

Book Review

A Common Core: *Thais and Americans*

Managing Cultural Diversity

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1. Introduction

The first version of this book is written in 1978 by John Fieg, an American who had good opportunities to work in Thailand and get to know Thai culture and people. Elizabeth Mortlock revised the original work in 1988 while she was living in Thailand. In this version she updated new information about changes in Thai business community in Bangkok by economic, social, and political development. During the last decade Thai society changed very quickly and now Bangkok is one of the most important business cities in Asia. Many firms in Thailand try to apply Western business pattern but deep in the root of Thai society there are many things that are still not easy to explain and understand by people from other cultures.

Thailand and America have been developing cultural, economic and political relationships for more than 180 years after the first American ship reached Thailand. Two countries have become important trading partners; American multinationals have large offices in Thailand as well as Thais move to work in America. It is important to understand these two cultures in order to find the best of working together.

2. Book Review

This book is divided into 7 chapters: basic similarities, key differences, social relations, attitudes toward work, relations at work, cross-cultural dimensions in business, and learning from one another, which will be revised in the following parts.

2.1 Basic Similarities

Thailand and the United States are known as the country of freedom. Thailand is only one country in Southeast Asia that was not under western control during colonized period. At the individual or national level, both of them seem to be freedom-loving; they tend to resist outside control and have high personal independence.

American pragmatism reflects practical human skill more concerned with doing the real things than creating theories. As the influence of Buddhism, Thais try to live in harmony with nature. Even Thai pragmatism parallels American approach, both people can make realistic assessments and flexible adjustments as they search for ways to solve problems of mutual concern.

They both tend to dislike pomposity and arrogance. In the United States, one person is as good as the next, and their preference is for an easygoing informality in social relations. As Americans, Thais prefer a relaxed informality in social interaction with friends and enjoy social events that are informal and familiar.

2.2 Key Differences

This chapter was mentioned about key differences which can be summarized in the following table:

	Americans	Thais
The relationship of land and people	- nature as a background for mankind	- humans as a part of nature
	- control of natural environment	- natural disasters beyond control
Authority and power	- decentralized power; distrust of power and authority	- deference to authority
Social structure	- egalitarian social order	- complex hierarchy
Concept of time	- lineal concept of time	- cyclical time sense

A horizontal orientation in American society is a constant attempt to distribute and disperse power and authority to as broad an extent as possible and an accompanying tendency to level differences in status by insisting on an informal egalitarianism in social relations. Thailand, in contrast, has more of vertical orientation, characterized by a concentration of power at the top of the social structure and a hierarchical social order featuring a series of superior/subordinate relationships, involving a show of respect, obedience, or reciprocity.

2.3 Social Relations

They have similar concept about friendship that a friend must be reliable and will give honest, considered advice. There are differences in pace and perspective of social relations which can be summarized in the table below.

Americans	Thais
- tend to be assertive; distinguish individual from another	- tend to be nonassertive; try to be in groups
- social status is determined by occupation, achievement, and earnings	- dichotomy between two unequal positions: age difference, family role, or occupational status
- tend to express emotions 100%	- tend to keep emotions under control
- is it honest, correct, or accurate?	- is it fitting, suitable, or proper?
- tend to be more compartmentalized	- tend to react more to the totality of other individuals
- a tendency to try to 'make up'; prefer to 'forget and forgive'	- tend to diffuse their conflict
- humor and laughter as a good thing	- smile covers a multitude of emotions: happiness, contentment, or sadness

2.4 Attitudes toward Work

Americans	Thais
- tend to work hard; separate time for work from time for fun	- tend to work and have fun in the same time
- life is short; men could change everything in their life	- no matter how much human changes thing; life is still in its cycle(birth, getting older, illness, and dead)
- like challenging work	- tend to work one step below their actual capacity
- ambition is a good thing; tend to improve their position	- wealth and power will bring only unhappiness
- risk-taking; "nothing ventured, nothing gained"	- like comfort and security than all-out individual achievement

As we can see the summarized concepts from the table above, both of them have many different attitudes toward work. One similarity is change; they can accept change at work if there is enough reason for change.

