Germany and Thailand:

Explaining my Culture of Origin and my Culture of Choice

By Joana Stella Kompa

I was born, raised and educated in Germany which I consider an individualist culture. In 1989 I migrated to Asia and spent 16 years in Singapore which shares as a hybrid system traits of both, Western individualism and Asian collectivism. After Singapore I have been living in Thailand for the past seven years which constitutes a predominantly collectivist culture. Approaches to measure individualism and collectivism methodologically have been applied across various cultures (Shulruf, Alesi, Chiochina, Faria, Hattie et al., 2011) However, the very definition of what embodies culture may be answered differently. Many Germans cite collective achievements as well as outstanding individuals in the areas of philosophy, the arts, music, architecture, theatre, sports or science to represent culture, whereby most Thais identify culture with Buddhist principles and the quality of interpersonal relationships. Duncan McCargo acknowledges in his paper *Buddhism, Democracy and Identity in Thailand* that "Buddhism has long been a source of identity for Thai people, rather than a universalistic religion." (McCargo, page 160) although he notes in his abstract that Buddhism is increasingly abused for governmental interests.

The influences of individualism and collectivism on behavior and emotional valence are profound and some general and verifiable examples shall be given in the following. In German culture e.g., conflicts are generally resolved via direct dialogue and argument whereby in Thai culture conflict by itself is regarded as a negative and unpleasant experience which is addressed indirectly via social influence and third-party mediation (Phukanchana, 2004). Thai culture is at heart non-confrontational. In German culture children are brought up to become autonomous individuals who take responsibility for their own lives. In Thai culture, by contrast, the bond between parents and their children is kept very tight. Caring for one's parents dutifully is regarded as an undisputed key value throughout life.

This has e.g., direct influences on the family-driven study-choices of young Thais (Pimpa, 2005) or the mixing of business with family (Marianne, Simon, Krislert & Antoinette, 2008). In German culture privacy and temporary solitude are regarded as a given part of an individual's realm whereby in Thai culture group-orientation and social gatherings express a natural state of being. German people are considered to be systematic and orderly, with a strong sense of personal initiative, with limitation to former East Germany (Frese et al., 1996), and clearly separating work- and private life. In Thailand private life and working life overlap and work-ethics are far more relaxed and laid-back by comparison.

Benefits of each system seem to lie in the eyes of the beholder: dependent on the type of gratification, individuals choose cultural traits according to their personal preferences. What is wrong in one person's perspective can be regarded as perfectly legitimate and desirable from another person's view. We shall therefore defer personal judgment on cultural values since any observations and evaluations are bound by our own cultural frame of reference.

A methodological approach to analyze cultural values more specifically has been presented by McCann, Honeycutt & Keaton (2010). By applying the more refined terms of horizontal and vertical collectivism and individualism, their study reveals that that previous assumptions about Thai culture as being highly vertically collectivist seem to be unfounded although the authors point out critically that the current tools of measuring cultural value dimensions may still not fully capture contextual issues as well as in-group comparisons (McCann, Honeycutt & Keaton, pp. 169). The authors also mention a potential intra-societal conflict emerging between horizontal-egalitarian and vertical-hierarchical collectivism in Thailand.

This conclusion may explain the current political divide in Thailand between the rural poor and the rich elites (Ungpakorn, 2009).

References

Frese M, Kring W, Soose A, Zempel J. (1996). PERSONAL INITIATIVE AT WORK: DIFFERENCES BETWEEN EAST AND WEST GERMANY. Academy Of Management Journal [serial online]. February 1996; 39(1): 37-63. Available from: Business Source Premier, Ipswich, MA. Accessed June 21, 2012.

Marianne, B., Simon, J., Krislert, S., & Antoinette, S. (n.d). Mixing family with business: A study of Thai business groups and the families behind them. Journal Of Financial Economics, 88(Darden - JFE Conference Volume: Capital Raising in Emerging Economies), 466-498. doi:10.1016/j.jfineco.2008.04.002

McCann, R. M., Honeycutt, J. M., & Keaton, S. A. (2010). Toward Greater Specificity in Cultural Value Analyses: The Interplay of Intrapersonal Communication Affect and Cultural Values in Japan, Thailand, and the United States. Journal of Intercultural Communication Research, 39(3), 157-172. doi:10.1080/17475759.2010.534862

McCargo, D. (2004). Buddhism, Democracy and Identity in Thailand. Democratization, 11(4), 155-170. doi:10.1080/1351034042000234576

Phukanchana, T. (2004). Politeness in Thai Culture: Strategies of Disagreeing. Conference Papers - International Communication Association, 1.

Pimpa, N. (2005). A Family Affair: The Effect of Family on Thai Students' Choices of International Education. Higher Education, 49(4), 431-448.

Shulruf, B., Alesi, M., Ciochina, L., Faria, L., Hattie, J., Fu, H., & ... Watkins, D. (2011). Measuring

Collectivism and Individualism in theThird Millennium. Social Behavior & Personality: An

International Journal, 39(2), 173-187.

Ungpakorn, G. (2009). Class Struggle between the Coloured T-Shirts in Thailand. Journal Of Asia

Pacific Studies, 1(1), 76-100.