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## **Intercultural Communication Between Japanese and Thais Through Discrepancies in Images**

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### **Abstract**

In recent years, the relationship between Thailand and Japan has become closer and closer in several respects, such as economy and trade, tourism and cultural exchange. In addition, more and more young Thai people are studying Japanese in accordance with a greater number of Japanese companies conducting business in large cities such as Bangkok and Chiang Mai. Under such circumstances, the primary concern of this paper is to look for ways in which Japanese and Thais can communicate more effectively. The discussion is initially based on two kinds of questionnaires conducted in Bangkok – one for Thai students of the Japanese language and the other for Japanese business people and their spouses. The answers to these questionnaires illuminate the following:

- the image Thai people hold of Japan and Japanese people;
- the image Japanese people hold of Thailand and Thai people; and
- what Japanese think Thai people believe about Japan and Japanese people.

The data gathered from the questionnaires show some discrepancies in the mutual images for various reasons, e.g., inappropriate background information, insufficient interactions, and therefore, stereotyping. With the examination of those incongruous images and identification of possible reasons producing them, suggestions will be made so that this particular intercultural communication could be improved.

The study of Thai people through a questionnaire and interviews of Japanese business people was part of the study conducted by Honna and myself in Thailand on teaching Japanese as a foreign language of international communication (Honna and Takeshita 1996). The data presented here are re-examined to assist the focus of this paper.

The questionnaire for Japanese people was administered at another occasion by Takeshita in order to verify and objectify those personal comments obtained through interviews. Then the results were put together so that a comparison between Japanese and Thai people's images might be made.

The Thai subjects of the questionnaire – 34 male and 194 female students – are 228 young students of the Japanese language at Chulalongkorn University and at the Japan Foundation Bangkok Language Center [See Graph 1 & Graph 2]. By the time of the study, they had already been working or willing to work for Japanese companies in Bangkok. Their images of Japan and Japanese are important in that they have or will have close interactions with Japanese business people and their families in Thailand.

The Japanese interviewees are male representatives of 12 different Japanese companies of various sizes who are working with Thai people in Bangkok. Some of them are also among the subjects of the questionnaire described below.

The questionnaire for Japanese people was filled out by 67 business people and their spouses living in Bangkok – 34 males and 33 females [see Graphs 3 & 4]. There are nearly equal percentages of men and women, more than 65% of the men are in their late 30s and early 40s, while almost 60% of the women in their 30s. Their lengths of stay in Thailand are not uniform [see Graph 5]. These are people who are supposed to have the closest relationship with Thai people for a certain period of time and who will bring their impressions of Thailand back to Japan and talk about them in the future, i.e., the messengers.

We asked the Thai students if they really had come into contact with Japanese and actually exchanged words with them. It turned out that the students at the Language Center had more experience in talking with Japanese, especially in Japanese, than the university students [see Graph 6]. It is also evident that the university students have a limited amount and range of experience because they are likely to meet Japanese on campus, while those at the Language Center have a lot more chances to interact with Japanese business people [see Graph 7]. Fifty-four percent of the students at the Language Center have been to Japan, while only 25% of the Chulalongkorn students have done so.

### **The Thai Images of Japan and Japanese People**

In the questionnaire given to Thai students of the Japanese language, we asked each student to write five adjectives that came to their mind when they thought of Japan. The reason for asking adjectives was to avoid nouns referring to something Japanese such as "sukiyaki" and "harakiri" whose connotations were difficult to understand without a certain context.

Graph 8 shows most of those adjectives. Roughly speaking and as a natural consequence obtained from those willing to work for Japanese companies, they have a very good impression on Japan – good in the sense that their impression will please Japanese people. Their overall image is friendly and welcoming to a Japanese. To a Thai eye, the image of Japan may be summarized as the following: Japan is a clean, hygienic and beautiful country although the temperature is too low and the prices are too high; it is a small country but it has convenient and interesting things.

One can clearly see that lots of adjectives were presented as a result of making comparisons between Thailand and Japan from a Thai point of view. Specifically, the adjective "clean" was pointed out by more than 60% of the students. Why Japan seems to be a clean country to so many Thai students is quite understandable when we observe Bangkok from a hygienic point of view.

Thai people's efforts toward modernization of their capital city have not only led to constructions of magnificent skyscraping office buildings, brilliant-looking department stores and shopping malls, but to the world's most infamous traffic congestion and air pollution. It is also true that the city nonetheless houses people far below the poverty line in the slums. Furthermore, the city is not free from contagious diseases. Doctors admit, for example, that many citizens are infected with typhoid – a legal epidemic in Japan where the patients should be segregated from others for treatment. Japan is indeed a clean and sanitary country in this respect.

We also asked each student to write five adjectives that came to their mind when they thought of Japanese people [see Graph 9]. It should be noted that Graph 9 represents the reactions of those at the Language Center exclusively.

The speculation is that the students at the Language Center may have a more realistic view of Japanese than the college students since they are in closer contact with the Japanese business people. In fact, the data collected from the Chula students are somewhat different from those shown in Graph 9.

