannot accept when they talk direct, they are very
sensitive. Because sometime I understand that you need to be honest with people but sometime Thai just cannot take that and if you work with someone older than you, even if you do not agree with them just listen to them that will help you a lot. Keep smiling and laugh a lot, they like that. P2 (Q7) explains the significance of the Thai smile during a conversation, “They always laugh, Thai. Even in bad situation, or good situation, they just laugh. In a bad situation, that does not mean they laugh at you. They don’t know what to do so they just smile and laugh.”

- **Formal cross-cultural training will benefit both Thai and Western cultures**

P3 (Q7) suggests formal training in cross-cultural communication and understanding, “Cultural training would be a good idea. I went to training and it was good to understand western thinking more. I think they got to understand Thai thinking better—they got some but not everything.” P5 (Q7) suggests that westerners take the time to learn the many layers of Thai culture they will be working with: “Learn some basic information about local traditional culture, business culture, local main religion and mentality of Thais first prior start the job. Learn the company that he/she is going to work with, its culture before making any change which he/she believe will help to improve the company. People reaction can make the change more difficult and end up with bad result. P4 (Q6) advises, “Really, you should learn to respect the culture here. The Thai workers have their ways and they don’t appreciate westerners coming over here and not paying attention to how things are done. Overall Americans and Thais get along well together. A lot of managers from your country are married to Thai women and have families. P3 (Q7) sums up the usefulness of understanding Thai culture, “They (Americans) should learn Thai culture first, if they know better they can change anything.”

- **Sensitivity to community relations, customs and respecting the community that is working for you: Thais share their sentiments, observations and advice.**
Some Thais feel they are marginalized in the Thai (American/Thai Company) workplace, P3 (Q7) observes, “Because they (Americans) are here today and gone tomorrow. They don’t have a responsibility to the people.” P3 (Q7) “Give back to the world, give back to the people. Not only make money but give money back to your home in Thailand (expats living in Thailand). I don’t like it when they (expats) are counting the money and go back to their country.” P5 (Q7) “Accept that even though you came from a civilized country but it does not mean that you know better than Thais. Accept that expatriate does not have all power in Thailand that everyone will have to listen and follow you but rather look for the tactic what you can do to make people listen to you and cooperate with you. Dictatorship works but leadership works better.” (Q6) “Be more quiet and listen: Chai yin yin (keep a cool heart).” P3 (Q6) “Take care of the community. People are not machines.” Community development and support is held in high esteem by the Thai hierarchal, paternal culture. P2 (Q6) explains, “For most (Thais) I think family comes first. Parents. Money is important, yes, important but they (Thais) will care about their family more than money. Foreigners respect the king and queen and you do not say anything about the king and the queen…the family.”

- **Thais are interested in self improvement and wish to advance to top, key positions in companies**

Thailand is about people and community. While Thais are interested in making money, they view their company as an extended family and expect to be treated as a valuable asset to the organization in which they belong. P5 (Q7) explains, “Do understand that Thais also looking forward for career growth, be précised/open to them to help them moving their career growth. This is also a plus for company in building people asset. People are the most valuable asset to a company or organization.
Summary

The answers to questions 6 & 7 by participants (P1-P5) explain their view of the Thai/American future relationships. In summary, findings are:

- Communication is the key attribute for westerners who wish to work in Thailand. Thais feel that westerners should learn the language and understand the Thai communication style because it is easy for westerners to misunderstand verbal conversation context as well as behavioral/body language styles indigenous to Thai culture. Conversely, Thais can easily misunderstand emotional outbursts of anger and feel personally threatened.

- Thai participants advise westerners that learning and understanding Thai culture is another key element that will help to bridge the cultural gap. Thai culture is rich and distinct on many levels with numerous taboos and hierarchal protocols that are not easily abandoned by Thais working in western companies. Both cultures need to be understood in order to be embraced and accommodated.

- Formal cross-cultural training will benefit both Thai and Western cultures so that there is mutual understanding with regards to communication, behaviors, and work styles.

