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Some Cultural Aspects of Thai Companies, with Recommendations for Westerners

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1. Introduction

Thailand is not a mere tourist destination any more. Its rapid economic growth in the past years has turned it into a country where many foreign companies do business, invest, set up joint ventures, etc. Business and trade involve communication, and in the case of Thailand, for Westerners it is bound to be *intercultural* communication: communicating with Thai people whose values, practices and communicative style are very different from their own.

Some European companies, though willing to spend tens of thousands of dollars in studying market structure, technical aspects of the production process, legal aspects of trade with a foreign country, and the like, still feel reluctant to invest a much smaller amount into intercultural training for their representatives and/or expatriates who will work in a foreign culture. The results, often disastrous both in human and in economic terms, show them wrong. The present paper may help foreign businesspeople in Thailand in preventing some intercultural errors, and contribute to a better understanding between them and their Thai counterparts.

Originally, this paper was not conceived of as a stand-alone report. The survey on which it is based (for details, see the next section) was primarily meant to be a basis and a source of inspiration for in-depth interviews and case studies inside companies operating in Thailand that we want to carry out in the future. In addition, many of the results of the survey can only be properly interpreted if we could compare them with the results of a similar survey in Western countries, still to be carried out.

Nevertheless, we believe that the present study will in itself yield some insights into business-related aspects of Thai culture that Westerners may benefit from. Our general purpose is (a) to add 'flesh and bones' to some of the quantitative figures we find in the literature about work-related values in Thailand as well as (b) to specify some business-related aspects of Thai culture as it is described in the general literature about Thai culture.

Consider, as an example of point (a), the cultural dimension Hofstede (1980:92-152, 1991:23-48) calls Power Distance. With a Power Distance score of 64, Thailand ranks 22nd out of 53 countries, i.e., is located in the middle range of this dimension. In fact, the score for Belgium (65) is practically identical to that of Thailand. We may assume that cultures that rank at the high end of the Power Distance dimension will exhibit nearly all the features associated with high Power Distance (such as those listed in Hofstede, 1991:37), and that cultures which rank very low will exhibit almost none of these features. But with cultures that score in the middle, such predictions become impossible. They might exhibit some of the features associated with high Power Distance, but not others; or perhaps, exhibit almost all of those features, but to a weaker degree than high Power Distance cultures; or a mixture of both these possibilities… Putting the same problem in different terms: while the Power Distance Index scores of Belgium and Thailand are nearly identical, we cannot infer from there that hierarchical relations between bosses and subordinates are identical in those two countries. Clearly, a detailed and qualitative description of what Power Distance entails in each culture remains necessary.

Thailand never really ranks at the very extreme of any of Hofstede's dimensions, and is often in the middle range. Its scores on the five dimensions are as follows:

Power Distance: 64 (22nd of 53 countries)
Individualism: 20 (40th of 53 countries)
Masculinity: 34 (44th of 53 countries)
Uncertainty Avoidance: 64 (30th of 53 countries)
Long-term orientation: 56 (8th of 23 countries)

This itself is likely to be due to cultural factors, and in particular to Thai Buddhism, with its emphasis on balance and its general aversion of all extremes in life.

As to point (b) above, the general picture we get from the literature about Thai culture (see, for instance, Cooper & Cooper, 1990, Segaller, 1993, Klausner, 1993) includes (but is of course not limited to) the following features.

- An emphasis on 'cool-heartedness' *(jai yen)* as a way to maintain social stability and emotional control, a high degree of reluctance to display emotions generally.

- An emphasis on harmonious interpersonal relationships with a need for face saving and indirect communication patterns and the near-impossibility of any form of positive criticism.

- An emphasis on strict social hierarchy and respect *(krengjai)* of the inferior toward the superior (the father, the older person, the boss, …).

- A high degree of 'eclecticism' and syncretism (religious and general), the capacity of combining and integrating elements from to Westerners seemingly incompatible or contradictory doctrines and philosophies.

What we want to start probing in this paper is, how are these general values of Thai culture being implemented in a modern business environment? For instance, is it totally impossible to say no or to criticise? Do people never get mad or upset? Is there no dialogue at all between bosses and subordinate? Etcetera.

2.   The survey

In 1995 I taught a class in *Intercultural Communication in Business* to a group of 55 executives who were enrolled in an Executive-MBA Program at the Graduate School of Business of the National Institute for Development Administration (NIDA), a University in Bangkapi, a suburb of Bangkok. As an assignment for this class, together we drew up a questionnaire probing into some business-related features of Thai culture, and each student was requested to (a) fill out this questionnaire himself/herself and (b) ask a colleague working for the same company to fill it out also. The total number of properly filled out questionnaires we got back was 104, only slightly less than the theoretical maximum of 110. However, although the students were specifically requested to have the second questionnaire filled out by a colleague of the same level, some found this difficult to ask (they told me so in class), mainly because of the length of the questionnaire,[1] and in reality almost half of them (27) had

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[1] This puts the finger on what will always remain a major difficulty in (inter)cultural research. On the one hand, it may seem vain to try and capture anything relevant about a complex and living culture in only 69 closed ques-

the second questionnaire filled out by a subordinate, i.e. a white-collar worker. As a result, only 77 questionnaires represent the managerial level. In many cases, the answers of the executives and the white-collar workers are similar, and no distinction needs to be drawn. We will, however, discuss in a separate section some interesting instances where the answers of the two professional categories differ from one another. Without any kind of relation, also 76 of the questionnaires were filled out by men, 28 by women. Most of the respondents are between 30 and 40 years old, very few are under 30, few over 40.

Because we were working with a 'captive audience', we had by definition no difficulty obtaining a sizeable number of filled-out questionnaires. The drawback is that we had no control over the composition of our sample. The majority of the companies where our executive-MBA students work are located in Bangkok and active in service industries such as banking, telecommunications and finance. Approximately two-thirds of the companies are service industries, one-third only are involved in manufacturing. The companies of the 49 respondents who specified their main area of activity can be roughly classified as follows.

Banking and finance	18 companies	
Telecommunications, radio	4	
Software development	1	
Personnel recruitment	1	
Real estate	1	
Publishing	1	
Trade	1	
Hospital and health	4	
Civil engineering (consulting)	2	Total : 33
Bakery goods	1	
Power generating	5	
Manufacturing, consumer goods	6	
Manufacturing, paints & chemicals	1	
Gas and oil	1	
Ship repair	1	
Pharmaceuticals	1	Total : 16

Most companies operate under Thai ownership as well as under Thai management:

	Ownership	Management
Thai	38 companies	43
Foreign	6	2
Shared Thai-foreign	8	7
Not mentioned	3	3

We may therefore assume that the sample reflects Thai business culture, and that direct foreign influence will be rather limited.

The questionnaire included questions about annual turnover and number of workers employed in the company. Unfortunately, many respondents were unable to answer these questions, and therefore we are not able to subdivide our sample with respect to these.

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tions; on the other hand, even such a questionnaire is at the very limits of what is reasonable to request people filling out…

In what follows, when we give figures that are based on nearly all the respondents, we only give percentages, as these are very close to the actual numbers out of a total of 104. In those few cases where the total number of respondents is less than 100, we mention this explicitly.

One further word of warning. Responses to questionnaires are, of course, only reliable insofar as the people who fill them out are giving sincere and accurate answers. While there is never any absolute guarantee that this is the case, there are probably more reasons to worry about this aspect in Thailand than in most Western countries. From what we know about their culture, Thai people in general, and students in a classroom setting even more (even if anonymity was guaranteed), may give the answer they feel they *should* give, or they feel the other person would *like* to hear, rather than a 'true and correct' one (insofar as that exists). If this did play a role, it does not necessarily make the responses meaningless; it might mean that they reflect an ideal state of affairs rather than reality as such. Our impression, however, is that this aspect did not play a major role in our survey, even if we can never be sure about it.

3.   Time and Space

3.1   Time

Five questions deal with (vastly different) aspects of time, ranging, more or less from small to large, from punctuality to decision making and to the issue of future or past orientation.

3.1.1   Arriving on time for work

The first question examines whether workers arrive on time for work or not, and the results are as follows.

[Q1] In the morning most workers in my company

◊ Arrive on time	41%
◊ Arrive on the average … minutes early	43%
◊ Arrive on the average … minutes late	16%

Some people did not fill out how many minutes they generally arrive early or late. However, the averages calculated with the available data give us an indication. The average of those who arrive early is 18 minutes, for those who arrive late it is nearly the same, 17.5 minutes. As we said in the introduction, it is difficult to draw any conclusions as long as we don't know what the comparable figures would be for other, say Western, countries. But many workers arriving 18 minutes *earlier* (as an average!) than required seems a lot to us, and is likely to be uncommon in Western countries. No deep-seated explanation necessarily needs to be sought to explain this phenomenon. Traffic conditions is Bangkok are very unpredictable, as well as generally speaking extremely bad. Therefore, anyone who takes reasonable precautions against arriving late at work is bound to arrive early on days where traffic is slightly less congested than usual, and is nevertheless bound to arrive late from time to time when traffic is even more congested than usual. Notice, however, that workers seem to prefer the 'risk' of arriving early to the risk of being late. For a foreigner, it is good to know that, although people in Bang-

kok will understand that in some cases unforeseen traffic prevented you from arriving on time, traffic congestion should not be used *on a regular basis* as an explanation or an excuse for arriving late!

3.1.2   Starting time of meetings

[Q2] Meetings in my company generally start

◊	approx. … minutes earlier than planned	9%
◊	less than 6 minutes beyond the stated time	32%
◊	approx. … minutes late	58%

The majority of meetings start later than the stated time, but the time lag remains fairly small: the average is 10 minutes. One third of the meetings start on time, defined here as starting within 5 minutes after the stated time. We may conclude that the starting time of meetings in Thailand is not very different from what it would be in Western countries. Needless to say, this is not true in all parts of the world. Surprisingly, in 9% of the cases the meetings start earlier than planned. This may be related to face saving, as any late arrival could be interpreted as not attaching high priority to the meeting at hand.

3.1.3   The 'getting acquainted' period

As far as we know, there is no culture in the world where one starts a discussion about business without at least some preliminaries. In Northern Europe and the United States, these may be reduced to a few sentences ('How are you', 'Did you have a good flight', 'How is the weather back home', and the like) and take only a couple of minutes. In France, as described by Vincent Merk (1986), for some negotiations the business lunch (lasting a couple of hours, and during which one does not talk business) is an essential element of the 'getting acquainted' process, its importance being often overlooked or misunderstood by Americans or Northern Europeans. In other parts of the world, doing business with someone is carried out on the basis of trust and respect, and building this up may take several months, or even more. Typically, this appears to be the case, for instance, in some Arab-speaking countries. It took over two years for a Swedish engineer in Saudi-Arabia to built up the trust that was needed for a contract to be signed, in a story told by Hofstede (1991:49). Obviously, the length of this 'getting acquainted' period depends on many other factors, such as the size of the contract involved: for a small order, things may go faster. What is important for a Westerner to remember, however, is that this preliminary period will in some cases be of extraordinary length in his/her eyes. Interviews that were carried out by one of my students (Van Theemsche, 1997) in various Gulf states confirm this. In addition, the Western representative's home base (the boss in the home country) also needs to remain convinced that it is worthwhile allowing the representative to travel back and forth to the target country and investing a lot of time and money in 'building up trust and respect', without any guaranteed results!

