

The Wai in Thai Culture: Greeting, Status-Marking and National Identity Functions

Larry Powell, Jonathan Amsbary & Mark Hickson

University of Alabama at Birmingham – United States

Abstract

This study examined the role of the Wai from the perspective of people in Thailand. The Wai, the most common greeting used by natives of Thailand, consists of bringing one's palms together while bowing or dipping one's head. Data, gathered by having participants write an essay on the role of the Wai in Thailand, were subjected to content analysis. The analysis indicated that the Wai serves at least five functions in Thai society – utilitarian, status, nationalistic, personal enhancement, and religious functions. Subcategories of behaviors range from using the Wai to appease a bully to its use in religious rituals. These results reflect the complex nature of using and interpreting nonverbal behavior in a high context culture. The results also support the already well documented role of the Wai in terms of status.

Keywords: *Wai, Thailand, high context culture, greetings, status*

Introduction

This study looks at the Wai, the most common nonverbal greeting used by natives of Thailand (Cooper & Cooper, 2009; Sabath, 2002). Previous research by American scholars on communication in Thailand has been limited to self-perception of communication competency (e.g., Dilbeck, et al, 2009). Information focusing on nonverbal behavior has been largely limited to brief summaries provided for tourists or in broad studies of Thai culture, particularly in terms of the Wai (e.g., Cooper & Cooper, 2005). Welty's (2009) description of the Wai is typical: the Wai is "that mark of respect, greeting, or recognition performed by bringing open palms together and synchronizing with a dip of the head or a bow (low, lower, or lowest, depending upon the level of veneration to be shown toward the person or object being addressed)" (p. xi). Similarly, Jones (2003) described the act as that of pressing one's "palms gracefully together, fingers pointing upward as if in prayer, and incline the head forward in salutation" (p. 35). Windham (1996) noted that it is the one nonverbal behavior that all visitors to Thailand should know how to do. Others have noted that it is particularly important while engaging in business transactions with Thai natives (Andrews & Siengthai, 2009).

Background

One particularly important aspect of the Wai, in comparison to other cultures, is its role in the designation of status. The relationship of status to nonverbal behavior is hardly unique to Thailand. For example, nonverbal status differences are found in a number of ways in the United States. Supervisors typically have larger offices, frequently in the corner of the building and on the top floor. An external office for the administrative assistant creates a barrier between the supervisor's office and anyone else who wants to enter. Once at the door, the subordinate waits for the supervisor to invite him or her into the office. Inside the superior's office, the subordinate maintains good posture. The subordinate uses eye contact to monitor the approval of the superior. Although an American will not typically bow, the subordinate slightly lowers his head. The subordinate shakes the hand of the superior only if offered. In the American military, the

subordinate salutes the higher-ranking officer and holds the salute until the superior reciprocates (Richmond, McCroskey, & Hickson, 2012). Many cultures use nonverbal cues to identify status differences (Bente, et al, 2010). For example, high status individuals tend to claim more space with their bodies, talk more, and attempt more interruptions than low status individuals (Leffler, Gillespie, & Conaty, 1982).

Thailand has always been culturally influenced by the cultures of the Indian subcontinent, primarily the Buddhist and Hindu cultures and the Far Eastern cultures of China, Korea, and Japan to the north. The Thai people have strong identifications with both cultures and the use of the Wai reflects these connections (Kislenko, 2004). In appearance, the Thai Wai is most similar to the traditional Indian prayer pose, *Pranamasana*. Like the Wai, it involves placing the hands together with the fingers upright over the chest, thus placing the gesture directly over the heart, or *charka*. The *Pranamasana* is delivered as a greeting with the phrase “*Namaste*.” In India, the *Pranamasana* generally signifies a spiritual connection to the person or object to which it is delivered. Like the Wai, it can also be used to signify cultural status as younger people are expected to initiate the gesture to their elders. The primary meaning, however, is to acknowledge a deep or spiritual connection to whom the gesture is made. Like the Wai, it may also be made to religious or sacred objects. Thus it shares many characteristics of the Wai, but is not as strict a sign of status and cultural rank (Hertel & Humes, 1993). Rather, the primary use of the *Pranamasana* is to acknowledge a deep spiritual connection to the target of the gesture (Chatterjee, 2001).