One example may be Japanese people's strictness. Forty percent of the students at the Language Center point out this quality, while only 25.7% of the Chula students do so. Perhaps, there is more strictness in business, especially in Japanese companies, while Japanese teachers try to create a relaxed atmosphere in the university classrooms to suit the Thai students' easy-going nature.

Another example concerns punctuality. Six percent of the students at the Language Center say Japanese are punctual, while only 1.8% of the Chula students do so. Thai punctuality is quite different from Japanese punctuality. Unless a Thai person has a chance to do something important with a Japanese for a certain period of time, he or she does not become conscious of punctuality as Japanese talk about it.

Generally speaking, the impression Japanese make on these students is not unfriendly. Adjectives that convey positive images, pleasing to Japanese, are listed at the top, such as lovable, diligent, gentle, kind, wise, good-looking and lively. Those with a negative image such as thrifty, scary, cold, lascivious, inscrutable and over-working have smaller percentages.

The word "lovable" is a translation of a Thai adjective "naa rak," a combination of *naa* (suitable for) and *rak* (to love). This word, also translated as cute, could be applied not only to people, both young and old, but also to animals,

things, places and many more one could think of loving. It is possible to say that Mt. Fuji is *naa rak*.

**Japanese People's Images of Thailand and Thai People**

In a different questionnaire, Japanese people were also asked to write five adjectives to modify Thailand. Most of these results are shown in Graph 10. Some adjectives stand in direct opposition to those in Graph 8, such as hot versus cold, dirty and smelly versus clean and hygienic, and developing versus developed. Some adjectives in Graph 10 reflect the negative aspects of Thailand judged from a Japanese standard, such as their world-famous traffic jam, the unbridgeable gap between the rich and the poor, and the poorest corners and streets of Bangkok that are not well taken care of.

Graph 11 indicates Japanese people's images of Thai people. According to this graph, to Japanese people, Thai people appear to be pious probably because they visit the temple very often, but they are also irresponsible, saying "mai pen rai" all the time. "Mai pen rai" is a useful phrase for Thai people and it works in many ways, but here Japanese people most probably take it as "never mind" or "que sera sera" to ease one's pain or get rid of embarrassment in a difficult situation. In this context, Japanese consider Thai people as refusing to take the responsibility of what they have or haven't done such as mistakes and broken promises. Thai people

appear to be shrewd and selfish because they refuse to face what seems to a Japanese to be a serious trouble again by saying "mai pen rai." They also appear to be gentle, cheerful, always smiling and easy-going, and they seem to live a very idle life, not being so diligent as Japanese.

Graphs 12 and 13 are the results of having asked the Japanese people what they thought Thai people might answer if they were asked to give adjectives to modify Japan and Japanese. The intent of this question was to see how correctly Japanese were guessing at the Thai people's images of their own country and themselves.

Graph 12 clarifies that Japanese people believe most that Thai people think Japan to be a clean and beautiful country. Japan is abundant in expensive things but that shouldn't pose any problem because it is a rich country with its economic power.

Likewise, in Graph 13, we can see the Japanese speculation that Thai people think Japanese are rich people probably because they work in a diligent and serious manner, with intelligence and wisdom. They are also good-looking because they are lighter complexioned than Thai people.

### **A Comparison of the Two Views**

Naturally yet interestingly, the images Thai people hold of Japan and Japanese partially contradict the image Japanese people believe Thai people have. The Japanese people's guess and the actual reactions of the Thai students are presented in Chart 1, [see following pages] with the percentage of people who pointed out each adjective. The Thai students point out 7 adjectives that no Japanese think of while Japanese people have 18 adjectives on the list that no Thai pointed out.

A wider variety of adjectives represent greater discrepancy between the Thai students' images of Japanese and what Japanese people believe Thai people think of themselves. Again, the two views are shown in Chart 2. The Thai students point out 12 adjectives with no percentages on the Japanese part, and Japanese present 24 adjectives that Thai students never mention.

The adjectives for the image of Japan with most contrastive percentages between Thai and Japanese people are presented in Graph 14. Some adjectives such as "clean" and "having limited land" obtained high percentages from the Thai students while Japanese did not so much expect Thai people to think so. On the other hand, the adjective "rich" got a very high percentage from the Japanese while the Thai percentage was not worth mentioning. Generally speaking, Japanese people seem to be very much conscious of their country's economy, which is reflected in the high percentages of adjectives such as "rich," "abundant," and "economically great."





Along these lines, Graph 15 shows the adjectives that are comparatively well-balanced in the two views. In other words, as far as these adjectives are concerned, Japanese people's grasp of their own image for the Thai students is to the point. The two prominent adjectives are "expensive," and "cold." Both of these adjectives represent rather obvious and observable contrastive aspects of the two countries.

A greater discrepancy is found between the actual image Thai people hold of Japanese people and the speculation on the Japanese counterpart [see Graph 16]. Although Thai people present a very good image of Japanese, Japanese people missed those favorable adjectives such as "lovable," "gentle," "kind" and "lively." In other words, they expect Thai people to think of themselves as rich and intelligent people when Thai people have a lot more other qualities to pay attention to before richness.