The same is being said about the Chinese business community in various South-East Asian countries: trust is an essential element in doing business, and building up trust inside the Chinese community may be a difficult and long process (though by no means impossible) for a 'stranger.'

Two aspects of these preliminaries were included in our survey: (a) the time participants indulge in small talk before starting to discuss business, and (b) the time it may take to get to know someone personally before accepting to do business with that person.

[Q3] When a meeting in my company starts,

◊ we immediately start discussing issues	54%
◊ we may exchange some personal and other unrelated subjects before talking business, for approx. … minutes	46%

With people you work with, extensive socialising before getting down to business may not be functional on a daily basis: only 46% of our respondents say they indulge in some personal and other unrelated subjects before talking business with their colleagues, and then for an average of (only) 10 minutes. More exciting, however, are the answers to the following question:

[Q6] Before you do business with someone, do you wish to spend some time in order to know the individual personally (family, education, social background, etc.)?"

◊ no, not at all	9%
◊ yes, a few minutes	32%
◊ yes, one or two hours (e.g. having lunch together)	28%
◊ yes, a few weeks	18%
◊ yes, a few months	13%

As one can see, even if 41% of the respondents declare they start doing business immediately or after a few minutes of small talk, the process of getting acquainted is felt to be important for the majority of the respondents. Twenty eight per cent feel that an extended lunch is the appropriate length of time for the 'getting acquainted' process. The question itself was, no doubt, insufficiently refined, as no difference was made depending on the kind of transaction and the importance of the business relation one wishes to establish. However, what is most important, and certainly surprising from a Western point of view, is that a considerable number of our Thai respondents (31%), think of the process of getting acquainted before entering a business relation as something that will take weeks or even months. This is close to the examples we discussed above, where the Western businessperson needs to be aware that investing (morally and financially!) in a long period of building up trust and respect is sometimes necessary before the locals accept him/her as a business partner. Related to this is the *specific/diffuse* dimension which we will discuss below.

We also included two questions about the function of the *business lunch* in our survey, because our own feeling was that the business lunch is very common and plays a role in the getting acquainted process.

[Q21] Business lunches where good food is served in a nice restaurant are an element in my relation with business partners

◊ yes, very frequently: two times a week or more	2%
◊ yes, frequently: approx. once a week	10%
◊ yes, but more rarely: approx. once a month	50%
◊ yes, but very rarely: a couple of times a year	32%
◊ no, almost never	6%

The impression we had about frequent business lunches is clearly not borne out by the answers our respondents gave to Q21. In fact, only 12% of them declare having a business lunch at least once a week, and for the vast majority it is a rare occurrence indeed.

[Q22] The business lunch is used

◊ to get to know each other, not to talk business	15%
◊ to get to know each other as well as to talk business	81%
◊ to talk business mostly	4%

The middle answer to Q22 was not sufficiently refined to differentiate between lunches where one primarily talks business and lunches where the primary function is the getting acquainted process. Nevertheless, the percentage of our respondents who consider that the function of the business lunch is to get to know each other is four times higher than those who feel the function of the business lunch is to talk business. We may probably infer from there that in those cases where the business lunch fulfils both functions, the 'getting acquainted' function usually prevails.

3.1.4   Long-term orientation: the 'Confucian' dimension

Hofstede (1991:159-174) adds a fifth cultural dimension to his original four (which we shall examine below). We will call it 'long term-short term orientation', but it is richer and more complex than that, involving, alongside the temporal orientation itself, the issue of the tension between tradition and modernity, as well as many other aspects. On Hofstede's long-term orientation scale, Thailand ranks 8th out of 23 countries with a score of 56, i.e., mid-range once again: rather high on a world scale but lower than many other Asian countries.
Questions 53-56 in our survey are related to this dimension.

[Q53] Traditional Thai values must be

◊ preserved unchanged in most cases	11%
◊ adapted to the needs of the modern world	85%
◊ abandoned whenever necessary	4%

[Q54] the influence of American values and lifestyle upon contemporary Thai society I feel as

◊ a threat that should be fought	5%
◊ a positive influence that should be encouraged	21%
◊ an opportunity but only if combined with our culture	66%
◊ neither positive, nor negative	8%

While, not surprisingly, only a small minority feels that traditional Thai culture must be abandoned whenever necessary (4% in Q53), the number of those who fear foreign influence (5% in Q54) or who wish to preserve traditional values unchanged (11% in Q53) is equally small. The answers to both questions indicate that most of the Thai favour adapting their traditions to the modern world. As we said in the introduction, contrary to Western culture as well as Islam, many South-East Asian nations excel in integrating modern, usually Western elements into their own culture without major fears or worries about losing their own 'cultural identity.'

The answers to these questions confirm what others authors, including Hofstede, say about certain South-East Asian cultures. Issues that are analysed in other parts of the world (including Europe, and perhaps even more so, the world of Islam[2]) as problems of contradiction and mutual exclusion (between tradition and modernity, between autochthonous culture and American influence, and more generally, between an ideology, a religion, a philosophy or a theory A and an ideology, a religion, a philosophy or a theory B) are approached in a very different way in South-East Asia: in terms of complementarity, reconciliation, syncretism and, ultimately, harmonious combination of A and B, like the yin-yang symbol represents the harmonious combination and complementarity between black and white, male and female, and so forth. In such cultures, modern and new ideas are likely to be considered as an opportunity rather than a threat (Hofstede, 1991:170-3).

I remember my own attempts at initiating a discussion with my Thai students about American influence in Bangkok. McDonalds, KFC and other fast food restaurants, the multiplication of American-looking shopping malls, Western dress codes, etc.: weren't they threatening the integrity of Thai culture? In fact, I was never able to organise a meaningful discussion about this issue with my students in Bangkok, quite simply because they did not see what the issue was. I saw a clash between two cultures where they saw peaceful coexistence. There are now Thai restaurants in Bangkok along Western (and many other) restaurants, giving people a choice: what is the problem? Compare that attitude with the long discussions about the 'cultural exception' Europeans were proposing at the GATT negotiations in an attempt to prevent American soap operas and other television programmes from inundating European television channels!

The answers to question 55 confirm even more strongly the tendency towards eclecticism together with integration and synthesis, but this time at the level of management theory.

[Q55] When applying management theory in practice,

◊ it is best to stick to one theory which is considered most appropriate	9%
◊ it is best to combine elements from different theories	91%

91% of the respondents feel that integrating elements from different theories is preferable to sticking to one theory when applying management theory in practice. This seems to us a very high percentage, probably substantially higher than what a similar question would yield in some other parts of the world.

In question 56 we measure respect for social status obligations.

[Q56] Social status obligations with respect to car, house, clothing, etc.

◊ must be met even when I consider them too expensive	10%
◊ must be met but only to a certain extent	75%
◊ are unimportant and must not be met	15%

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[2] It would be interesting to study the position of predominantly Islamic South East-Asian countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia in this respect.

75% of our respondents declare they respect these obligations, but only within limits, again a typical characteristic for a long-term oriented, 'Confucian' country (we are not claiming that Confucianism as such has been influential in Thailand).

3.1.5 The past and the future

The importance of the past is reflected in the answers to the following question.

[Q8] The way the company did things in the past is an important yardstick for future decisions

◊	I strongly agree	10%
◊	I agree	69%
◊	I disagree	19%
◊	I strongly disagree	2%

In making managerial decisions, the past appears to be important, presumably substantially more so than in many Western cultures.

As to the future, we asked whether the future is predetermined or is shaped by the people themselves.

[Q39] In my opinion the future is

◊	already determined, whatever we do or try	23%
◊	partly determined, partly shaped by ourselves	51%
◊	for the best part shaped by ourselves	26%

A substantial number of our respondents feel that the future is partly or even completely predetermined. Although it is difficult to draw a clear conclusion from these figures, compared to the West it seems safe to infer that for Thai people the future is more predetermined. This is not tantamount to saying that the Thai value fatalism. In a paper I wrote about the Philippines (Verluyten, 1993) I showed that Westerners mistakenly take as fatalism a Filipino value which is more accurately described as the idea that, *after humans have put in all the effort they can to achieve a certain result,* there comes a point where other forces take over and the outcome may still be different from what we hope or expect.

3.2 Space

3.2.1 Office Space

Only one question in our survey relates to office layout: we wanted to know if the prevalent pattern in Thailand is for the a person to share the same office space with several co-workers, like in Japan, or whether many of them have their own office, like in Western companies. The answers are as follows.

[Q11] The office space where I work is

			Number of respondents
◊	a separate office or cubicle	69%	54
◊	a room shared with … persons	31%	24

This question was properly filled out in only 78 of the 104 questionnaires. The second option (shared office) showed a range from 2 to 80 persons. What is clear is that the majority of the respondents have

their own office, but a sizeable minority share office space with others. Sharing a room with 80 other workers is, no doubt, an uncommon occurrence in Western countries.

3.2.2   Interpersonal Space

Thailand, like several other South-East Asian cultures including Japan and China, is also a largely non-touching culture. In fact, in rural Thailand there existed (or still exists) a system of fines for touching someone else's body (even by accident), and in particular a boy touching a girl's body (or her weaving loom, considered an extension of her body!), with different rates depending on the body part that was touched (Klausner, 1993:260). In a work situation, this might mean that people seldom or never tap a colleague on the back, hold his/her hand or arm when making a point, etc. The answers to the two questions that were asked about this confirm that touching is uncommon, and even nearly non-existent for about half of the respondents: 43% are never touched by male colleagues, 59% are never touched by female colleagues.

[Q9] When a male colleague at work wants to show me his affection and sympathy, he touches my arm or shoulder

◊	yes, often	9%
◊	yes, but rarely	50%
◊	no, almost never	41%

[Q10] When a female colleague at work wants to show me her affection and sympathy, she touches my arm or shoulder

◊	yes, often	10%
◊	yes, but rarely	33%
◊	no, almost never	57%

Westerners from cultures where touching is more common are therefore advised to abstain from it entirely until they are absolutely certain that the relation with their Thai partner, as well as the situation, allow for it; the safest attitude, no doubt, is to wait for the Thai person to initiate the process.