By comparison, bowing in Japan shares some of the functions of the Wai related to acknowledging station and cultural status. Like the Wai, it may be used as a greeting but may also be used to express humility or deference (De, 1993). Further, there are rather rigid rules about initiating the bow and how deeply one must bow. While there are spiritual roots to the gesture, it is commonly accepted as a social and business gesture with little spiritual meaning. Thus, despite the Wai’s similarity to other Asian customs, there is an element of the Wai that is distinctive to Thai culture.

The Wai in Thailand

One American company that has adopted this attitude for Thailand is McDonalds. The fast-food, hamburger chain is one of the top 10 most recognized brand names in Thailand (Andrews & Siengthai, 2009). One factor that may contribute to this positive recognition is the Wai. Each visitor to McDonalds in Thailand is greeted by a plastic, life-sized statue of Ronald McDonald, greeting them at the entrance with a Wai. The problem, however, is that Thailand is a high context culture. That means that decoding of nonverbal messages, particularly on a behavior as important to the culture as the Wai, “depends on the context” (Andrews & Siengthai, 2009, p. 158). Ronald McDonald, because of his plastic construction, must always offer an all-purpose Wai that cannot be altered to the specific status of each entering diner.

The use of the Wai in Thailand is a complex nonverbal behavior that varies based upon the relative status of the participants and the situation that triggers the behavior. Sometimes the Wai is performed so that it accompanies a verbal greeting. Sometimes it is a nonverbal act with no verbal accompaniment. The specifics of where the hands are positioned and how far the person bows depend upon the relative status of the individuals. As Tonkin and Kongsiri (2005) noted, “The Wai is always initiated by the person whose status, by reason of age or rank, is inferior to the person to whom respects are being paid” (p. 28). All of this takes place in the context of “*Hai Kiad*,” the honor concept that is the “motivating value which almost every Thai seeks in work and society” (Andrews & Siengthai, 2009, p. 69). Thus the precise placement of the hands and the extent of the bow vary depending upon the relative status of the two individuals. As Jones (2003) described it, “The greater the difference in rank, the lower the head is inclined and the higher the Wai should be” (p. 35).

Interpreting the Wai within this status structure can be complicated – so complicated that “Thais don’t expect foreigners to understand these rules, but it is polite to return a Wai to a friend, co-worker and definitely to a VIP” (Williams, 2007, p. 187). While the nature of intercultural differences may inhibit full understanding, this study worked under the assumption that a more complete understanding of the Wai from a communication perspective can be obtained by obtaining information from natives of the culture.

Method

The participants in the study were 68 students of a large public university in Bangkok, Thailand. Each student wrote an essay on "The Role of the Wai in Thai Culture." Those essays were submitted to content analysis in terms of functions. The two coders developed the categories on a post hoc basis using the approach advocated by Altheide (1996) and Lindof and Taylor (2002). A total of 226 statements were coded and analyzed. This was an average of 3.32 responses per participant. The initial coding produced a reliability estimate of 97.8% between the two coders, with only five items in question regarding which analytic category was appropriate. After discussion, the two coders reached consensus on those five items.

The categories of analysis included utilitarian functions (greetings, saying goodbye, asking forgiveness, apology, saying thanks, reciprocity), status functions (different versions for different social classes), religious functions (to monks, Buddha), personal enhancement functions (ingratiation, establishing status), national identity functions (national pride, national identity).