- Sensitivity to community relations and giving back to the community that is working for you by supporting the members of the organization as well as their family members would be appreciated and respected by your Thai community and workers. Also, it would be greatly appreciated if the American firm showed that they understood the socio-economic level of the workers by ensuring that their specific needs are addressed and met.
• Thais are interested in self improvement and wish to advance to top, key positions in companies and will be loyal to the company that is interested in supporting the career growth of the employee.

Summary of Common Themes

The most important key findings shared by the participants are that they feel that they are not respected as equals to their American counterparts; Thais feel they should be awarded the same opportunity, trust and compensation as their American counterparts. Another prevalent theme is that Thais feel Americans should gain a good knowledge of the Thai language and understand Thai culture, customs and protocol before trying to engage in a working relationship in companies located in Thailand. Learning to control temper and being polite is a theme that all Thai participants felt was essential for Americans to demonstrate if they wish to work in Thailand with Thai Nationals and be successful. Participants suggested that ongoing cross-cultural training would greatly benefit both Thais and Americans as it would encourage more effective communication and generate a higher level of productivity for the organization and its members.
Discussion

While conducting my literature review, I was surprised to discover quite a number of books that address Thai culture, information and advice regarding how Americans should or should not conduct themselves as residents in Thailand. The flaw, in my opinion, and it is a fatal flaw, is that the available literature regarding Thai culture is enveloped into a formulaic *do's and don'ts* that do not address the individual person or situation. Someone once told me that if you wanted to visit Thailand and you wanted to know what to expect, you should ask a Thai. It is my opinion that you would need to ask a lot of Thais to ascertain a good understanding of what you might expect. Further, you would need to be a keen observer of the people in Thailand and ask for help when you are unsure of a situation. The response might be a community pow-wow of sorts that is tedious for a lot of Americans, but the outcome will be reassurance that all parties can successfully move forward with the task at hand.

Bangkok, Thailand is a surprisingly changed city in the new millennium. It is a cosmopolitan city that is growing exponentially with expansive financial districts, neat little gated housing developments, high-end shopping centers and the expanding manufacturing districts surrounding Bangkok from Ayutthaya in the north to the deep sea port bordering Rayong. Centrally located, densely populated and highly multi-cultural, Thailand is the melting pot of Asia and is known for accommodating most cultures and cultural practices as long as they are not required to participate.

To meet the demands of the increasing European, American, Japanese, and Australian expatriate communities and accompanying businesses they created, Bangkok is racing to expand communities, services, roads and highways. Cranes identifying the construction sites of new high rise buildings can be seen by the thousands; as far as the eye could see and beyond.
My initial education regarding Thai culture was attained from the advice and point of view of various members of the diverse expatriate community that I lived in and worked with. As an American, I was considered very wealthy by Thais and placed on a hierarchal level akin to highly wealthy Thais. This level of respect that accompanied my imposed position was isolating because it is customary for Thais to maintain a role of highly diplomatic accommodation. For example, if a problem arose, my Thai employee/servants or co-workers would try to work out a solution and not “bother” me with the issue; trying to guess what I would prefer. If the problem was not solvable, I would generally hear about it when the issue reached crisis stage or I would just make the discovery on my own accord. This process of accommodation was not conducive to efficient communication and in fact, fostered mistrust because I knew I was getting selective information. At least, that was my first impression with working with Thais in Thailand.

Having had what I felt was enough advice from my expat friends and well meaning wealthy Thais regarding what I should be doing and how I should conduct myself, I began to observe customs and the actions of Thais, asking questions about their opinions regarding how we could accomplish a task while respecting each other’s cultures. This approach became an amazing dance of protocol and respect built on a tentative foundation of trust.

Personally, working for an American owned company located “upcountry” outside of Bangkok Thailand was a challenging adventure of balancing insidious pressure from naïve American management positioned in mid-western United States with the unswerving tempo of our Thai workers and managers at the Bangkok facility. Patient observation of daily operations coupled with appreciative inquiry of workers and managers provided valuable information to design strategic operation plans and an effective communication structure built on trust. The result was that information was being shared more freely and attention to problem solving
became more immediate with hierarchal protocols somewhat abandoned in favor of the higher purpose of thwarting a potential crisis. This new communication strategy, improved the overall productivity of the operation and consequently, bottom line profits.