4.   Communication and face saving

4.1   Communicating in English

As many Thai businesspeople seem to experience difficulties communicating in English, we asked our respondents to assess their own fluency in this respect:

[Q12] When I need to communicate in English, I find that

◊	very easy	8%
◊	rather easy	44%
◊	rather difficult	41%
◊	very difficult	7%

One can interpret these figures in either an optimistic or a pessimistic way. Over half of our respondents have no major difficulties expressing themselves in English, or at least declare they don't. But the figures also tell us that the Westerner is likely to find that nearly half of his Thai interlocutors experience difficulties, and sometimes very serious difficulties, expressing themselves in English, and allowances will have to be made for that during negotiations and the like. Understanding some of the

phonetic difficulties Thai people have when speaking English may help (Verluyten, 1996:113-115), and more generally some simple techniques can be used to avoid misunderstandings and confusion: speak slowly, eliminate background noise, avoid long sentences and complicated syntax, avoid double negatives ("It is not altogether untrue that …") and counterfactuals ("If it had been the case that …"), avoid idiomatic expressions and/or expression that refer to Western culture ("we all wear our cross"), repeat and test for understanding frequently (Verluyten, 1996:111-113).

4.2   Direct/indirect communication and face saving

Thailand is often described as a country where indirect, implicit communication patterns prevail and where, for reasons of face saving, criticism and refusals cannot be stated openly (see, among many other sources, Cooper & Cooper, 1990:134-144 and elsewhere), let alone publicly. We asked our respondents to describe (a) how they would criticise a subordinate, (b) how their boss would criticise them, and (c) how they would reject a proposal from someone outside the company.

[Q13] When I need to criticise a subordinate, I generally do it in the following way

◊	criticise him/her directly, openly and publicly	4%
◊	criticise him/her directly and openly but in private	68%
◊	avoid open criticism but make him/her feel in a more indirect way that something was wrong	28%

[Q14] When a superior (e.g., my boss) criticises me, he/she generally does it in the following way

◊	criticise me directly, openly and publicly	7%
◊	criticise me directly and openly but in private	74%
◊	avoid open criticism but make me feel in a more indirect way that something was wrong	19%

Clearly, public criticism should almost always be avoided. It is perhaps surprising that the majority of the respondents declare that criticism is direct and open, even if done in private. But here again, a distinction no doubt needs to be made depending on the importance and the nature of the criticisms that is uttered. What the Westerner will have most difficulty coping with are those cases, still representing one in four or one in five according to the figures above, where criticism is *not* stated in words. When asked to describe how indirect criticism is done, respondents provide answers such as the following (a direct quote from a questionnaire, I only corrected the English somewhat):

> I feel it by myself, such as the way my boss treats me has changed, he avoids direct contact with me, some of his attitude is different from normal. These are the warning signs, and let me find out what happened.

Only a dozen or so of our respondents answered the question where we ask them to explain how indirect criticism may be carried out, but their responses are quite enlightening and may show a Westerner what indirect communication and face saving really mean. Because of deficiencies in English, we paraphrase and summarise most of the answers here rather than quoting them directly:

• mention the point of criticism through another colleague (four separate responses suggest this)

• mention a related situation and take that as an example without referring openly to the case at hand; leave the interpretation to me (two responses)

- refer to a future task or assignment and explain how he/she would like it to be done, without mentioning the case at hand
- insist that I be cautious in general terms, without mentioning any specific case
- show me the correct way without any blame or criticism
- point out the problem during a training programme
- criticise but at the same time stress that I clearly do my best and that there are always many factors involved when something goes wrong
- correct the document where I made a mistake, then pass it to his secretary who will forward a new copy to me
- "let me learn it from experience" (i.e., not formulate any criticism verbally at all)
- comment on other things that are in my favour (in other words, praise may be an indirect form of criticism!).

All this reminds me of the question I asked my students in Bangkok when discussing the issue of directness and indirectness in class. Suppose an absent-minded teacher wrote an obvious error on the blackboard that could easily be corrected: would they point it out to him/her? The unanimous reply was: no, they would not. When I further asked if there wasn't any way, then, in which they would inform the teacher of the error he/she made, one of the students replied with a wonderful expression: 'Yes, there is, our face would show a question mark.' It is doubtful whether the average Westerner will be capable of reading the question mark on his Thai interlocutor's face, or will detect the unspoken 'warning signs' in the boss's behaviour!

If the majority of the relations in the office are still characterised by a degree of directness according to the figures above, the proportions are different when dealing with an outsider:

[Q15] When I need to reject a proposal from someone outside the company,

◊ I tell the person so clearly, openly and directly	49.5%
◊ I try to make the person understand that I am not interested but without stating it too directly	50.5%

In other words, in half the cases a refusal or rejection will not be openly stated. The Westerner is likely to face a situation in Thailand that is similar in this respect to what is often said about Japan, where it is impossible to rely on *words* in order to figure out if your interlocutor is interested in your proposal or offer, or not. It is necessary to learn how to read the indirect, unspoken signals which will be the only ones present to convey this message to you.

In some Western countries, though by no means all, relations at work are characterised by an atmosphere of open conflict, involving a lot of yelling and shouting, even between co-workers. This is particularly so in France, and these 'ritual verbal confrontations' (d'Iribarne, 1989, who describes this communicative style in detail, uses the expression *la ritualisation des affrontements verbaux*) do not leave any deep or permanent trace. We asked our respondents if yelling and shouting also happen at the workplace in Thailand:

[Q16] When some of my colleagues in the company have a conflict or disagreement, they may shout and yell at each other

◊	yes, frequently	0%
◊	yes, sometimes	28%
◊	yes, but very rarely	34%
◊	no, never	38%

As one can see, in the vast majority of companies losing one's temper occurs only seldom, and in many (almost 40%!) it does not even occur at all. Losing one's temper and getting mad is almost always counterproductive as well as considered bad manners in Thailand, and Westerners are well advised to refrain from ever getting mad, no matter how bad things are going. In one story that I was told in Bangkok, a French company that had just established a subsidiary office there lost many of its good Thai secretaries simply because the French bosses had a habit of shouting at their secretary, or so it was felt by the secretary, in any case. Frequently, the next day the secretary simply did not show up for work and she never reappeared.

Indirect communication patterns are often a means to save the interlocutor's face: avoiding direct criticism or open refusals are clear instances of that. The reluctance to say 'no' may take forms such as accepting an invitation and not showing up rather than saying you can't make it that day (for this is like saying to the person who invites you that you have something more important to do that day), etc. (see, for instance, Klausner, 1993:391 and elsewhere). I submitted to my Thai respondents a question that I used before for totally different purposes, to differentiate Western and Bantu (Central African) culture with respect to the relative weight of the present moment and projections into the future. The question is as follows:

[Q5] Suppose you have two appointments *of equal importance,* one at 2:00 p.m. and the second at 3:00 p.m. At 2:50 p.m. you are still talking with the first person. You would generally choose to

(a) continue with the first person at the expense of your second appointment

(b) tell the first person that you are sorry, but that you must go to your second appointment.

When confronted with this dilemma, the vast majority of Westerners (Americans, Europeans) go for option (b); in all cases where I have asked this question, over 90% of the (Western) people I asked during my lectures and seminars, and usually *much* more than 90%, chose option (b). With my friends from Central Africa, it is the other way round; virtually all of them will continue with the first person and ignore their second appointment. The reason for this lies in the respective priority of a present event and a future one for these two groups of people. Central Africans project themselves less vividly in the future, and therefore the second appointment, to them, is nothing but a few words in an agenda. It is virtual, future, not real and present; and how can you give up something that you are involved in now, that is useful and pleasant, for a hypothetical future event? Westerners, on the other hand, are quite willing to 'sacrifice' the present to a future occurrence.

Returning now to Thailand, the responses to this question were as follows (I add (a) and (b) for easy reference).

[Q5] Suppose you have two appointments *of equal importance,* one at 2:00 p.m. and the second at 3:00 p.m. At 2:50 p.m. you are still talking with the first person. You would generally choose to

(a) continue with the first person at the expense of your second appointment	23%
(b) tell the first person that you are sorry, but that you must go to your second appointment	77%

Westerners need no explanation for the fact that 77% of the Thai respondents react like themselves: in a modern economy with several scheduled appointments during the day, option (b) seems the most 'normal'. What is more interesting is the fact that almost a quarter of our respondents in Thailand, i.e., much more than in the Western world, chose option (a). The reason for this is likely to be very different from the explanation we gave for the Central African behaviour above. Various sources describe how Thai people, when invited, would rather accept an invitation they know they cannot honour, and then not show up on the given day, rather than decline the invitation. The cultural reason for this is well known: face saving. It is difficult, for a Thai person, to tell someone in a face-to-face interaction that you refuse a proposal or decline an invitation. Declining the invitation is like saying: that evening, I have something more important to do than to come to your dinner party. Westerners often reply: yes but isn't it equally bad, or much worse, to accept and not show up on the given day? The answer is no, because face saving operates, quite literally, when you are *facing* that person, and much less when the face-to-face interaction is not present.

Similarly, the Thai will have more difficulty than Westerners telling the first person in Q5 that they have a second appointment they must now go to: it is like saying, now I have something more important to do than staying with you. Ignoring the second person, on the other hand, is less of a problem, because you are not facing that person at the time.

5. Gift giving

There are many concurring accounts that in Japan, gift giving is an essential part of establishing good relations between subordinates and their bosses as well as between company personnel and outsiders. Three questions in our survey related to this issue. The answers to the first two seem to indicate that inside the company, gift giving is not as widespread in Thailand as it is in Japan.

[Q17] Managers give gifts to subordinates in our company

◊	yes, frequently	11.5%
◊	yes, but rarely	77%
◊	no, almost never	11.5%

[Q18] Workers give gifts to their superiors in our company

◊	yes, frequently	7%
◊	yes, but rarely	77%
◊	no, almost never	16%

The majority of our respondents indicate that gift giving occurs rarely; managers giving gifts to their subordinates is slightly less rare than workers giving gifts to their bosses. Even so, if in over 10% of

the Thai companies managers frequently give gifts to their workers, this may be more than in Western countries.

The figures are quite different with respect to giving gifts to outsiders:

[Q19] It is important to give gifts to business partners to establish and maintain good relations with them

◊	I strongly agree	25%
◊	I agree	64%
◊	I disagree	11%
◊	I strongly disagree	0%

As one can see, the vast majority of the respondents feel that giving gifts is essential in a business relation (and also with government officials: some respondents pointed this out specifically).