At the same time, the adjectives presented by Japanese and not by Thai students included "hasty," "hairsplitting," "irritable," "arrogant," "shrewd," "haughty," "hidebound," "bothersome," "tyrannical" and "spooney" ("amorous"). All these adjectives lead to a terrible image of a person.

Several adjectives for the image of Japanese people obtained similar percentages from both Thai and Japanese people. The top ones that the Thai students present for the Japanese quality are "lovable," "strict" and "diligent." It is quite surprising that only "diligent" looks symmetrical in Graph 17, while the other two are hardly noticed by Japanese people.



## Conclusion

I did not expect the two kinds of reaction to look perfectly alike and symmetrical. There exist differences between the norms and criteria of the people judging each other, and one phenomenon can never be described in the same way from different cultural backgrounds. Also, there is a problem of translation. Approximately 70% of the Thai students' adjectives were translated from Thai into English by a Thai professor of English at Chulalongkorn University and 30% were written in Japanese by the students and translated by the author into English. All the Japanese people's adjectives were written by the respondents in Japanese and were translated into English by the author. The original meanings could be lost in such translation work, however carefully it might be done. Excluding these variables as much as possible, I would like to look for ways to help Japanese people to reflect upon themselves in a more meaningful way in Bangkok, and at the same time, to improve the images they have of Thai people in order for Japanese to establish a better relationship with Thai people.

The Japanese society in Bangkok is never small. Approximately 30,000 Japanese are said to be living in Thailand, a great majority residing in Bangkok. More than 1,000 companies are registered as members of the Japanese Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Bangkok (as of March, 1996), most of the 9,000 members of the Japanese Association in Thailand are the residents of the Bangkok area, and the Japanese School in Bangkok has an enrollment of 1,800 elementary and junior high students (as of July, 1996). There are also cram schools for these children to get them prepared for entrance exams back in Japan. A telephone communication network is well-established for all the members of the Japanese Association in Thailand.

Surprisingly, interviews with Japanese business people and their spouses revealed that their interactions with Thai people are quite limited. The business people may be working with their Thai colleagues in the office, but important things are discussed with a very few English-speaking Thai managers in English, who will give orders and directions to other Thai workers in Thai. After office hours and during weekends, hardly any personal relationship is maintained between Thai and Japanese people. Colleagues as they may be, they are not personal friends. Although those English-speaking Thai managers are efficient, the rest are considered to be lazy and irresponsible.

Most Japanese families employ a maid and a driver at home. This is partially because the Thai government encourages foreign residents to hire Thai workers to provide them with employment opportunities. Also, many Japanese companies forbid wives to drive in Bangkok for safety's sake. The mothers send their children to the Japanese School, and it is almost impossible to make Thai friends through their children's association.

On arriving in Bangkok, Japanese wives are eager to study Thai and soon make it a rule to spend several hours of the week at a language school for Thai lessons, but not many continue to the advanced level or until they can read and write in Thai. They soon find out that all they need is a handful of phrases to tell the maid to do things, tell the driver to go to places, place an order at a restaurant, and ask a vendor to give them a discount in town.

As some interviewees confessed, Japanese people, both men and women, have formed their images of Thailand and Thai people most probably through observation, through what they see from their automobile windows on the streets, and through how their employees work at home. Many people lack actual exchanges of thoughts and shared experiences with Thai people.

It has already been mentioned above that the Thai students in this research are the people who will have the closest relationship with Japanese business people and their spouses staying in Bangkok. They might be so in the future, but as far as these Japanese people are concerned at this moment, it does not seem to be the case.

Many interviewees say Japanese and Thai people do not have a language in common. It has to be stressed, however, that they do have a language in common. Most Japanese businessmen in Bangkok are college graduates, and probably all their wives have at least a high school diploma. That means they have studied English for a long time before arriving in Thailand. Even in countries where English is commonly spoken, Japanese are notorious for not speaking up in English when they do understand the language. The tendency seems to be even more prominent in Bangkok, partially because of the minute Japanese network. It should be lamented if the Japanese sense of economic superiority does not allow them to have a friendly and carefree relationship with the local people and prevents them from making use of English as a language for communication because they feel ashamed of making mistakes. Whatever the reasons may be, it is evident that the English language is not used effectively by either Japanese or Thai people. Thailand also has people who have studied English, such as the students in this research, and many of them are in Bangkok.

If these Japanese business people and their spouses stopped wasting their English proficiency, they could widen their field of activity by getting out of their own intimate circle. Then they are sure to begin to see different aspects of Thailand and Thai people. A Thai behavior will have a different meaning, a better meaning, if a person observing it actually experiences the Thai value behind it. Many Japanese have studied English and read about the Thai culture before coming to Bangkok. Once they are in the city, they observe objectively the behavioral patterns and confirm that what they have known about the culture is true. Learning through personal interactions and experiences, however, will lead to real understanding and empathy, a condition which they have not yet achieved. When Japanese people who are lucky enough to have plenty of opportunities to learn a lot in Bangkok really

take advantage of those opportunities, the graphs presented here should look different. For this process to take place, the English language is indispensable.

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