Eventually, the expatriates working in our Bangkok manufacturing facility were able to hand over their jobs to their Thai counterpart and just a few expats remained in an advisory or liaison role along with an American CEO at the helm. This exchange of power and responsibility was accomplished by virtue of the fact that the Thai managers mastered the English language and communication between Thais and Americans was coherent. To their credit, American managers acquiesced to Thai convention that improved communication and working agreements for the two merging cultures.

Prompted by curiosity regarding how business practice in American companies located in Bangkok had transpired since my personal experience fourteen years ago, I went to Bangkok to visit businesses and interview the Thai managers now in charge. The hierarchal and patronizing Thai protocol was still somewhat in place, however, I was surprised by the candid answers to my questions regarding how Thai’s actually viewed working with Americans, their habits, understanding of Thai culture, how and where they felt Americans could improve their relationships with Thais in the working environment. This candid critique of Americans by Thais was a polar opposite from the fastidious diplomacy that I experienced when I was working in companies during the early nineties.

Interviews of five participants were conducted at their respective factories in order to identify and understand the Thai manager’s view of working with American companies and the effects that American culture has had on the Thai culture and related work styles. Interviewees were very interested in sharing their careful critique of Americans and the merging of Thai and
Western cultures—another surprise. Interviews with high level managers would last up to two hours! It was an honor to get an interview with such high level managers and then to have them spend so much time with me, was astonishing. I got the sense that they felt that they could share their thoughts in a non-threatening way through these interviews and they were earnest about wanting to share their opinion.

Politeness is obligatory in Thai culture and most Thais feel it is poor form to offer a critique of another person’s actions whether it is arrogance or insolence. I found that close observance of body language helped me determine if I was expressing myself in an appropriate manner. Discomfort with a question was indicated by the interviewee’s long pauses and by evading the question with a story addressing a different angle to the question. While communication and east/west cultural understanding has improved, a disconnect in communication, work style, work ethic and cultural protocol by Thais working with Americans remains a source of irritation that results in reluctant accommodation. The more senior interviewees were the most forthright with their critique of Americans.

A recurring theme by Thai managers was the American’s impetuous work style. One Thai manager expressed that this behavior by American management was his biggest source of headache at work due to the frequent changes in work plans/orders that created contention among workers. He reported that he was continually pulled off task or a project to mollify the turmoil that these change orders caused. Even though communication and east/west cultural understanding has improved, Thais experience a cultural disparity working with Americans and this discrepancy remains a source of annoyance.

However, joint ventures between Thai and American businessmen introduced new technologies, improved working conditions, established international standards and created
jobs—lots of jobs and opportunities that Thai’s feel are helping them become equal contributors in a world market. It was reported by some interviewees that Thai investors are now requiring their companies seek to employ western managers that will share their knowledge with Thai managers.

While difficulties with the clash of cultures between Thais and Americans is an ongoing challenge, the Thais that I spoke with feel that they prefer working with an American company because of the valuable exchange of technology offered, improved working conditions and benefits that American companies provide over Thai organizations. For example, American companies encourage training and education and will pay for their employees to attend seminars, hire supportive consultants and reimburse employees for completion of higher education degrees in their field. US companies implemented higher, competitive working standards in their Thai factories providing benefits such as: generous salaries, transportation, complimentary meals, free uniforms, overtime compensation, recreation fields for football and volley ball, paid vacations, paid monk leave and family health insurance among many other incentives. In some instances, housing was constructed by the company and provided to workers that had moved from upcountry to work at the factory.

Another dominant theme is the Thai cultural hierarchy. It is not polite to criticize or judge others—especially a person that ranks higher than yourself on the Thai social hierarchy scale. It is essential that this cultural hierarchal order is not overlooked when starting or running a company. Thais are used to being invisible and reluctant to attract attention. Bothering the boss about further instructions or clarity of a task the boss had previously explained, could be perceived that the Thai person is criticizing the boss for not explaining the task well or correctly. Conversely, American managers will not be respected if they do a job that is considered below
their rank, like sweeping the floor or washing a window or even jumping in to do the job that is the responsibility of a Thai. While American managers might feel they are being helpful, it is viewed as a criticism of the Thai person who owns the job. This American exuberance, though well intended, can cause the Thai worker to lose face that might even result in that person quitting due to shame and embarrassment.