We asked our respondents to give some examples of gifts that are given and to give us an indication of their average value [Q20]. The most common gifts are inexpensive pens and necklaces, but some respondents quote *average* values of several hundreds of dollars. One of them states:

> US$ 100 for ordinary occasions like a New Year gift for ordinary business partners, but for the special occasions for some important people, [the gift] may cost sometimes more than US$ 40,000 (baht 1 million).

In other words, the value of some gifts will seem incredibly high in Western eyes (the same seems to be true in Japan). The average of the figures that were given in the questionnaires is US$ 105, but this hides the fact that for the highest quarter of our respondents (presumably those people that are also higher up in the hierarchy of the company they work for), this average value goes up to US$ 1,015!

6. d'Iribarne

6.1 Informal networks

In his book *La logique de l'honneur,* Philippe d'Iribarne shows convincingly that in a French company, you cannot rely for information and help on official channels only; you need to become part of an informal network of people inside the company who know, trust and respect each other and who will go out of their way to help each other. These informal networks do not have the same importance in the American (U.S.) and Dutch subsidiaries of the same company d'Iribarne studied.

In connection with this, the following questions were part of our survey.

[Q37] To get things done, one cannot rely on official channels only, it is important to know the right people *inside* the company

◊	I strongly agree	23%
◊	I agree	66%
◊	I disagree	11%
◊	I strongly disagree	0%

[Q38] To get things done, one cannot rely on official channels only, it is important to know the right people *outside* the company

◊	I strongly agree	11%
◊	I agree	54%
◊	I disagree	32%
◊	I strongly disagree	3%

Clearly, developing and maintaining informal networks is essential in order to be able to function inside a Thai company and also, though to a smaller extent, in order to get things done from people outside the company.

6.2   Basic human nature, need for and acceptance of control

According to Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961), each culture varies in its predominant value orientation on a number of issues. Many of these defining features have a strong impact on the way society, but also business and work, are organised in a particular culture. One of these issues is *basic human nature,* which can vary from (a) evil to (b) a mixture of evil and good, to (c) good.

In a culture of type (c), where people are basically good and honest, tight control systems to check on workers will be, it is felt, less needed. As the majority of our respondents find workers trustworthy and tight control unnecessary, we may infer that in Thai culture, the basic nature of human beings is considered to be good and honest.

[Q61] Workers should be trusted, tight controls are unnecessary

◊	I strongly agree	8%
◊	I agree	67%
◊	I disagree	22%
◊	I strongly disagree	3%

In other cultures, even if control mechanisms are felt to be necessary, they may be resisted by the workers. d'Iribarne (1989) has shown that this is the case in France, where honour and personal pride prevail, and therefore the workers do not want management to look over their shoulder and check on them. In companies where there exists an individual performance bonus scheme, the performance of each worker obviously has to be checked accurately in order to award the performance bonus to the best workers. Introducing such a scheme in a country like France may be more difficult, because it will be harder for management to obtain precise figures about the worker's performance (they may even boycott or sabotage any such scheme). Two questions in our survey are related to this.

[Q58] When management intends to collect more precise figures about each worker's performance, most workers are likely to

◊	resist such a measure strongly	3%
◊	resist such a measure somewhat	53%
◊	accept such a measure with no particular feelings	30%
◊	be happy to accept such a measure	14%

[Q59] An individual performance bonus scheme (better performing workers get higher pay) exists in my company

yes	50%
no	50%

Thailand (or rather, perhaps, Bangkok) appears to be very much 'middle of the road' with respect to resistance or acceptance of control as well as with respect to the existence of performance bonus schemes: they are probably less present as well as less accepted than in a country like the U.S., but more easily accepted than in France. No doubt the type of company (its organisation and activity) will also play a role here.

The vast majority of our respondents, however, favour the introduction of an individual performance bonus scheme.

[Q60] II think that an individual performance bonus scheme (whether we have one now or not)

is/would be beneficial for my company		68%
is/would be negative for my company because (more than one answer possible…	…it makes workers compete one against the other	20%
	…there is the risk that a subordinate might make more money than his/her boss	6%
	…other reasons	6%

This is not necessarily contradictory to the responses to Q58. Our respondents, the majority of whom are executives, may favour the introduction of an individual performance bonus scheme while at the same time being aware that control of the individual performance of each worker might be resisted by them.

7. Trompenaars

7.1 Specific/diffuse

Trompenaars (1993) categorises various cultures along a dimension he calls *specific vs. diffuse.* In fact, he seems to have 'borrowed' this dimension, like several of the other concepts he uses, from older sources (work by Parson from the 1950s,—see Gudykunst & Kim, 1992:51-3) without mentioning that this is the case. *Diffuse* means that the whole person is involved in a relation; in a culture with the characteristic of *specificity,* on the other hand, it is possible to enter a relation with someone purely at a business level, for instance, without concerning oneself with other aspects of that same person (such as his ancestry or moral background, his religion, his family life, etc.). We inquired into this dimension with the following two questions.[3]

[Q7] I can do business with someone who is competent professionally but has an immoral personal life

◊	yes, his/her personal life is irrelevant	13%
◊	yes, but I would prefer not to	50%
◊	no, that would be difficult for me	37%

There is little doubt that these answers are shifted toward the *diffuse* side in comparison with most Western cultures, where little inquiries are made into the personal life of business partners. In con-

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[3] The *getting acquainted* and *gift giving* sections above are also related to the specific-diffuse dimension we examine here.

trast, almost 40% of our Thai respondents are likely to refuse doing business with a professionally competent person if that person's personal life is not up to their moral standards; and the vast majority of Thai people will be reluctant to enter into a business relation with such a person.

[Q68] If my boss asked me to assist him/her with a task that has nothing to do with the company (e.g., for his/her spouse's business), during company hours, I would

◊	almost certainly accept to assist	27%
◊	probably accept to assist	60%
◊	probably refuse to assist	12%
◊	almost certainly refuse to assist	1%

Here again, although we do not (as yet) have any figures from Western cultures to compare these results with, it seems probable that the Thai are less specific, i.e., distinguish less between one aspect of a person (in this case, the fact that he/she is their boss for a particular job) and other, 'unrelated' (to Westerners) aspects of that same person. 87% of our respondents are likely to carry out, for their boss, tasks that have nothing to do with the job they are paid for, during company hours,—an attitude that most Westerner would deem unacceptable or even unethical. As the question we asked involves a boss-subordinate relationship, however, we should not forget that the hierarchical difference may also play a role; see the discussion about Power Distance below.

7.2   Universal/particular

Another of Trompenaars' dimensions, also borrowed from the same source without acknowledgements, is *universal vs. particular.* A culture has the characteristic of *universality* if its members apply the same standards to all human beings; it is *particular* if people tend to have different standards for different groups, e.g. relatives or friends vs. strangers, members of in-group (religiously, ethnically, etc.) vs. members of the out-group. In a *universal* culture, the answers to the two following questions (Q63 and Q62) should tend to be similar; in *particular* cultures, we expect a rather different reaction to these two questions: people will tend to protect a close friend more than they would protect other workers.

[Q63] When another worker who is a close friend of mine commits a professional error that may seriously damage the company, I would

(a) most probably report this to his/her superiors	41%	
(b) maybe report this to his/her superiors	36%	Total (a) + (b) = 77%
(c) probably not report this to his/her superiors	18%	
(d) almost certainly not report this to his/her superiors	5%	Total (c) + (d) = 23%

[Q62] When another worker I don't know very well commits a professional error that may seriously damage the company, I would

(a) most probably report this to his/her superiors	59%	
(b) maybe report this to his/her superiors	29%	Total (a) + (b) = 88%
(c) probably not report this to his/her superiors	11%	
(d) almost certainly not report this to his/her superiors	1%	Total (c) + (d) = 12%

Grouping the answers together two by two, we notice a shift in the attitude of 11% of our respondents depending on whether they are dealing with a close friend or a mere colleague (77% against 88%). This does not seem much, and we would tend to conclude that our Thai respondents are on the *universal* side of this cultural dimension. What is perhaps surprising is the high proportion of respondents who would report their co-worker's error to the boss, regardless of their relationship with him/her. This may indicate a high degree of loyalty to, and involvement in, the company,—probably substantially higher than in some Western cultures where solidarity between the workers will take priority over loyalty to the company (France might be an example of such a culture).

A second set of questions that are relevant to this dimension are the following.

[Q64] When I am asked to write a letter of recommendation that could get a close friend a good job, but I know my friend is not really suited for that job, I would

(a) most probably write the letter of recommendation anyway	14%	
(b) maybe write the letter or recommendation anyway	40%	Total (a) + (b) = 54%
(c) probably not write the letter or recommendation	33%	
(d) almost certainly not write the letter of recommendation	13%	Total (c) + (d) = 46%

[Q65] When I am asked to write a letter of recommendation for someone I do not know well at all, which could get that person a good job, but I know the person is not really suited for that job, I would

(a) most probably write the letter of recommendation anyway	9%	
(b) maybe write the letter or recommendation anyway	13%	Total (a) + (b) = 22%
(c) probably not write the letter or recommendation	23%	
(d) almost certainly not write the letter of recommendation	55%	Total (c) + (d) = 78%

Contrary to what we observed when comparing Q63 and Q62, the shift between Q64 and Q65 (involving a friend and a stranger respectively) is large (32%), and the proportion of our respondents who would consider 'lying' in a letter of recommendation in order to get a friend a job is over 50%. A particularist tendency surfaces here, that manifests itself perhaps only when loyalty to the company does not override it, as was the case in Q63 and Q62.

7.3   Ascription/achievement

The third of Trompenaars' dimensions (again borrowed from the same source without acknowledgements) we shall examine here is *ascription vs. achievement.* In cultures where ascription prevails, people will tend to be judged and treated depending on qualities that are inherent to them from the outset (such as birth, family background); in those cultures where achievement is dominant, they will be judged in accordance with the qualities they have achieved themselves (through hard work, their own willpower, etc.).

The following question in our survey relates to this dimension.

[Q69] The respect I owe a person does not only depend on the person's own achievement, but also on that person's social and family background

(a) I strongly agree	15%	
(b) I agree	58%	Total (a) + (b) = 73%
(c) I disagree	24%	
(d) I strongly disagree	3%	Total (c) + (d) = 27%

Ascription clearly plays an important role in Thai culture, probably substantially more so than in most Western cultures.

8.   Hofstede

8.1   Power Distance

In his well-known work (1980, 1991), Hofstede originally identified four dimensions along which work-related cultural values may vary: Power Distance, Individualism-Collectivism, Masculinity-Femininity and Uncertainty Avoidance. A fifth dimension, Long Term Orientation, was added in Hofstede's 1991 book; this dimension we already discussed above.

