

Wai, the Thai Greetings

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Preface

Greetings while making introductions can be handshakes or bows. Thai culture has a unique greeting called 'wai' that characterizes the non-verbal communication for expressing respect and honor to other people. The essay discusses how the 'wai' also applies in Thai business setting and how it is essential for non-Thai businesspeople to adapt to this culture signature while conducting business with Thai businesspeople.

Background, Problem Identification and Goals

Thailand, one of the countries in Southeast Asia, which is a founding member of ASEAN, and the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) enjoys steady trade agreements with its neighboring countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines and Brunei Darussalam. Thailand started to grow its manufacturing industry basis since 1970 following the shifting from the agricultural industry in the previous years. This is a reflection of the large investments made by private firms from Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore. The country with the population of 67 million started exporting motor vehicles and telecommunication equipment [1]. Thailand is also a favorite tourist destination which recorded a visit of 39,797,406 tourists in 2019 [2]. Thailand Asia is dubbed as 'The Smile Country' and "Land of the Free" as it escaped colonization by the west [3]. The people of the country boast its natural views, cuisines, culture; the main attractions that foreign people adore. As Thailand business escalated with their scale of economy, doing business with Thai business people became increasingly common and communication aspects for the business success may be well considered.

In terms of expression of greetings, there are lot times that non-Thai business doers are baffled when getting introduced to Thai businesspeople as Thai people do not generally offer handshakes; instead they do the wai. Wai is simple gesture of a customary greeting performed by placing both palms of the hands pressed together as in a prayer-like gesture with fingers pointing upwards. The pressed palms are close to the chest with the head slightly bowed [4]. In Thailand you will possibly receive a wai wherever you go and whenever you meet: a supermarket cashier, a schoolboy, a peddler at the market, a waiter. Within the intercultural business communication, it is essential for non-Thai business doers to get

introduced to the way Thai businesspeople greet their business counterparts. It is also interesting to find out that other than the wai, there are some things non-Thai businesspeople need to know before doing business with Thai people.

Case Study: The Necessity of Performing Wai in Business Communication with Thai Business People

While doing business with Thai businesspeople, is it necessary for non-Thais to perform wai when greeting a Thai businessman? The fact is business partners to Thai businesspeople sometimes get confused with which way to use as all the wais look the same, and therefore it is a good idea for non-Thai businesspeople to get to know the correct one in order to create a good starting business impression. [4] says the wai is a sign of respect. It can be a way of expressing gratitude or demonstrating understanding of a situation or person and also a polite way to apologize. Wai can also be performed to a statue, Buddha images, monuments or even pictures of the King or King's family members. Willan further explained that the wai comes in some types of gestures [4]. Different gestures have something to do with who the other person is. The three levels of wai are:

- The peer-to-peer wai which is performed by person who meets another person meets socially; this wai is done by slightly nodding the hands so that the thumbs touch the chin and is done quickly, similar to someone saying 'hello'.
- The more respectful wai which is performed when greeting seniors or people of higher status; you do this by moving your head forward a bit with the hands up so that the thumbs touch the nose; and
- The monk wai that is performed when Thai see monks.

This is done by following the nod with a bow and the hands slide up so that the tip of the hands touches the eyebrows. It is always necessary to return wai as a gesture of respect back to someone who shows their respect. And it is also important to note that there are situations in which performing wai is not necessary, namely to children and of course to Ronald McDonald life size plastic figure performing the wai at each entrance door of McDonald restaurants in Thailand.

For non-Thai, performance of the first and second wais are preferable when greeting their Thai counterparts. The first wai is to be performed to long life business partner or friends and those people than someone know very well, while the second wai is to be offered to people of higher business rank or partners or when a certain extent of respect should be expressed. However, to some culture, Thai wai sometimes looks exaggerating and even the wai gesture-which requires a person to nod and bow with palms put together-is considered as a gesture of worshipping, which is too much when offered to other human beings. Of course this is only a minor case which occurs when an individual has their own opinion and belief about hand gestures. However, it is good to address such notion so that anyone with this belief may perceive wai not the way he thinks, but the way the orginal wai serves as a collective of Thai culture. According to Andrews & Siengthai (2009) as quoted by [5] et al. [5], the honor concept of wai originated from the motivating value that almost every Thai seeks in work and society. The precise position of the hands and the extent of the bow, as [5]. argued, vary depending upon the relative status of the two individuals. Jones (2003) in [5]. described that "the greater the difference in rank, the lower the head is inclined and the higher the wai should be"