For the Thai worker or manager, another source of frustration occurs when American business style is implemented without much introduction or understanding of Thai culture or its people. This causes Americans to appear unapproachable or uncaring. It is perceived by most Thais that the American business style is to dismiss Thai cultural formality and move right to the task. The assumption of the American boss is that both Thais and Americans are operating at the same level of competence. The results can be catastrophic and evoke a highly emotional response simply because there is a prevailing miscommunication regarding the exchange of information and understanding of the expectations of the Thai worker from his or her American manager.

Thais prefer to work as a collective group where responsibility rests with the success or demise of the project and not a particular person. American firms tend to expect personal ownership of a task or project and draw attention to the individual, such as overt praise or gifts, for personal success. While this practice might provide incentives for American workers to seek a higher performance level, it is a devastating embarrassment to a Thai worker or manager who prefers modest contributory recognition jointly with the rest of his or her team or cohorts. It is suggested by Thai managers that Western businesses may be going too far with encouraging individual performance over team performance metrics because of the Thai’s aversion to individual responsibility and/or recognition for personal job performance.
All participants in this project suggested that both Thais and Americans would benefit from formal cross-cultural training that would allow all parties to understand each other better and become more informed of cultural boundaries and ingrained cultural ethical standards. It is my opinion that ongoing cross-cultural training that included all levels of management would make a difference. After all, understanding one another is the first step in building trusting relationships.

Thailand is a predominantly Buddhist country steeped in Buddhist traditions along with Chinese ancestral worship, inherent superstitions and communal protocol. When I was invited to attend a funeral or a celebratory reception, I noticed that each event had some slight variation that was a distinct custom of the specific family. When conducting business in Thailand, it is imperative that the invitee attends the function. Not attending without a very good reason would be a sign of grave disrespect to the Thai individual and their family. That said, it is interesting to understand that Thais overall, are highly understanding and forgiving people. To be successful in business in Thailand, it really is all about respect, communication and more respect.

Recommendations for future studies may involve more exploration regarding available cross-cultural training programs for Americans wishing to live and work in Bangkok, Thailand including available ongoing cross-cultural communication training for staff, managers and workers. Thai interviewees expressed a keen interest in the west/east exchange of technological knowledge. Perhaps, further investigation of American and Thai operations abilities and practices would provide valuable information to support more efficient productivity within organizations in Thailand. Exchange of knowledge was of great interest to the Thai managers that were interviewed. Along with the desire for knowledge of sophisticated technologies, the Thai mangers were interested in training and education in areas such as: organizational
development, software organizational and management systems, team building exercises, meeting facilitation training, clean and safe work standards, environmentally safe manufacturing facilities and practices, and the possibility for higher standard of living for themselves and future generations.

Thailand, particularly Bangkok and the surrounding districts, is a proven region of opportunity for foreigners and Thais alike. Americans businesses during the last century in Bangkok have been solely American owned or American-Thai joint ventures. Both cultures have made progress with sharing technologies, skills and customs. While living and doing business in Thailand still has its challenges, as indicated by interviewees during the interview process, a lot of progress has been made to meet and mutually accommodate the blending of Thai and American cultures.
References


Appendices

Appendix A: Coding of Interviews--Subject 1-6

Appendix B: Invitation to Participate

Appendix C: Informed Consent Form

Appendix D: Interview Questions

Exhibits

Exhibit 1: BOI—Board of Investment, Investment Policies and Criteria

Exhibit 2: Gert Jan Hofstede, *The cultural biology of organization*
Appendix A

Coding of Interviews—Participants 1-6

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Age</th>
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<tr>
<td>P1 Procurement Manager-Food Manufacturing</td>
<td>30-40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2 Office Manager-International Philanthropic Organization</td>
<td>30-40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P3 Factory Manager-Food Manufacturing</td>
<td>30-40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P4 Vice President Operations-Electronics Manufacturing</td>
<td>50-60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P5 Owner: International Export</td>
<td>50-60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participants: Criteria that all five participants met are:

- They are Thai nationals
- Manager level position
- Employed by an American company in Thailand
- Work with Americans either as a peer, subordinate or Thai counter-part (training to replace an American manager)
- Fluent enough in English to give English responses to the questions
Appendix B

Invitation to Participate in this Study (Sample)

Subject: Invitation to Participate in Study, Clash and Accommodation: The Influence of Western Culture on Thailand’s Culture in Businesses in Bangkok.

