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Are You a Dek or a Phoo Yai?

By Cammy Wilson

Status in Thailand is a matter of standing -- literally, as well as figuratively. And the seriousness with which Thais treat the matter can come as a jolt to westerners. My initiation came early.

Just as I heaved the last suitcase over the threshold of my new abode, the landlord arrived. He looked distressed.

"But where is your maid?" he asked, pointing distractedly toward my bags.

"What maid?"

Muttering in Thai, he headed for the car and driver waiting for him outside the gate. In a few minutes he returned, bringing a young woman of possibly 14 with him.

"I brought one of my maids over," he said. "She will stay today. Then you will find a maid."

He seemed to think the matter was closed, dropped into a chair and opened a newspaper, settling in to supervise his charge. Hardly had the young woman begun cleaning the bathroom when my Vietnamese neighbor (married to an American); her three trilingual children, who speak Vietnamese, English and Thai; and their maid poured into the house, bearing mops and pails and chattering excitedly at the prospect of helping with the move. Soon they all -- except the landlord, of course -- were wedged into the bathroom cleaning; I set about pouring cold drinks. Hearing a commotion, I turned to see my neighbors filing out the back door, their faces long and distressed. The landlord followed behind, gesturing wildly.

"If you want them to clean that is all right with me," he said in stiff English, the muscles twitching in his face, "but if my maid is to clean she will clean."

"But it's all right with me for everyone to clean," I replied, baffled at the events whirling around me.

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"No, no, no," he insisted. "If they clean I will take my maid and go." I looked from the landlord to his maid, now on her knees scrubbing the bathroom floor, crying as she went. I was completely confused and somehow this was apparently my fault.

"They go, OK, OK, OK," the landlord said, dropping into a chair and turning his attention back to the paper. With the neighbors' exit, all was apparently back into proper place in his world; thus, I learned that you do not help out the maid in Thailand, at least not without running the risk of disturbing some status-conscious Thais. Carefully delineated behavior based on social position is a routine aspect of Thai life and is due in part to the Indian influence on both customs and art forms here as well as throughout the Malay peninsula and Indonesia. Sometimes class matters are as direct as the landlord's behavior, or more so. When Thais greet each other or foreigners, the type of greeting delivered and received rests upon each person's reading of the other's position. Status is more subtly, but no less effectively, conveyed in language -- the way a culture talks about itself. There is, for example, an entire language for referring or dealing with royalty. And for ordinary folk there are likewise many terms to describe the intricacies of social standing.

For example, the Thai phrase for important person is "phoo yai." Being referred to as a phoo yai is gratifying; however, being termed a "dek" indicates otherwise, since dek means child. Anyone who is not sufficiently intelligent, successful or important enough to be considered a phoo yai may forever be regarded as a dek by his superiors or betters, regardless of age, according to one language authority.

A similar word to dek is "look nawng," which literally means children or younger brothers or sisters. Like dek, look nawng may be used sometimes to refer to employees or supporters of successful people in business or government. The use of such terms underscores paternalism, which characterizes the society.

Thais tend to think of themselves or others as belonging to a family or group headed by a successful and powerful leader. Blood relationship is unnecessary. However, to advance in society, affiliation with a more powerful person is important, if not mandatory; the latter expects to receive gifts and allegiance from followers who, in turn, expect favors and protection. A small-time leader will give his or her allegiance to a yet more powerful figure and so it goes up the line. The Thai Interior Ministry notified its employees that before the recent New Year's celebration subordinates should not give their superiors expensive gifts.

Regardless, a true phoo yai is unlikely to face much in the way of scrutiny or "whistle blowing" in a system where fealty is expected on both sides. Thai reluctance to offend extends well beyond calling attention to the misdeeds of one's superiors. "Kreng jai," which means to have consideration for someone else, speaks to the fear that a Thai might offend, annoy or anger someone that he or she knows or to whom allegiance is owed. Thus, speaking one's mind to friends or relatives is not a popular practice.

Determining class is a necessary skill which even the illiterate master at an early age.

"Within seconds of meeting someone a Thai can determine the status of the opposite person," said one authority. Such speediness is necessary as greetings likewise depend on status. The traditional greeting is a "wei," a prayer-like gesture of placing one's palms together and bowing. The placement of the hands --- generally somewhere from the mid-chest to the forehead --- and the degree of bowing --- from a slight nod to a prostrate position --- indicates the status afforded the other person, who, in turn, weis according to his or her assessment of your status. For example, a subordinate who greets his employer might wei with his hands to his forehead, while the employer might merely wei to his chest or even nod.



Ms. Panee Mechamnan
greets a friend.

A wei for a
superior.



Such customs can perplex a foreign visitor. One American businessman described his first meeting with government officials.

"I was trying to get some information on oil pricing and I had to go to several different ministries," he said. "Every time the official from one office would take me to the next one he would put his arms over his head like he was praying." It was status, however, not religion, that was being saluted.

To show extreme fealty -- to the king or to a high official or sometimes to a parent, a Thai will bow all the way to the floor. In fact, some pictures of the king reveal so many people in prone positions that a casual viewer might be reminded of photos of the Jonestown death scenes.



A gesture of extreme respect -- for the king or, on occasion one's parents.

Sometimes paying one's respect seems more important than personal safety. Many motorists wei each time they pass a Buddhist temple. This is especially unsettling when friends or taxi drivers take both hands from the steering wheel to wei in the direction of a temple, regardless of speed or traffic.

A glass of tea for a phoo yai.



Another method of displaying respect for superior persons is to hunch one's shoulders down in passing. In some Thai homes maids -- in order to keep their heads below those of their employers -- approach the latter on their knees. Having someone drop to her knees and half slide/crawl over the floor to hand you a cool drink can be disconcerting to a foreigner. Occasionally, however, westerners demand such behavior from their employees.

Status in Thailand, like elsewhere, is generally commensurate with income, occupation, education and social contacts. People can and do change their status, however, and as one acquires money or higher education or a more prestigious job, he or she can expect status to rise as well.

Regardless, nearly everyone can expect to accumulate at least a little status sometime in life. One young Thai educated in the U.S. and married to an American remarked on the difference between the two cultures.

"When my husband was 30 he went into a depression but at 30 I was ecstatic," she said. "Here you're respected for your age or what you know. It's just the opposite in the United States." Thus, recognition -- real or feigned -- is available to almost all Thais at some point in their life span. Children must respect adults, adults must respect those who are better connected or more well-to-do. And, if you age -- even if you pick up no other form of status -- you accumulate the respect accorded longevity.

Despite all the homage given and received, some Thais perceive a shift away from the proprieties. Some Thais lament a lack of manners in the young who occasionally hardly wei, much less display the proper regard for more extreme displays of respect.

Having dispensed with the servants-on-their-knees approach in her own home, one young woman told her mother: "If you ever saw any of your servants standing up, you wouldn't recognize them."

After all, status is a matter of standing.

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