Power Distance is about inequality in society. In all cultures, there exists a certain amount of inequality between people, but this amount is not the same everywhere. As we said in the Introduction, Thailand's Power Distance index (PDI) stands at 64 (22nd out of 53 countries), i.e., mid-range. This makes it even more interesting to inquire which features that are associated with high Power Distance are represented in Thailand, and which are not. Quite a number of questions in our survey relate to this dimension.

In high Power Distance countries it is more difficult to express disagreement with your boss. We asked our respondents the following.

[Q23] When I disagree with a superior (e.g., my boss), I will tell him/her so

◊	almost always	13%
◊	most of the time	40%
◊	seldom	44%
◊	almost never	3%

A small majority (53%) of our respondents say they normally don't have any qualms expressing disagreement with their boss. On the other hand, the percentage of 47% who would usually not express any disagreement with their boss seems rather high in comparison with Western countries. In any case, Thailand seems to be clearly 'middle of the road' in this respect.

We also asked our respondents about decision-making at meetings.

[Q4] In my company, at meetings

we discuss *and decide* things together		66%
we may discuss issues, but some people make the crucial decisions outside the meeting …	…before the meeting takes place	12%
	…after the meeting has taken place	22%

Decision making, according to these responses, appears to be very participative. Two-thirds of our respondents declare that decisions are made in a collegial way. Of the minority who declare that crucial decisions are made outside the meetings, about two-thirds agree that the decision takes place *after* the meeting. This seems to indicate that even there, consultation goes on prior to decision-making. In only 12% of the cases, decision-making is autocratic and the function of the meeting, presumably, is only to *inform* people of a decision that is already final.

Another question relates to giving orders.

[Q24] A superior or boss will most frequently

◊	give clear orders and instructions without discussing them with me	11%
◊	explain why a particular task must be carried out	41%
◊	consult and ask for my opinion before he/she decides what to do	40%
◊	let me make my own decisions and go along with them most of the time	8%

Here again, the answers are clearly 'middle of the road'. More autocratic and more consultative styles of giving orders are represented almost equally, and the extremes on both sides represent a small minority of the total.

According to Hofstede (1980:135, 1991:35), in high Power Distance cultures clerical (white-collar) and manual (blue-collar) workers have a very different social status, whereas in low Power Distance countries their social status will be more similar. About this issue, our respondents felt as follows.

[Q29] A manual (blue-collar) and a clerical (white-collar) worker in our company

◊	both have about equal status	32%
◊	the clerical worker's status is slightly higher	40%
◊	the clerical worker's status is much higher	17%
◊	the clerical worker's status is slightly lower	9%
◊	the clerical worker's status is much lower	2%

These figures certainly do not show extreme social distance between white-collar and blue-collar workers. A third of our respondents declare that the two professional categories have about equal social status, and those who feel that office workers are socially substantially above manual workers represent only 17%. Surprisingly, 11% even feel that manual workers are socially above clerical workers.

Another feature of high Power Distance Cultures, according to Hofstede (1991:37), is that power is more existential, i.e., is inherent in the powerholder rather than related to a specific function (such as being the boss in a company during working hours). Therefore, in a high Power Distance culture, a boss will tend to remain superior to his/her subordinates even outside working hours; in a lower Power

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Distance culture, the boss is a powerholder only during activities related to his function, and not all the time.

[Q27] When a worker meets his/her boss on Sunday in a shopping mall, does he/she need to pay special respect to the boss?

◊ yes, the boss is still the boss even outside work	69%
◊ no, outside work the boss is the worker's equal, not his/her superior	31%

Here two-thirds of our respondents feel that the subordinate owes respect to the superior all the time, and not only at work. This may seem at odds with some of the results above, which were either mid-range or else below 50% with respect to Power Distance. We will get back to this at the end of this section.

If holding power is existential in high Power Distance cultures, role reversal is more difficult. It will be hard to conceive that the boss, in another situation (outside work) may take orders from a person who is the subordinate during working hours. We tested our respondent's reaction to this with the following question.

[Q28] A boss wants to learn tennis and one of his/her subordinates is a good tennis instructor: can the subordinate teach his boss tennis after hours?

◊ yes, no problem	69%
◊ maybe, but it might be a bit awkward	25%
◊ no, that would be difficult to conceive	6%

Again we may be a little puzzled by the result. Whereas the answers to the previous question clearly indicated that over two-thirds of the respondents tend to see holding power as an inherent quality of the boss, and therefore part of his/her personality twenty-four hours a day and seven days a week, here over two-thirds indicate that role reversal is possible, i.e., that the superior-subordinate relation is *not* existential.

Before addressing this issue, let us consider the answers to a number of other questions related to Power Distance. Two of them are about external signs of power, which are supposedly more important in a high Power Distance country (where the boss needs to show that he/she is superior), and less important in low Power Distance countries (where the boss needs to downplay his/her authority over others; see Hofstede, 1980:121, 1991:43).

[Q25] External signs of a boss's status (a bigger car, expensive office furniture, high quality clothing) are important for him/her to maintain his/her authority over the workers.

◊ I strongly agree	8%
◊ I agree	51%
◊ I disagree	39%
◊ I strongly disagree	2%

Here a majority of our respondents (59%) feel that external signs of status are important, although extreme opinions on both sides are rare again.

[Q26] It is difficult for a subordinate to come to work in a bigger car than his/her superior.

◊	I strongly agree	5%
◊	I agree	29%
◊	I disagree	57%
◊	I strongly disagree	9%

The proportions are again reversed: about two thirds of the respondents disagree with this statement, only 34% agree. However, there is little doubt that this proportion of one third of respondents who agree is substantially higher than it would be in most Western cultures where, to my knowledge, no-one would care much one way or the other about the size of cars (except for company cars, which clearly reflect one's position in the hierarchy). Therefore, it is not clear whether the answers to this question really indicate relatively low Power Distance, or not.

Two questions related to differences in management styles were also part of our survey. Q44 is inspired by André Laurent (1983), and answers are supposed to be correlated with high/low Power Distance cultures: in high Power Distance cultures, people expect clear guidance and answers from their superiors; in low Power Distance cultures, superiors may admit their ignorance, puzzlement and/or let the workers decide for themselves. Similarly, Q45: in high Power Distance cultures, as managers have little tendency to delegate power to subordinates, they need to be involved in all the details of the work; in low Power Distance cultures, on the other hand, they concern themselves with the broad lines of the work, but leave details to be worked out by subordinates. However, another of Hofstede's dimensions, Uncertainty Avoidance, may also be involved here.

[Q44] It is important for a manager in my company to have precise answers to most of the questions that his/her subordinates may raise.

◊	I strongly agree	27%
◊	I agree	61.5%
◊	I disagree	11.5%
◊	I strongly disagree	0%

 [Q45] It is important for a manager in my company to know in detail everything that is going on in the department he/she runs.

◊	I strongly agree	28%
◊	I agree	43%
◊	I disagree	29%
◊	I strongly disagree	0%

Q44 indicates that workers expect a manager who gives them clear guidance. Q45 shows that Thai managers are expected to be in charge of everything themselves, with little propensity to delegate or leave details to workers at lower echelons. This may be explained by a higher degree of Uncertainty Avoidance rather than by the Power Distance dimension.

When comparing the answers our respondents provided to different questions that are related to Power Distance, we may get the feeling that there is no clear line in them. To several questions, the answers are 'middle of the road': Q23, Q24, Q29 are examples of that. Thailand's score on the Power Distance Index is medium, and it is therefore not surprising that in many instances the responses reflect this position. This is in itself likely to be a reflection of the fact that Thai culture is impregnated with Buddhism, with its aversion from any extremes.

But in other cases, the respondents' answers are seemingly contradictory: they seem to tend toward the high Power Distance side for Q25 and Q27, in particular, and toward low Power Distance for Q4 and Q28. In Q4, 66% of our respondents declare that decisions are made together at meetings, rather than outside the meeting by a smaller group of people. This more 'democratic' type of decision-making is supposed to be typical of low Power Distance cultures. Similarly, in Q28, 69% of our respondents accept role reversal (the subordinate becoming the boss's tennis instructor), another feature that is typical of low Power Distance cultures. In Q27, on the other hand, 69% of the respondents feel that special respect is due to the boss even outside working hours, and this is supposed to be typical of high Power Distance cultures, where authority is existential rather than solely dependent on the function; in Q25, 59% of them feel that external signs of status are important, another feature that is supposedly typical of high Power Distance cultures.

We would like to contend that Q4 and Q28 on the one hand, Q25 and Q27 on the other, inquire into very different aspects of the Power Distance dimension. Q25 and Q27 are about *formal* aspects of authority: paying respect to the boss, external signs of status. Q4 and Q28 are not about form, but about the *substance of authority:* decision making in Q4, expertise in a given field in Q28.

The seemingly contradictory responses to these two types of questions struck me because they confirm what is my own hunch about Thai society as I got to know it in Bangkok (mainly in academic circles): a very high degree (in Western eyes) of formal hierarchisation and stratification, but, underneath all this, a social system where the 'lower' strata have a lot of input and feedback into the decision-making process. For instance, students will greet their professor with a very submissive-type *wai* and when they walk past the professor, they will lower their upper body in an effort to ensure that their head is below the professor's head (which is particularly difficult if the professor is seated when they walk past him/her!), in a way that may make a Westerner feel uncomfortable when first experiencing it. On the other hand, when attending classes that are taught by my Thai colleagues, I was struck by the high degree of input the students have in the way the class and the exams are organised,—much more, in my opinion, than what is common in the West.

If the analysis above is correct and if there is indeed a 'discrepancy' between a very hierarchical, stratified system of formal manners and a more egalitarian (relatively speaking, of course) substantial reality, it is no surprise that Westerners may have a hard time grasping this. In the West, people tend to feel that the formal aspect and the substance of authority should be, as much as possible, in concordance with each other. This is clearly reflected in Hofstede's lists of features that are associated with high vs. low Power Distance respectively: formal features (dress code and other external signs of power, privileges such as having a separate bathroom or parking lot, etc.) are mixed together with substantial features (involving, for instance, decision making power) in the same lists (Hofstede, 1991:37, 43). In the same way, Westerners may be puzzled when they learn that in Japan, a very strict system of formal social stratification (based on seniority, rank, etc.) goes together with what is often described as 'bottom-up' decision making…

We believe that an accurate description of Thai culture calls for splitting up the Power Distance dimension into different subcomponents, and at the very least into a formal and a substantial component

of this dimension. The strict codification of formal manners in a country such as Thailand (and probably also in Japan) is, as is well-known, a way to ensure face-saving. The concept of face-saving is often misunderstood by my students, and by many Westerners generally. When I explain to my students or trainees that face saving means, among other things, that it may be nearly impossible to *say* 'no', to *voice* disagreement, to *openly* criticise, they often infer from this that refusing, disagreeing or criticising are almost impossible in Thailand or Japan. In my opinion, this is not true, and it is perhaps *not even more difficult* to convey a refusal, disagreement or criticism in these two countries than it is in the West; only, it will be conveyed in a different way. The refusal, etc., will not be stated openly, in words: in that way, *formal harmony* will be preserved. But as far as *substance* is concerned, the refusal, disagreement or criticism will be very clear to the Thai or Japanese interlocutor. Recall one of our respondents, whose quote we repeat here, who clearly felt her boss's disapproval of what she did although it was not stated in words:

> I feel it by myself, such as the way my boss treats me has changed, he avoids direct contact with me, some of his attitude is different from normal. These are the warning signs, and let me find out what happened.