Conceptual Studies

When trying to comprehend a piece of cultural items from another country, a deep understanding is necessary, one of which is by developing cultural intelligence. [6] quoting Ang et al. (2007) who argued that cultural intelligence is "an individual's capacity for successful adaptation to new and unfamiliar cultural settings and their ability to function easily and effectively in situations characterized by cultural diversity". In term of social introductions, a handshake, an embrace, or a bow, depending on the culture, accompanies introductions [7]. Chaney and Martin further put forward that customary greetings vary from one culture to another. The bow is common in China and Japan but not in many other cultures. Hugging or embracing upon introduction is deemed inappropriate in business settings in the United States but is a common practice in South American countries (p. 165), and in Thailand, the wai is the way. It seems simple and easy but actually the concept of wai is somehow not as simple as it appears.

According to [5], Amsbary and Hickson (2014) "the use of Wai in Thailand is a complex nonverbal behaviour that varies based upon the relative status of the participants and the situation that triggers the behaviour". The wai is sometimes performed with a verbal greeting like 'sawadee khap/kha' (literally means 'greetings') or 'khawp khun khap/kha' (thank you). [5] quoted Tonin & Kongsiri (2005) that said that the wai is always offered by the person with lower status in terms of age or rank to a person with a higher status. The willingness to adapt to a certain culture setting is attributed to the four elements of cultural intelligence on of which is motivational intelligence (drive) that can be described as motivation (Wanatishart, 2014) as quoted by [6], that shows a focus of engagement with other people and aspiration to adjust to the new culture (Ang et al, 2007 in [6]. Such an effort for understanding

other culture represents a knowledge of certain business rules and etiquette, which, according to [7] "refers to manners and behaviour considered acceptable in social and business situation" (p. 164). As for the necessity for learning other culture as part of social behaviour, [7] argue that "Proper social behaviour includes learning cultural variations in making introductions, exchanging business cards, recognizing position and status, communicating interculturally, dining practices, tipping etiquette, giving gifts, and traveling" (p. 165).

Discussion

Most Thai businesspeople will likely offer a handshake, but it will always be appreciated if non-Thai try to make wai too or at least to respond to someone who offers a wai. It is also important to note that Thai people recognize a hierarchical system where juniors respect seniors and low rank individuals respect high rank individuals. The wai is a perfect way of participating in such culture that non-Thais can demonstrate during introductions. The willingness of non-Thai businessmen to perform the proper wai during introduction or when meeting their Thai counterparts can serve as a way of starting and maintaining good business relationship as Thai counterparts will certainly take non-Thai offers or proper response of wai-as comforting and respectful and in support to the expected business behaviour as suggested by [7]. A good start in business, such as the one represented by proper wai of non-Thai businesspeople, suggests a good shaping of human relations as put forward by Bryam (1997) in [2] who argue that the success of an interaction can be judged not only from the effective exchange of information, but also in terms of the maintenance and establishment of human relationship which depends on factors of attitudes. Performing wai during introduction to Thai businesspeople while conducting business can also reduce affective obstacles such as negative attitudes, bias, prejudices and stereotypes. Behavioural obstacles, according to [2] originates from the lack of recognition on other people's cultural backgrounds and their related non- verbal cues such as gesture, smiles, movements, social distances and communication.

Conclusion

Thai wai is a cultural signature belonging to Thai people's culture, which characterizes expression of respects among individuals. The wai is also practicable in business and it is a noble idea for non-Thai businesspeople to perform the wai while getting introduced to Thai businesspeople in view of conducting and building fruitful business collaboration with Thai people. It is necessary for people of other nationality, including Indonesian businesspeople to adopt this way of greeting while conducting business with Thai businesspeople. Interestingly, the wai, which requires no physical contact, is a perfect way to perform in support to the physical distancing measures during the Covid-19 pandemic. During the time when contagious Covid-19 is a big and life-threatening issue, the wai bears safer and more convenient way of greeting each other compared to handshakes, hugs, fist bumps

or elbow bumps. For non-Thai businesspeople, the wai is simply a good way performing and maintaining expression of respect to others during the new normal atmosphere.

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