



Thailand

cultural note

Thailand is the only country in Southeast Asia never to have been a European colony. The country consistently remained free of European rule (a point of great national pride to the Thais) and signed trade treaties with both France and Britain under the rule of King Mongkut and his son, King Chulalongkorn. The name Thai means "free."

Country Background

History

Like other countries of Southeast Asia, Thailand was peopled in prehistoric times through successive migrations from central Asia. Evidence of Bronze Age civilizations in northeast Thailand illustrate the high level of technology achieved by prehistoric people in Southeast Asia.

During the eleventh century, the Thai people began migrating from southern China. (Some research indicates that they were forced out by the Han Chinese.)

From the thirteenth century to the early twentieth century, the country was called Siam. The name was changed to Thailand in 1939.

Thailand was ruled by an absolute monarchy until a group of foreign-educated Thais directed a military and civilian coup d'etat in June of 1932 and replaced the absolute monarchy with a constitutional monarchy. The current nation can be dated to that period.

In 1941 Japan occupied Thailand. After World War II, Thailand followed a pro-Western foreign policy.

Since the Second World War, a balance of power has been established between the military and the civilian leaders, with the king occasionally mediating. Whenever the military has felt threatened, it has seized power. This has become more difficult as a growing political consciousness has developed in the Thai people. The Thais hope that the days of military coups are now over.

Type of Government

The Kingdom of Thailand is a constitutional monarchy.

Thailand has a prime minister and a parliament with two legislative houses, but their power has been limited by the military. Membership in the lower house is by election, but in the upper house it is by appointment, and the military is well represented. Generally, the upper house has supported the military, while the lower house has been more likely to oppose it.

Language

Thai, which is linguistically related to Chinese is the official language. Several other languages are spoken, including Chinese, Lao, Khmer, and Malay.

Religion

About 95 percent of the Thais are Theravada Buddhists (the Theravada school of Buddhism is an early form of Buddhism). About 3 percent of the population are Muslims, with the remaining 1 percent split between other religions (including Christianity).

Demographics

Thailand has a population of about 57 million. Nearly 10 percent of the population lives in Bangkok, the country's capital and largest city. About 78 percent of the people are ethnic Thais, 13 percent are Chinese, and the remaining 9 percent are a mixture of other Asians and non-Asians.

Cultural Orientation

Cognitive Styles: How Thais Organize and Process Information

The Thais cultivate alternatives and so are open to information on most issues. They live in a concrete, associative, pragmatic world where the present is more important than the future and the person takes precedence over the rule or law.

Negotiation Strategies: What Thais Accept as Evidence

The truth develops from subjective, fatalistic feelings on the issue modified by faith in the ideologies of Theravada Buddhism. Thais with higher education from European or U.S. universities may develop their truths from objective facts.

Value Systems: The Basis for Behavior

Religion plays a very important part in a Thai's life, but it does not dictate his or her every move. There are no absolute demands because their form of Buddhism permits selective conformity. They are free to choose which precepts of Buddhism, if any, they will follow.

Locus of Decision Making

The individual is responsible for his or her decisions. Thais are nonassertive, as well as being very conscious of the feelings of others and their position in the social hierarchy. Decision making revolves around the hierarchical, centralized nature of authority and the dependence of the inferior upon the superior. Thus, the typical supervisor is authoritarian. The superior makes decisions autonomously, and the inferior unquestioningly obeys. A benevolent superior and a respectful inferior is the Thai ideal.

Sources of Anxiety Reduction

The extended family is the basic social unit, with structure provided by the family, the village, and the wat (temple). The king is the primary provider of social cohesiveness. Thais refrain from developing specific expectations whenever possible because fate and luck play a major role in any event. You cannot plan because you cannot predict, so Thais live with a great deal of uncertainty. There is a high sense of self-reliance-what a person is depends on his or her own initiative.

Issues of Equality/Inequality

Status is of primary importance, as hierarchical relations are at the heart of Thai society. However, people gain their social position as a result of karma, not personal achievement. The royal family and the nobility are the only real class-conscious segment, although a class-conscious society is emerging. Regional and ethnic differences are socially and politically significant. This is a male-dominated society.

Business Practices

Appointments



punctuality

- Punctuality is a sign of courtesy. Foreigners are expected to be on time.
- Traffic is extremely heavy in Bangkok, and floods make travel even worse. Allow plenty of time between appointments, especially during the rainy season.
- The best time to schedule a visit to Thailand is between November and March. Most business people vacation during April and May. Avoid the weeks before and after Christmas, and the month of April. Thailand's Water Festival is held in April, and businesses close for an entire week.
- Write a month or two in advance to arrange appointments.
- Arrange for a letter of introduction, and try to have an intermediary.
- Business hours are 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday.
- Shops are open from 10:00 a.m. to 6:30 or 7:00 p.m., Monday through Saturday. Smaller shops open earlier and close later.



Negotiating

- Your initial meeting with Thai business people may be over lunch or drinks, so that they can get to know you. However, do not expect to discuss business over lunch.
- Because of the Thai deference to rank and authority, all requests and correspondence must pass through many layers before reaching top management.
- Be flexible and patient in your business dealings. Recognize that the Thais do not follow the same relentless work schedule that other cultures do. Allow sufficient time to reach your goal.
- Never lose control of your emotions, and don't be overly assertive; that is considered poor manners.