For Westerners who do not understand that a strict hierarchical system regulating social behaviour and expression may not necessarily reflect the underlying substance, it may be illuminating to think of the small and fossilised examples of a formal system of politeness that does not necessarily reflect true substance as they exist in Western languages. You may call someone 'Sir' (or even more clearly, 'Mein Herr', 'Mijnheer', 'Monsieur', all meaning something like 'my Lord', in German, Dutch and French respectively) without feeling at all that this person is your superior, let alone your Lord. The Thai language has approximately twelve grammatically defined honorificals to address someone (i.e., putting it simply, twelve different words for 'you' and 'I', depending on the social position of the speaker and the addressee; see Cooper & Cooper, 1982:99), as against two in many European languages *(Du* and *Sie, tu* and *vous*, etc.). It would be a mistake to infer from there that the Thai live under an authoritarian, oppressive system of social stratification that permeates all aspects of their life and precludes input or feedback from the lower strata in society. We are not saying here that Thai society is less hierarchical, or more hierarchical, than Western cultures; we simply contend that the reality of a culture may be too complex to be grasped by such a simple affirmation, or by a figure representing a score on a linear Power Distance scale.

Westerners may feel most at ease when interacting with equals, and may feel less comfortable in situations of formal social stratification (reflected, for instance, in seating arrangements at a restaurant, in the order of speakers at a seminar, etc.). In Thailand (and Japan), clear social stratification is probably felt to be reassuring rather than threatening, and it is the absence of a clear hierarchy that may make people feel uncomfortable. If the social hierarchy in a group of people is clearly defined, there are no difficulties with seating arrangements or with the order of speakers: these follow automatically from the hierarchical order. If, on the other hand, within a group the social hierarchy is *not* clearly defined, all kinds of face-threatening, harmony-breaking problems potentially arise: who is going to sit where around the table? who will speak first? etc.

8.2   Individualism and group orientation

In certain cultures, people tend to think of themselves primarily as individuals; in others, as members of a group. Western cultures, to varying degrees, are the most individualistic in the world. Thailand, with an Individualism score of 20 (40th out of 53 countries) ranks low, though not among the very lowest, on Hofstede's scale (Hofstede, 1991:53). We therefore expect Thailand to exhibit many features that are associated with collectivism (group-orientation).

In group-oriented cultures, people owe a high degree of loyalty to their in-group, and in return they get (and expect) a high degree of protection from it. The group may take different shapes (the family, the tribe, the ethnic group), but, in relation to our topic, we wanted to test in how far the Thai think of their company as a group to which they owe loyalty, and from which they receive protection.

[Q31] When someone is offered a higher salary elsewhere, he/she would tend to stay with the present company out of loyalty.

◊	I strongly agree	5%
◊	I agree	48%
◊	I disagree	42%
◊	I strongly disagree	5%

As one can see, slightly over half the respondents think that loyalty to the company will prevail over better pay. In the absence of comparison with other cultures, it is difficult to assess whether this is more than average, or not. Our own impression is that in most Western cultures, a higher proportion of people will be willing to change jobs if they are offered better pay. In some Western cultures, such as the USA, this will almost undoubtedly be the case.

Japan is often described as a culture where loyalty to the company is very high, and where, as a visible result of that, an individual who works for company A will always prefer to buy and use products from company A over its competitors. For instance, it is said to be almost unthinkable for a Japanese person who works for, say, Toyota, to come to work in any other make of car than Toyota. We submitted this question to our Thai respondents.

[Q32] If I work for an automobile company (say Toyota or Ford) coming to work in a car of another make (say Nissan or Opel) I would find

◊	very difficult	14%
◊	rather difficult	32%
◊	rather acceptable	30%
◊	totally acceptable	24%

Here also, although over half of the respondents feel it is rather acceptable or totally acceptable to drive another car to work, the percentage of those who don't share that feeling, 46%, seems high in comparison to Western countries, where, as far as we know, virtually no-one would find it difficult to drive an Opel to work even when working for Ford. On the other hand, this form of loyalty, just like the previous one, while higher in Thailand than in Western cultures, is probably lower in Thailand than it is in Japan.

In group-oriented cultures, people owe loyalty to their group, but they also expect a high degree of protection from their group, in this case the company. We inquired about the help and assistance the company is expected to provide in the areas of housing, education for the children, health care, and unforeseen financial problems.

[Q33] I expect my company to provide assistance and help to me in the following areas

		yes	no
◊	housing	63%	37%
◊	education for the children	60%	40%
◊	health care	96%	4%
◊	unforeseen financial problems	68%	32%

The majority of Thai workers clearly expect assistance and help from their company in domains where such assistance is not expected in Europe and/or in other parts of the Western world, such as the United States. Virtually everyone expects assistance with health care, presumably in the form of health insurance contracted for the workers by the company. This is most probably linked with the social and political structure of Thailand where, like in the United States but unlike most European countries, health insurance is not provided by the state. But in other domains also, the Thai expect assistance from their company in domains where Westerners, Europeans and Americans alike, would not. The difference with Western culture is perhaps most striking with respect to unforeseen financial problems: over two-thirds of our Thai respondents expect help from their company in this case, whereas I know of few Europeans or Americans who would (or could) turn to their company for help when facing unforeseen financial difficulties.

In more collectivist (group-oriented) cultures, reward systems need to be geared to this group-orientation. It may be advisable to reward a group who performed well, rather than a particular individual who worked better than the others.

To test which system prevails in Thailand, we asked the following question.

[Q66] When performance improves seriously in my company, the company will

not issue special rewards for that	8%
reward the individual or individuals most responsible for the improvement	42%
reward the group or team most responsible for the improvement, even if some individuals of the group did not participate in it	41%
reward the superiors of the people most responsible for the improvement	9%

Group-oriented reward systems seem to be as common as individual reward systems. Again it is difficult to assess the value of this result in the absence of a comparison with Western countries, but it seems likely that in many Western cultures, individual reward systems will be more prevalent, and group-oriented reward systems less common, than in Thailand. It is also interesting to note that in almost one case out of ten, the people who get rewarded are the superiors of those who performed particularly well!

The prevalent decision making style will also depend on the position of a culture on the individualism-collectivism dimension.

[Q67] In my company decision are most often made by

◊	individuals	32%
◊	groups or teams of people	68%

As one can see, two thirds of our respondents declare that a collective decision-making style prevails in their company. The decision making style that prevails in countries like Japan or Thailand (I am not claiming that it is identical in both those countries) is difficult to grasp for Westerners. On the one hand, it may seem that decisions are made in a more autocratic manner than in the West, by an individual or a small group of people at the top. On the other hand, extensive consultation of the lower echelons in the company will occur before any decision is made (possibly even more in Japan than in Thailand, but the process is probably important in both countries). Therefore, a simple question such as Q67 above may in itself reflect Western bias and be insufficient to capture the complexities of the Thai decision making style (see also the discussion of Power Distance above). In any case, a truly individual decision making style, though important according to one third of our respondents, does not correspond to what happens in the majority of the Thai companies we studied. Most decisions are made collectively, but our survey does not provide us with further information about the precise way in which decisions are made by 'groups or teams of people'.

8.3   Masculinity/femininity

Hofstede's fourth dimension, which he terms Masculinity-Femininity, should not be exclusively understood in terms of macho-ness, or in terms of male vs. female. A masculine culture is a culture where traditional male values dominate, such as assertiveness, ambition and growth, being tough, etc. In more masculine cultures, the expected behaviour of males and females is clearly differentiated; in the most feminine cultures, such as the Netherlands or Sweden, gender roles are less differentiated, and males can take on caring roles while females may pursue a professional career.

Thailand scores rather low on Hofstede's Masculinity index: it is in 44th position out of 53 countries, with a score of 34. This means that there is still a clear discrepancy with the countries that have very low scores, such as Denmark (16), the Netherlands (14), Norway (8) or Sweden (5).

The following questions were intended to illustrate different aspects of the Masculinity dimension.

[Q46] When faced with a choice between the preservation of the environment and economic growth, the government should generally give...

priority to preservation of the environment even at the expense of economic growth	68%
priority to economic growth even at the expense of the environment	32%

One might conclude from this question that the Thai are 'ecologically minded', and that this is an emanation of the lower degree of Masculinity in their country. However, the interpretation of the answers to Q46 may not be that straightforward. The fact that one third of the respondents prefer to give priority to economic growth even at the expense of the environment, against the prevailing discourse about ecology and the preservation of the environment, seems equally surprising to us, and this percentage may be higher than in many Western countries, where perhaps nearly everyone will give priority to the environment at the expense of growth.

Another value cluster that is associated with low Masculinity is a preference for things small and slow rather than big and fast (Hofstede, 1991:103). In relation to this, the following question was included in our survey.

[Q47] Overall I prefer

◊ a large car which is fast and luxurious	44%
◊ a small car which is economic and pollutes less	56%

Our own hunch is that more people in the West, and especially in certain European countries, would prefer the small car than the percentage shown here. With a question such as this, of course, it is particularly doubtful whether the answers truly reflect the behaviour of the respondents. But if there is a discrepancy between what people declare and what they really do, in this case, the percentage who go for option 1 (the fast and luxurious car) is likely to be higher in deeds than in words; in other terms, the 'masculine' option is probably underrated in the answers to Q47, and Thailand is probably closer to the masculine end of the dimension for this aspect than many Western countries.

Masculinity is also reflected in a 'work to live' attitude where ambition and achievement prevail over leisure time and family life. An Asian country, Japan, has the highest score on Hofstede's Masculinity dimension (rank 1, score 95). Thailand, on the other hand, is sometimes described as a country with a 'laid back' attitude where work, whenever possible, will be turned into a party or, at least, an activity that is fun (Cooper & Cooper, 1990:128),—but that does not necessarily preclude working hard. Let us consider the answers our respondents gave to the following questions.