2.5 Relations at Work

	Americans	Thais
Organization structure	- horizontal coordination	- vertical respect
	- try to make thing well-organized; often look sideways	- try to keep things in good order; mainly look up and down
Assistance	- initiate will come from the one who needs help	- superior is 'side that gives'
Confrontation	- prefer to bring problems out and discuss in a frank manner	- tend to avoid conflicts
Personal and Business	- life centers on one's job	- do not consider work to be all of life; allow social or personal time within work hours

In the table it is shown that Thais and Americans have different pattern for relationships at work, it might be considered as the consequences from the basic differences in social structure, concept of time, authority and power. In Thailand, it is necessary for supervisor to strive their subordinates in the fair, respectful, and polite way.

2.6 Cross-Cultural Dimensions in Business

Many firms in Bangkok adapted Western management styles but it is not easy to apply all issues to Thai company. In the following table, it is shown American and Thai approaches in Business. Thais and Americans have different perceptions of work; Americans tend to be task-oriented while Thai preference is relationship. As it was discussed before, these attitudes are based on different concepts in their cultures. Both Thai and American companies have to be aware of each other when they have to do business together.

	American	Thai
Work pattern	- is based on organization and coordination	- is based on order and protocol
Superior-subordinate relationship	- is characterized by an easygoing informality	- paternalism; chief has right to order but also has duty to protect and assist
Appraisal and Promotion	- is based on work performance	- tend to use personal relationship
Decision making	- systematic, facts-oriented method	- is made by the leader
Plan	- fit into a schedule	- flexible
Negotiation	- precision, directness and productive use of time; "let's get down to business"	- human relationship; the way of flexibility and congeniality

2.7 Learning from One Another

Though Thais and Americans have a common core of values, there are two basic differences: (1) different attitudes toward time and natural environment and (2) different social structures and concepts of authority. American and Thai values are the key to understanding how and why certain basic ideas are played out so differently in each of the two societies. Thais and Americans use the up-to-date technical expertise and Western management techniques but they also know when and how to adapt and apply them. These cultures complement each other, and Americans and Thais, working together as partners, can help one another pick and choose the right thing which will improve the quality of life of both countries.

3. Decision making, Planning, and Negotiation

According to Hofstede's research (Hoecklin, 1994), Thailand scores 64 on the high power distance side and USA scores 40 on the low power distance side. In the same way, it is mentioned in this book that American managers seem to make decision after consulting with subordinates and Thai managers seem to use their power in decision making.

Planning is not common in traditional Thai companies, comparing with American companies that have both long-termed and short-termed plan. As an influence from Buddhist, Thais tend to view that everything in future can change, it is unnecessary to have a plan. Contrast with American way, they have a fix schedule and plan for the future.

As the consequence from decision making and planning, American negotiation tends to get to the point whereas Thai approach is to build up a personal relationship. It is mentioned in Trompenaars's research (Hoecklin, 1994) that Thailand tend to be in particularism part and the United States is in universalism. That means Thais focus is more on relationships and American is more on their plans and schedule.

4. Conclusion

This book shows many aspects in each society: similarities and differences in these two cultures, attitudes toward work, and relations at work. The author gave a number of examples to support his views.

There are many interesting points in this book that are not easy to cover everything in a limited number of words; as they are summarized in table forms in order to show as many points as possible in each topic.

In my opinion, it is a good book for Americans to understand Thai culture and also for Thais to be aware of differences in American society. Though some values in these societies have changed during the last decade but most of the points are still in the same way. From this book, it is shown an importance of cultural awareness; culture is a basic influence of human behavior, not only in social life but also in business. Thus it is better to know and understand the differences of each culture.

5. Bibliography

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