Results

Utilitarian Function

The most frequent responses fell into the utilitarian category (76 responses, or 33.7%). These included the use of the Wai for such things as greetings, farewells, accompanying apologies, expressing thanks, and returning or acknowledging a Wai with a Wai. One respondent emphasized its use as a greeting, adding that the behavior was "warm, friendly, and welcoming." Another described it as "the most comforting greeting of any culture." Most noted that the Wai is a stand-alone behavior for greeting, but does not have to be so. Frequently, the greeting is accompanied by the verbal "sawaddee krub" ("hello" for males) or "sawaddee kha" ("hello" for females). Similar verbal accompaniments are used for thank you ("khobkhun") and an apology ("kho tod"), although the "thank you" Wai has to be handled carefully. As one male wrote, you should not Wai when accepting a gift because, in that instance, the Wai "means that you don't really want the stuff that they have given." It is also improper to Wai someone of the same/lower age or status than yourself, because that is viewed as meaning that you wish they would "die faster." No verbal accompaniment was necessary when the Wai was used for reciprocity, i.e., acknowledging a Wai by returning a Wai. However, failure to acknowledge a Wai, or showing some sign that you accept the Wai, was viewed as a major insult.

One unanticipated utilitarian response was the use of the Wai as a defense against playground bullying. Two respondents provided comments that represented a dominance/submissiveness relationship to bullying, i.e., that you could avoid a beating from a bully if you Wai to him.

Status-Marking Functions

The second most frequent responses fell into the category of status recognition (59, or 26.1%). These included a female who said the Wai was "not just a gesture" [but] "shows different levels of respect." Another wrote that it was the "best way to show respect and admiration to an older person or someone in a higher position, even though you might not really respect them." Most importantly, those who mentioned this function also noted how the behavior should vary depending upon the relative status of the interactants. Young people should Wai to the elderly and to their bosses. Children should Wai to their parents and to their teachers. A standard Wai for the elderly was often displayed at chest level. For a superior, though, as one female wrote, "the tips of the thumbs should touch the chin, [and] the fingers should touch the nose." The reciprocity factor showed up in this response, too, with several respondents noting that acknowledgment of the Wai is important, even if it is not with a reciprocal Wai. That is, older people often acknowledge the Wai with merely a nod of the head, and that is considered acceptable.

A secondary element of status was that the Wai not only meant that the individual recognized the status of the other person, but it also made a statement about the status of the individual doing the Wai. As one male respondent wrote, "Thai people consider the Wai as a good characteristic of a good person." One

person wrote that people who do not use the Wai “do not have manners.” Similarly, another wrote that the Wai is a behavior associated with politeness and added, “If a Thai person is not polite, they are looked down on. This would be considered as low class and treated thereafter as such.” Another wrote that the Wai “represents your behavior and your family dignity,” while another said the gesture showed that you had “a humble attitude and . a good education.”

Most of the comments about the Wai, as it related to status, were positive in nature. There was one exception. Three respondents expressed what might be called a generation-gap resentment of being expected to Wai older people who may not, in their opinion, deserve respect.

National Identity Function

The third most frequent response (39, or 17.3%) was the Wai as an expression of nationalism, i.e., the Wai as a source of national pride and/or national identity. Others expressed it as a sign of cultural identification. One person described it as “a beautiful tradition of Thailand.” Another said it was “the expression that represents Thai culture.” A third wrote that it was “a kind of national identity that reflects [the country’s] image to foreigners” – an idea expressed by another as “tourist ingratiation.” A fifth argued that it was “a unique sign of Thailand,” while another noted that “Thai people should be proud of their gesture, because it is beautiful and charming.”

Personal Enhancement Function

The fourth function was personal enhancement (35, or 15.5%). Some of this was related to the idea that a person with manners exhibited their own high status by using the Wai. Some were also related to the relative status of employees and superiors. However, the specific comments that were categorized in this area were related to use of the Wai for specific purposes or with long-term goals, such as ingratiation and professional development. One person noted that, in the workplace, using the Wai is essential when going for a job interview. Another said it was crucial when dealing with organizational superiors if one is to have any hope of advancement. Another noted that by using the Wai, the individual “might start a long-lasting relationship [that would lead] to a strong and stable business in the future.” Using the gesture would “give you positive consequences,” one wrote. Another argued that “the Wai can open people’s hearts and shorten the distance between people.” This idea was expressed by others in terms of the Wai as a sign of personal modesty, warmth, and sincerity.