[Q48] When a task is not finished before the week-end, I will go to my office to finish it over the week-end

◊ yes, frequently	20%
◊ yes, sometimes	57%
◊ yes, but rarely	17%
◊ almost never	6%

[Q49] I would be willing to sacrifice part of my yearly vacation with my family if the company feels there is a need for that

◊ yes, almost certainly	36%
◊ yes, but rather reluctantly	39%
◊ only very exceptionally	23%
◊ no, never	2%

It seems clear that our Thai respondents have a different balance between work and leisure than most of their European counterparts, who, I believe, are much less likely to give up their vacation (nearly unthinkable in Europe) or to work over the week-end. The Thai are probably more similar, in this respect, to the Japanese and the Americans (U.S.) in giving higher priority to work over leisure and time spent with the family. In this respect, the answers are at clearly at odds with Thailand's low position on Hofstede's Masculinity scale.

Finally, two questions about gender roles were included in our survey.

[Q50] Women and men must be equal with respect to professional ambition and career-orientation

◊	I strongly agree	33%
◊	I agree	59%
◊	I disagree	8%
◊	I strongly disagree	0%

[Q51] When the wife has a successful career, the husband can stay at home and take care of the children and the household.

◊	I strongly agree	3%
◊	I agree	27%
◊	I disagree	52%
◊	I strongly disagree	18%

Although there is a strong feeling in favour of professional equality between the sexes (92%), there is also an unsurprising discrepancy between that theoretical position and accepting its consequences, i.e., the possibility of role reversal. Nevertheless, it may be equally surprising that a sizeable minority of our Thai respondents (30%) accept the idea that the husband would stay at home while his wife pursues a professional career. Whether they would do so in reality is another question, but, on the basis of the answers we got, there is little reason to think that the Thai are more macho than most Westerners, quite the contrary.

8.4 Uncertainty Avoidance

Thailand scores mid-range on Hofstede's Uncertainty Avoidance dimension: 64, rank 30 out of 53 countries (Hofstede, 1991:113). This makes predictions with respect to the consequences of its position on this dimension again difficult. A number of value clusters that are associated with high vs. low Uncertainty Avoidance were tested in our survey. The first one has to do with strategies that may be developed in order to absorb uncertainty about the future through saving money.

[Q52] I save a substantial percentage of my income for

		Yes	No
◊	my own future purchases (home, car)	93%	7%
◊	my children	76%	24%
◊	my grandchildren	42%	58%
◊	helping relatives when needed	72%	28%

Clearly, saving money is a major priority for our Thai respondents. There is little doubt that, for the third and fourth item in particular, the answers would have been different in Western societies, where saving money for the grandchildren (two generations hence!) or for relatives in general is, to the best of my knowledge, not an important preoccupation for most people.

In the workplace, a higher degree of Uncertainty Avoidance will manifest itself by features such as
- giving priority to job security over high pay
- a tendency towards relying on rules, regulations and procedures (that absorb uncertainty about unknown future occurrences)
- a tendency to promote people from inside the company to top positions, rather than hiring an outsider who, by definition, carries with him/her a higher degree of uncertainty
- a tendency to attach more value to age.

The following questions are relevant to these issues.

[Q42] If given the choice between a higher paid job with a short-term contract and a lower paid job with a long-term contract, I would generally prefer

◊	the higher paid, short-term job	45%
◊	the lower paid, long-term job	55%

[Q43] Detailed rules, regulations and written procedures are drawn up to ensure smooth operations in our company and to avoid the need for case-by-case discussions

◊	yes, frequently	26%
◊	yes, sometimes	56%
◊	yes, but rarely	16%
◊	no, almost never	2%

[Q40] In order to cope in the best possible way with unforeseen events, my company spends time and effort in making detailed scenarios and plans for the future

◊	yes, frequently	35%
◊	yes, but not frequently	62%
◊	no, almost never	3%

Its is difficult to find a clear trend in the answers to these questions. The number of our respondents who prefer the short-term job with higher pay is about the same as those who prefer the more stable job with lower pay. The answers to Q43 and Q40 are equally 'middle of the road'. With respect to these issues, then, it seems that Hofstede's figures about Thailand's position on the Uncertainty Avoidance Index are a faithful reflection of Thai culture; this may be less so for the aspect of *saving money*, where Thailand probably ranks higher than most other cultures, in line, not surprisingly, with what we know about South-East Asian cultures generally.

As said above, in countries with high Uncertainty Avoidance, there is a reluctance to accept outsiders, either from another company or from a foreign country. When a top executive position becomes vacant in a company, it will be filled more often by someone from inside the company than by someone else (Hofstede, 1980:177).

[Q34] When a top executive position becomes vacant, in my company it will be filled

(a) almost always by someone from inside the company	21%	
(b) more often by someone from inside the company	25%	Total (a) + (b) = 46%
(c) in about half of the cases by someone from inside, and half by someone from outside the company	33%	
(d) more often by someone from outside the company	19%	Total (d) + (e) = 21%
(e) almost always by someone from outside the company	2%	

[Q41] Bringing a foreigner to work for our company would be felt by most workers

(a) as a serious threat	5%	
(b) as a difficulty to cope with	26%	Total (a) + (b) = 31%
(c) as similar to hiring a local person	33%	
(d) as a positive measure	33%	Total (d) + (e) = 36%
(e) as a very positive and enriching measure	3%	

Here again, what is perhaps most striking is the 'middle of the road' position reflected in the answers to these questions, with no pronounced tendency towards one side or the other. Only with Q34 one could say that promotion happens more often from the inside in Thai companies, and that this may reflect a tendency towards Uncertainty Avoidance,—though it is still the question whether these figures would be different in low Uncertainty Avoidance cultures, such as the USA.

Finally, higher Uncertainty Avoidance is also correlated to a preference for older age: an older, experienced person carries less uncertainty with him/her than a younger worker.

[Q35] In deciding who gets a promotion inside the company, the candidate's *age* is

◊	irrelevant	16%
◊	a relevant, but minor consideration	51%
◊	a rather important factor to be considered	26%
◊	a very important factor to be considered	7%

[Q36] In deciding who gets a promotion inside the company, the candidate's *seniority* (=his/her years with the company) is

◊	irrelevant	9%
◊	a relevant, but minor consideration	50%
◊	a rather important factor to be considered	32%
◊	a very important factor to be considered	9%

Although the answers to Q35 and Q36 are again rather 'middle of the road', some conclusions seem possible:

- age and seniority *are* taken into consideration, probably more than in some Western cultures such as the United States or Britain
- age and seniority do not play the same prominent role that they play in Japan, where they are said to be the predominant (if not the only) factor in getting a promotion
- seniority is slightly more important than age as a factor in deciding who gets a promotion.

9. Splitting up the results between executives and white-collar workers

Although it is an unintended by-product of the our survey, the comparison of the responses of the 77 executives on the one hand, of the 27 white-collar workers on the other, yields perhaps some of the most interesting results in the present study. A general tendency appears very clearly in their answers, with very few counterexamples: the white-collar workers represent a more 'traditional' side of Thai culture, characterised, in particular, by the following features.

- Higher Power Distance
- Possibly lower Individualism, although there are some counterindications to that
- A different temporal orientation, with a more important past and a more predetermined future
- A higher emphasis on face-saving and preserving harmony
- Higher Uncertainty Avoidance
- A more *diffuse,* less *specific* orientation, including higher emphasis on the 'getting acquainted' process and on informal networks
- A higher emphasis on *ascription* as against *achievement.*

Let us examine each of these points in turn. Below we list the differences in the responses of the executives and the white-collar workers for *all* the questions where the difference between the two groups is higher than 8%; we also include a small number of questions where the difference is below 8%, for the sake of illustration. We will also discuss some cases where there is virtually no difference in the responses of the two groups, though most of those are not taken up here. Below we recall the questions in an abbreviated form only; the full formulation can be found in the text above. In both groups, the number of responses was always near or at the maximum (77 executives, 27 white-collar workers); we therefore only include percentages in the tables below.

9.1   Power Distance

As one can see in the table below, white-collar workers clearly put more emphasis on hierarchical relations than their bosses (the executives) themselves do. The white-collar workers feel a higher need to pay respect to their superior outside work [Q27], to associate the size of the car to someone's status [Q26], and, even more clearly, would find it awkward for a subordinate to teach the boss tennis [Q28]. They also tend to differentiate the social status of white as against blue collar workers more, presumably because they desire to differentiate their own social status as much as possible from that of the manual workers [Q29].

	Question (abridged)	Exec.	White Collar	Difference
[Q28]	A subordinate can teach his boss tennis after hours: yes, no problem	76%	48%	28
[Q29]	A clerical worker's status is (slightly + much) higher than a manual worker's	53%	67%	14
[Q26]	Difficult for a subordinate to come to work in a bigger car than his/her superior (strongly agree + agree)	31%	40%	9
[Q27]	Need to pay respect to the boss outside work, e.g. on Sunday in a shopping mall	68%	74%	6

9.2   Individualism

With respect to Individualism, the picture that emerges is less straightforward. White-collar workers expect more assistance from the company in various domains [Q33]. This could be due to lower Individualism, the company functioning as an in-group which is expected to provide a higher degree of support and protection (in exchange for loyalty); but it can equally well be explained by the fact that people with lower salaries feel a higher need for assistance from the company in the domains mentioned in [Q33].

White-collar workers find it more difficult, if working for an automobile company, to come to work in a car of a different make [Q32]; this also indicates that, to them more than to the executives, the company functions like an in-group to which one owes loyalty.

On the other hand, the white-collar workers see the decision-making and reward processes as less group-oriented than the executives do [Q67], [Q66].

	Question (abridged)	Exec.	White Collar	Difference
[Q33]	I expect the company to provide assistance and help			
	◊ with housing	56%	81%	25
	◊ with education for my children	55%	72%	17
	◊ with health care	95%	100%	5
	◊ with unforeseen financial problems	63%	84%	21
[Q32]	Working for an automobile company, coming to work in a car of another make is difficult (strongly agree+agree)	41%	59%	18
[Q67]	Decisions are most often made by groups or teams of people	71%	60%	11
[Q66]	When performance improves seriously, the company			
	◊ rewards the individual responsible for it	40%	48%	8
	◊ reward the group or team responsible for it	42%	37%	5

9.3   Time orientation

The white-collar workers clearly have a different, presumably more 'traditional' and/or less Western, temporal orientation: for them the past is much more important as a yardstick for future decisions than for the executives (although its importance remains high even for these), and the future is more pre-determined.