- Thais avoid confrontation at all costs. They will never say "no," but will instead make implausible excuses or pretend that they don't understand English. They may even tell you that they must check with someone at a higher level, when such a person doesn't exist. Likewise, they find it difficult to accept a direct negative answer.
- Always present your business card, preferably with a translation printed in Thai on the opposite side. (You can have these printed in Bangkok.)
- Thai business people will be impressed if you learn even a few words of Thai.
- If someone begins laughing for no apparent reason in a business meeting, change the subject. He or she is embarrassed.

cultural note

direct confrontation is considered very impolite. Do not ask questions that require a value judgment (e.g., "Which of these competing products is the best?"). Such questions are much too blunt. Use more subtle questions, and slowly work your way toward the answer ("Which of these competing products do you use?"). But don't make assumptions about the answer (e.g., "So you use this one because it is best?" will probably elicit a "yes," even if the true reason for the preference is because a relative sells that brand).



Business Entertaining

- To entertain a small group, take them to a Western restaurant in a large hotel. Arrange a buffet supper for a large group. Always include Thai wives in business dinners.
- Expect to eat with Western-style forks and spoons. Keep the fork in the left hand and the spoon in the right (reverse this if you are left-handed). Cut with the side of the spoon, not the fork. Use the fork to push food onto the spoon.
- Never finish the last bit of food in a serving dish. Wait until it is offered to you and then refuse politely the first time. When it is offered again, accept; it is considered an honor to have the last bit of food.
- Drink tea or beer with meals. Drink water only if you have seen it being poured from a bottle.
- Many Thais smoke after dinner, but don't be the first to light up. Always pass cigarettes around to the men at the table. Although traditional Thai women do not smoke or drink in public, it is acceptable for Western women to do so.

Time

- Thailand is seven hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time (G.M.T. + 7), or twelve hours ahead of U.S. Eastern Standard Time (E.S.T. + 12).

Protocol



Greetings

- Press your hands together as though in prayer, keeping arms and elbows close to your body, bow your head to touch your fingers, and say Wai (pronounced like "why"). This traditional greeting is used for both meeting and departing.
- Thais will shake hands with Westerners, but they will be pleased if you greet them with their traditional greeting.
- When introduced to a monk, never touch him; simply give a verbal greeting without shaking hands.



Titles / Forms of Address

- Titles are very important to Thais.
- Many Thai business people are Chinese.
- Chinese names generally consist of a family name, followed by two (sometimes one) personal names. In the name Chang Wu Jiang, "Chang" is the surname (or clan name). He would be addressed with his title plus Chang (Mr. Chang, Dr. Chang).
- Chinese wives do not generally take their husband's surnames, but instead maintain their maiden names. Although Westerners commonly address a married woman as Mrs. plus her husband's family name, it is more appropriate to call her Madam plus her maiden family name. For example, Li Chu Chin (female) is married to Chang Wu Jiang (male). Westerners would probably call her Mrs. Chang. She is properly addressed as Madam U.
- Thankfully, many Chinese adopt an English first name so that English speakers can have a familiar-sounding name to identify them by. Thus, Chang Wu Jiang may call himself Mr. Wally Chang. Others use their initials (Mr. W J. Chang).
- Ethnic Thais predominate in government positions, but they will also be found in the business world.
- Since the adoption of surnames in the 1920s, ethnic Thais generally have two names. Their given name will come first, then their surname.
- Address people by their title (or Mr./Mrs.) and their given (first) name. The short Thai term for Mr., Mrs., or Miss is Khun (although there are longer forms as well). Thus, former Prime Minister Chatchai Choonhavan could be addressed as Khun Chatchai.
- Nicknames are popular in Thailand. Don't be surprised if the Thais give you a nickname, particularly if your name is hard for Thais to pronounce.



Gestures

- Public displays of affection between members of the opposite sex are not condoned. However, members of the same sex may touch or hold hands with one another.

- Never point your foot at anyone; it is considered extremely rude. Don't cross your legs with one leg resting on the other knee, and never cross your legs in front of an older person.
- Never touch anyone-especially children-on the head.
- Always give up your seat on a bus or train to a monk who is standing.
- Never walk in front of Thais praying in a temple.
- Beckoning is done with the palm down and the fingers waved toward the body.



Gifts

- Gifts are not opened in the presence of the giver.
- If you are invited for a meal, bring flowers, cakes, or fruit. Don't bring marigolds or carnations, however, as they are associated with funerals.
- Other popular gifts include women's cosmetics or perfume, brandy, neckties and clips, cigarettes, illustrated books from your area, dolls in native dress, and stationery.



Dress

- For business, men should wear a lightweight suit or slacks and a jacket, white shirt, and necktie; women should wear a plain, conservative dresses or suits. Women should not wear black dresses, a color the Thais reserve for funerals or mourning.
- Dress for success. The Thais are impressed with appearance because it indicates that you are of the upper class. Businesswomen usually wear full eye makeup.
- Men should wear slacks and shirts, with or without ties in casual settings; women should wear light dresses or skirts and blouses. Short-sleeved blouses are acceptable, but sleeveless ones are not. Both sexes may wear jeans (but may find them too hot). Shorts are acceptable on the streets, but not in the temples.
- Men should wear traditional summer formal attire for formal occasions-white jacket, black pants, and black tie; women should wear long dresses. Black is acceptable to wear at a formal event if it is accented with color.
- Wear old or inexpensive shoes when visiting temples. You must remove them before entering, and sometimes they are stolen from outside the temple.
- Never wear rubber thongs on the street; they are considered very low class.