Religious Functions

The fifth most frequent response (17, or 7.5%) was in terms of the use of the Wai for religious purposes. Everybody has an obligation to Wai to monks, religious icons of Buddha, and to royalty. All three of those can be construed as possible religious functions, rather than status functions, since Thai royalty has a status comparable to a “virtual deity” (Jackson, 2008, p. 361). Individuals used the Wai to express more respect to Buddhist monks than to the elderly or to their superiors. Proper behavior required a higher placement of the hands in relation to the face. One person described the proper behavior as “When they see the monk walking, the Thai person must put their thumbs between their eyebrows and [make] a little bow. Moreover, if the monks are sitting, [they] also put their thumbs between their eyebrows, but they have to open their palms too.”

Discussion

To a casual observer, the Wai may seem much like a western handshake, i.e., a phatic greeting mostly meant to break the ice. This research, however, indicates that the meanings associated with the Wai are much deeper and more indicative of the Thai’s high context culture. If a western analogy to the Wai exists, it is probably the military salute. The salute can be interpreted as a greeting but is highly symbolic of group membership and status within the group in terms of how and when it is used. As such, it is more appropriate to think of the Wai as a salute rather than a casual handshake.

This study also demonstrates the complexity of the Wai in Thai culture. The Wai serves at least five functions in Thai society – utilitarian, status, nationalistic, personal enhancement, and religious functions. Subcategories of behaviors within this framework range from using the Wai to appease a bully to its use in religious rituals. These results support the complex nature of using and interpreting nonverbal behavior in a high context culture. The results also support the already well documented role of the Wai in terms of status. The data from this study adds to that framework by demonstrating a cultural pride that is associated with observing status difference. The religious functions of the Wai are inherent in its foundation, but this study also expands that to the virtual deity element of the royal family.

This study also supports prior research which found that observers make accurate judgments about status differences based on nonverbal behaviors (Cashdan, 1998). Other studies have also reported that nonverbal behaviors are important in self-presentational goals (Levine & Feldman, 1997). This factor is present in the use of the Wai in Thailand in a number of ways, including the utilitarian functions identified in this study.

Since Thailand is culturally bounded both by the cultures of India and the far eastern cultures of Asia, the Wai is influenced by each of these. It most closely resembles the Indian Pranamasana in appearance and shares some of the spiritual significance of the gesture. However, the Thai respondents in this study did not report the depth of the spiritual significance that one might find in India. On the other hand, the Far Eastern influences are found by the subjects report on the role of status. Specifically, they noted the strict applications and cultural expectations regarding those who one should be the recipient of a Wai as a symbol of respect and deference. In this sense, this study expands knowledge about the relationship of status and nonverbal behavior, particularly as it applies to Thailand.

Still, the use of the Wai for utilitarian, personal and national identity purposes in Thailand effectively demonstrates the expansive complexity of the concept and its key differences from those of other Asian cultures. At a basic level, the Wai signifies a national identity in and of itself, but its use also demonstrates an element of national pride as a distinctive element of the culture. Further, Thai people are much more status conscious and status comfortable than are Americans, and the Wai aptly demonstrates this cultural factor.

One major limitation should be placed on the results of this study. Specifically, all of the participants in the study were college students in Bangkok. The fact that they were college students places them in a higher social status than some of their peers of similar age. Further, as college students, their future is probably much brighter than those of their age who do not receive higher education. Thus, the fact that the participants were college students could bias the results since they are part of a subgroup where understanding status – both now and in the future – could be a major factor in personal career growth.

Second, this data was collected in Bangkok – the most cosmopolitan city in Thailand. There is no way to determine if these results would hold up for a more rural sample in Thailand, or even for a smaller city within the country. Still, Bangkok is the city which is the center of most interactions between the Thai and people from other countries. In that sense, this study should provide insight into the behavior that is useful to those seeking a better understanding for intercultural communication.

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About the Authors

Larry Powell and Mark Hickson are Professors in the Department of Communication Studies at UAB (University of Alabama B Birmingham). Jonathan Amsbary is an Associate Professor in the same department.

Authors' Address

1401 University Avenue
Department of Communication Studies , UAB
University of Alabama at Birmingham
Birmingham, AL 35294
United States
E-mail: lpowell@uab.edu

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