	Question (abridged)	Exec.	White Collar	Difference
[Q8]	The past is an important yardstick for future decisions (strongly agree + agree)	73%	96%	23
[Q39]	The future is already determined, whatever we do or try	19%	33%	14

9.4   Face saving and harmony

Most responses tend to indicate that face-saving and preserving harmony are more important to the white-collar workers. In [Q5], they exhibit a higher tendency to stay with the first person rather than going to their second appointment, presumably because they find it more face-threatening for the first person to cut off the appointment with him/her. [Q14] indicates that the white-collar workers' bosses have a higher tendency towards indirectness than the executives' bosses. But the answers to [Q23] run counter to this tendency: the white-collar workers seem to exhibit a higher tendency towards directness when relating to their bosses than the executives do when relating to *their* bosses; and in [Q13], both groups react in about the same way when asked how they would criticise a subordinate.

	Question (abridged)	Exec.	White Collar	Difference
[Q5]	Continue with the first appointment at the expense of your second appointment	18%	37%	19
[Q14]	A superior criticising me will avoid direct criticism, make me feel indirectly that something was wrong	17%	26%	9
[Q23]	When I disagree with a superior, I will tell him so (almost always + most of the time)	50%	59%	9
[Q13]	When criticising a subordinate I will avoid direct criticism, make him/her feel indirectly that something was wrong	27%	29%	2

[Q60] indicates that the white-collar workers shun competition more than the executives: over a quarter of them oppose an individual performance bonus scheme because it makes workers compete one against the other. In-group harmony appears to be more important for them than for the executives.

	Question (abridged)			
[Q60]	An individual performance bonus scheme			
	◊ is/would be beneficial	68%	65%	3
	◊ is/would be negative because it makes workers compete one against the other	17%	27%	10

9.5 Uncertainty Avoidance

In [Q41] and [Q42], the white-collar workers exhibit higher Uncertainty Avoidance than the executives: they feel substantially more threatened by the arrival of a foreigner in the office, and they value job security slightly more than the executives.

The responses to [Q52] are less clear-cut. Interestingly, white-collar workers save more for their grandchildren and other relatives than executives; the latter save more for their own future purchases and for their children. This may have less to do with Uncertainty Avoidance than with a different family structure. We surmise that the executives tend to live more in nuclear families with parents and children only (or tend to view their family primarily as such), whereas the white-collar workers have a more traditional, extended family structure (or view of it) which includes grandchildren and other relatives.

	Question (abridged)	Exec.	White Collar	Difference
[Q41]	Bringing a foreigner to work for our company is felt as a serious threat or a difficulty to cope with	24%	48%	24
[Q42]	I would prefer a higher paid, short-term job over a lower paid, long-term job	46%	38%	8
[Q52]	I save a substantial percentage of my income for			
	◊ my own future purchases (home, car)	94%	92%	2
	◊ my children	79%	68%	11
	◊ my grandchildren	39%	52%	13
	◊ helping other relatives when needed	70%	77%	7

[Q54] shows that the executives are more open to Western influence than the white-collar workers: very few of them feel American cultural influence as a threat, and many more consider that it has a positive influence upon Thai culture.

[Q56] tells us that short-term obligations have higher priority for the white-collar workers. In [Q55], the executives exhibit a higher tendency towards (Asian) eclecticism with respect to management theories than the white-collar workers,—but it is questionable whether the latter are really aware what management theories and managing people involve.

[Q54]	The influence of American lifestyle and values is			
	◊ a threat that should be fought	3%	11%	8
	◊ a positive influence that should be encouraged	23%	15%	8
	◊ an opportunity but only if combined with our culture	68%	58%	10
[Q56]	Social status obligations must be met even when I consider them too expensive	8%	15%	7
[Q55]	When applying management theory in practice, it is best to combine elements from different theories	96%	78%	18

9.6 Diffuse vs. specific; ascription vs. achievement

Many questions (see the list below) show that the white-collar workers tend more towards diffuseness than the executives: they see the person they do business with as a whole rather than focusing mainly or exclusively on the business aspect. They find it more difficult to do business with an immoral person [Q7], value gifts more to establish a personal bond with the other person [Q19], attach more importance to getting acquainted before doing business [Q22] and to informal networks of people who know

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and support each other [Q38], [Q37]. They would also find it more difficult to refuse their boss a favour that has nothing to do with work [Q68],—but in this case, the higher Power Distance which separates them from their bosses than is the case for the executives and *their* bosses may also play a role.

Note that even if the white-collar workers tend more towards diffuseness than the executives, the latter exhibit a high tendency towards diffuseness themselves in many cases.

	Question (abridged)	Exec.	White Collar	Difference
[Q7]	Impossible to do business with immoral person	32%	48%	16
[Q19]	It is important to give gifts to business partners (strongly agree + agree)	87%	96%	9
[Q68]	I would assist my boss during company hours with a task that has nothing to do with the company	84%	93%	9
[Q22]	The business lunch is used to get to know each other, not to talk business	11%	26%	15
[Q38]	To get things done, important to know the right people *outside* the company (strongly agree + agree)	61%	78%	17
[Q37]	To get things done, important to know the right people *inside* the company (strongly agree + agree)	86%	100%	14

The white-collar workers also clearly exhibit a higher tendency towards ascription than the executives: they attach more importance to a person's social and family background rather than to his/her achievements alone.

	Question (abridged)	Exec.	White Collar	Difference
[Q69]	The respect I owe a person depends not only on his/her achievements but also on social and family background (strongly agree + agree)	69%	85%	16

9.7   Masculinity

With respect to Masculinity, the picture that emerges from our data is not very clear. [Q47] might indicate lower Masculinity on the side of the white-collar workers, but is perhaps more likely to simply reflect the fact that their salary does not often allow them to buy a larger car. [Q50] might indicate that the white-collar workers are less favourable to professional equality between genders (even if the percentage in favour of equality is high for both groups). However, in [Q51], where the consequences of this ideal of gender equality are tested, there is no difference between the two groups!

Surprisingly, the white-collar workers exhibit a slightly higher tendency towards giving priority to work over leisure [Q48], [Q49], and therefore higher Masculinity in this respect; but the differences between the two groups are small in both cases.

	Question (abridged)	Exec.	White Collar	Difference
[Q47]	I prefer a large car which is fast and luxurious over a small car which is economic and pollutes less	48%	33%	15
[Q50]	Women and men must be professionally equal (strongly agree + agree)	94%	85%	9
[Q51]	When the wife has a successful career, the husband can stay at home and take care of the children (strongly agree + agree)	30%	30%	0
[Q48]	I will go to my office to finish a task over the week-end (frequently + sometimes)	75%	81%	6
[Q49]	I would be willing to sacrifice part of my yearly vacation if needed (almost certainly + reluctantly)	74%	77%	3

9.8   Universal vs. particular

Surprisingly, the answers to the four questions below would seem to indicate that white-collar workers are less prone to particularism than the executives. For the executives, the shift between [Q62] and [Q63] is 13%: thirteen percent of them would not treat a close friend in the same way as they would treat a stranger, when reporting a professional error. For the white-collar workers, in the same case, the shift is of 4% only. Similarly, between [Q65] and [Q64], the executives exhibit a 36% shift, the white-collar workers only 18%. If particularism is, supposedly, more traditional than universalism, we see no explanation for these results which run counter the general tendency where the white-collar workers exhibit more traditional, less modern or Western, values.

	Question (abridged)	Exec.	White Collar	Difference
[Q62]	I would report a serious professional error made by another worker I don't know well (probably + maybe)	92%	74%	18
[Q63]	I would report a serious professional error made by another worker who is a close friend (probably+maybe)	79%	70%	9
[Q65]	I would write a letter of recommendation for a stranger even if he/she is not suited (probably + maybe)	21%	26%	5
[Q64]	I would write a letter of recommendation for a close friend even if he/she is not suited (probably + maybe)	57%	44%	13

9.9   Conclusion: tradition vs. modernity

The cultural differences we detect between executives and white-collar workers, with the majority of them working for service industries in Bangkok, should caution us against extrapolating blindly from the results we discussed here to other social groups and/or to other parts of the country. If anything, blue-collar workers are likely to be even more 'traditional' with respect to the features we discussed above than the two groups we examined here, and so are people living outside the Bangkok metro-politan area. While the businessperson who spends a few days or weeks in Thailand for a contact or a negotiation is likely to encounter Bangkok executives mostly, the same is not true for the expatriate who stays in the country for several years and who will inevitably get into contact with other social groups, and possibly with companies outside Bangkok. In both cases, the cultural differences between the Western expatriate and the Thai people he/she meets are likely to be more pronounced than what emerges from our survey.

10.   General conclusion: recommendations for Westerners

As we said in the beginning of this paper, many of the results we got can only be properly interpreted if we could compare them with similar features in Western cultures. Nevertheless, it seems to us that we can safely issue a number of recommendations to Westerners who wish to do business in Thailand. We thought that our final conclusions would be most useful to the majority of our readers if we formu-late them as recommendations, and that is what we do here.

- Be as punctual as traffic conditions in Bangkok allow you to be, and do not use traffic consistently as an excuse for arriving late.

- Allow for some small talk to establish a relationship before talking business; socialise extensively when there seems to be a need for it and accept that business discussion may only be initiated at a later stage.
- Be very patient when business appears to be stalling, and persevere for a long time before drawing the conclusion that it is best to abandon an otherwise promising project.
- Do not be surprised when some of your Thai interlocutors appear to be very Westernised (mainly Americanised), but do not infer from there that Thai values are regressing. Do not infer from meeting executives that all Thai people are as Westernised as some of those might be.
- Acknowledge the importance of events that happened in the past in making decisions for the future, and be aware that the Thai may feel slightly less in control of the future than most Westerners.
- Do not touch your Thai colleagues or partners unless you are absolutely confident that doing so is appropriate.
- Never yell or shout at anyone, even when things seem to go terribly wrong.
- Allow for less than perfect knowledge of English, and express yourself in a way that reduces the risk of misunderstandings and confusion.
- Train yourself in reading indirect messages and be diplomatic and indirect yourself, particularly when criticising or refusing; even more so with people from outside the company than with people you work with every day.
- Be sure never to cause loss of face, even in seemingly innocuous cases like cutting short an appointment or a meeting, etc.
- Establish and maintain informal networks of people you can rely on inside the company as well as outside; the latter may involve exchanging well-chosen gifts with business partners.
- Do not create an atmosphere in the company where workers feel tightly controlled by a suspicious management, or where there is open competition between the workers.
- Do not neglect the external signs of your own social and professional status, even outside the workplace, and respect those of others.
- Do not make decisions without extensive prior consultation in order to ensure that your decision will meet with a broad consensus.
- Be aware that your social and family background contribute to establishing the impression people will have of you.
- Be aware that workers expect assistance from the company in various domains, as if they were part of a large family.
- Do not underestimate the professional role of women (do not rely on what is said about women in Asia generally).
- Introduce foreign elements (people as well as ideas) with caution, particularly at the lower professional levels.
- Expect more traditional, less Western attitudes at lower professional levels and outside Bangkok.

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