Dear

I am a graduate student in Organizational Psychology at John F. Kennedy University. As part of the requirements for the completion of my Master’s degree, I am conducting a research study on the Thai’s personal point of view regarding the impact western culture has had on the Thai business culture. Since your experience and knowledge would be a great asset in my research, I am requesting your consideration to participate in this study.

The proposed study will ascertain valuable information regarding how Thais prefer to work with Americans or Westerners from English language countries. The study will be conducted through a series of individual interviews with high level Thai national managers from companies doing business with the US and other Western countries. Each interview is expected to be of 45-60 minute duration and will be tape recorded. Study participants will be asked to describe their own experience regarding what works and what does not work in business relationships with Americans or other Westerners. Data gathered in interviews will be analyzed and interpreted with the goal of enabling a more complete understanding of Thai culture and how Western cultures can work more effectively with Thai businesses.

Participation is completely voluntary and you are free to change your mind at any time and choose not to continue. Should you choose to participate, all information you give during the interview process will be confidential and your individual contributions will be anonymous. All data collected during the interview process will be stored in a secured, confidential location accessible only by me and a third-party transcriber. Each participant will be identified on the voice recorder by first name participant code only. I will also make a copy of the completed project report available to you at your request.

Thank you for your consideration. I sincerely hope that you will choose to participate!

If you have any questions or would like to talk with me further prior to making a decision to participate, please feel free to call or email me.

Sincerely,
Suzanne E. Rush
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Aptos, CA 95003 U.S.A
01.831.212.1223 (mobile)
01.831.689.9118 (home office)
01.831.689.9148 (fax)
srush555@gmail.com
Appendix C

Informed Consent Form

My name is Suzanne E. Rush. I am currently a graduate student in the Masters of Organizational Psychology program at John F. Kennedy University in Pleasant Hill, California. The research project is a requirement toward the completion of my Master’s degree. This research project is being conducted under the advisement of Sharon Mulgrew, M.P.H. – Organizational Psychology Project Advisor. She can be reached at:

   Email: SAMulgrew@aol.com
   Phone: 01.510.450.0378

Project Summary: The proposed study will focus on understanding the experience and opinions Thai managers hold regarding The Influence of Western Culture on Thailand’s Culture in Businesses in Bangkok, Thailand.

The study will be conducted through a series of individual interviews with Thai managers. Each interview is expected to be of 45-60 minute duration and will be voice recorded. Study participants will be asked to describe their own personal experience with working with American or western cultures in business in Bangkok, Thailand. You may also be contacted by phone at a later date for clarification or follow-up necessary to insure accuracy of the data.

Data gathered in interviews will be analyzed and interpreted with the goal of enabling a more complete understanding of how Thais prefer to work with Americans or Westerners from English language countries.

Voluntary Participation: Participation is completely voluntary and participants are free to change their mind at any time and choose not to continue even after signing this consent form.

Confidentiality and Anonymity: All information given by study participants is confidential and individual contributions are anonymous. All data will be stored in a secured, confidential location accessible only by me and a third-party subscriber. Each participant will be identified on the tape by first name and participant code only.

Availability of Results: A Summary of the results of this study will be available to participants upon request after completion of the study.

Consent: I hereby consent to participate in the above research project. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may change my mind or refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without consequence. I may refuse to answer any questions or I may stop the interview. I understand that some of the things I say may be directly quoted in the text of the final report, and subsequent publications, but that my name will not be associated with this study.

Participant Signature: _________________________________ Date: ________________
Name: (Please Print) ______________________________________

Witness Signature: _________________________________
Name: (Please Print) ______________________________________

Date:
Appendix D

Interview Questions

1. What is your position and scope of responsibility in your company?

2. Please explain how you interface with Westerners that you are doing business with or want to do business with.

3. Tell me about a time when you were working with a Westerner and you did not understand what he or she was trying to tell you.

4. How do you think Westerners view Thai people?

5. How do you think that Western culture has made an imprint on Thai culture?

6. What changes in Thai culture have you seen over the last ten years? Twenty years?

7. How has Western culture changed how you conduct business?

8. What advice would you give a Westerner about conducting business in Thailand that would improve both parties understanding of each other?

9. In your organization, if you could change one thing, what would that be?
Culture Clash and Accommodation

Exhibit I

http://www.boi.go.th/english/about/investment_policies_criteria.asp

Thailand BOI—Board of Investment

Investment Policies and criteria

In determining the suitability of a project for which investment promotion privileges are requested, the Board of Investment applies the following criteria:

- For a project with investment capital (excluding cost of land and working capital) not exceeding 500 million baht, the following criteria are used:
  - The value added is not less than 20 percent of sales revenue, except projects that manufacture electronic products and parts or process agricultural produce, and projects granted special approval by the Board;
  - Ratio of liabilities to registered capital should not exceed 3 to 1 for a newly established project. Expansion projects shall be considered on a case by case basis;
  - Modern production processes and new machinery are used. In cases where old machinery will be used, its efficiency must be certified by reliable institutions and the Board's approval must be obtained;
  - Adequate environmental protection systems are installed. For projects with a potential environmental threat, the Board shall prescribe special conditions on both the location of the project and the manner of pollution treatment.

- For a project with investment capital (excluding cost of land and working capital) exceeding 500 million baht, the above criteria shall be used and a feasibility study of the project, as prescribed by the Board, must be submitted.

- For a concession project or privatization of a state enterprise project, the criteria shall be based on the cabinet's decision dated 25 May 1998, as follows:
  - Projects of state enterprises shall not be granted promotion;
  - For a Build Transfer Operate or Build Operate Transfer concession project by the private sector, the state agency that owns the project must submit its project to the Board for consideration prior to any invitation to bid, and bidders shall be informed of any promotional privilege entitled to them, prior to the bidding. In principle, the Board will not consider a project where the private sector pays for a concession, unless such payment is deemed to represent a reasonable investment for the state;
  - For a Build Own Operate project, including a lease by the private sector or rental payment to the state, normal criteria are used;
  - For privatization of state enterprises, only expansions after the privatization shall be considered for promotion.

To relax the limitation of foreign shareholding in manufacturing activities and to facilitate investors on their investment, the following criteria are used:

- For a project in agriculture, animal husbandry, fishery, mineral exploration and mining and service business under List One of the Foreign Business Act B.E. 2542, Thai nationals
must hold shares totaling not less than 51 percent of the registered capital;
For manufacturing projects, in all zones, foreign investors may hold a majority or all shares in promoted projects;
The Board may specifically fix the shareholding of foreign investors on some promoted projects when it is deemed appropriate.

**To improve the good governance** of projects, the BOI has instituted a cap on a project’s corporate income tax holiday at 100% of invested capital. This was an administrative change initiated in December 2001. By establishing a cap, the BOI can improve transparency and perform better cost/benefits analysis when reviewing projects.
Exhibit II

http://www.gertjanhofstede.com/

Gert Jan Hofstede

The cultural biology of organization

We humans are social mammals. Very intensely social, in fact. That shows in the uses to which we put new technologies: communicate, organize, trade. It shows in everything we do. Even the most autocratic boss is a group animal. Social drives for dominance and being related are essential for us. But the devil is in the detail.

The unwritten rules of our social groups are what I call culture. Culture is biological. It has co-evolved with human nature and with human psychology for over a million years. Competition between groups has honed our collaborative capacity. Culture transmits itself through the generations despite huge societal changes. The formal rules of our institutions cannot work as intended without relations. And relations follow the unwritten rules of culture. Culture is hard-wired, but group identities are malleable.

Culture (along with a host of other things) also co-determines much of what happens in our lives and our jobs, and that is what I can tell you about. Leadership, trust, transparency, management, humour, rights, religion, you name it; culture plays a big role. And cultural evolution is happening all around us every day.