

Integrated in Thai society

- *some aspects of integration of 36 expats, having lived at least 6 years in Thailand* -

Abstract

In the coming decennia Thailand will face an increase in immigrants from countries in the region but also from Western retirees. These immigrants have a different culture than the Thai and it is worthwhile to study how existing immigrants are integrated in Thai society. In the theory of integration a distinction is made between psychological adaptation (change of the immigrants' personality) and socio-cultural adaptation (the way the immigrant can deal with everyday life challenges in the new country). Psychological adaptation is regarded as a cyclic process, with ups and downs: socio-cultural adaptation is supposed to take place in a linear way and improve over time.

In our study we looked at the cultural distance of the home country of 36 immigrants (from 10 different countries) who have already lived more than six years in Thailand. And we focused on the differences between the category that showed less integration and the category that seemed well integrated. On average, 37 % of the existing distance between the culture of origin and Thai culture was bridged by the interviewees. The highest integration score was 70%, the lowest one 0%. Contrary to the theory, the less and well integrated did not differ very much in aspects of private life (language, partnered with a Thai, having children, having Thai friends). The less integrated group of immigrants had a more international working culture: English, French teacher; international business environment; having own business in Thailand and neighboring countries. Very probably these persons used and needed the cultural characteristics of their home country to perform well in their job in Thailand. Because of their more international scope, they had more negative remarks on the way Thais deal with foreigners and on some general aspects of Thai culture.

Key words: acculturation, cultural integration, cultural distance, Thai culture

1. Introduction

In Western countries, Thailand is known as the ‘Asia for beginners’. That means that Thailand is regarded as a country where you can easily (start to) enjoy the Asian culture without fearing you will not understand the native people or the native people will be hostile to foreigners and foreign cultures. Some scholars think that one of the reasons for this friendly, open and hospitable attitude of Thai people is the fact that Thailand in its history was never colonized by a foreign, western country like Malaysia, Indonesia or Vietnam were.

This friendly image of Thailand leads to a huge number of tourists that come to visit Thailand every year. But more and more people want to live in Thailand. According to the Migration Report (2012), about 3,5 million foreigners live (and work or study) in the Kingdom of Thailand permanently. Most of them are not coming from Western countries but from the neighboring countries like Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia: registered in total about 1,3 million. Within the remaining 2 million foreigners the biggest groups are from other Asian countries like Japan and China.

Next to this group of working (or studying) foreigners, Thailand seems to be a favorite country for retired foreigners from Western countries. It can be expected that the number of retired foreigners who want to live and stay in Thailand will grow in the next decennia. In conclusion, there is enough reason to ask if, how and how fast foreigners integrate in Thai society.

2. Theories of cultural integration and cultural distance between societies

2.1 Assimilation and acculturation

According to Berry (2011), all forms of cultural adaptation consists of two processes: learning and memory. Assimilation is then the maximal learning of aspects of the new culture or society and maximal forgetting the old culture. When immigrants are completely assimilated, integration is not needed anymore. For people that enter a new culture voluntarily there is not such a need forgetting the old culture. This may be different if people left their old country not voluntarily. The adjustment or acculturation process “is affected by different factors such as language, tolerance of the host society, satisfaction, different occupational opportunities, length of residence and finally the degree of orientation toward origin as the most effective factor of cultural adjustment” (Moghaddas, pg1). Although genuine relationships/friendships contributed to positive and rewarding life experiences in private, American expats in South Korea had severe challenges with the Koreans regarding their work styles (Kim, 2008).

According to the newest theoretical insights, cross-cultural adaptation (or acculturation) is a cyclic process and not a process that follows a U-curve like in the theory of the culture shock (Oberg, 1960). In this process the personal identity gradually transforms. There is no possibility to deny that this occurs when living in a new society. The main question is the degree of change an immigrant is willing to undergo and embrace. Kim (2001) describes this cyclic process in terms of a stress-adaptation-growth curve, in which the so-called culture shock (when first confronted with a new culture) is a necessary element in the adaptation process.

2.2 Cultural integration

Integration involves “the maximal learning and memory by individuals and minimal forgetting of earlier-established ways of living” (Berry, 2011, pg 2.14). Integrated immigrants have a so called intercultural mindset (Evanoff, 2006). According to this scholar is it possible to create a ‘third

space' in which various aspects of both the dominant and the immigrant culture are hybridized in ways which transform each. Evanoff wrote about a psychological space but it is also possible to combine this with physical space, a ghetto where people of the same culture live within a new society.

Integration is a complicated process, namely a complex pattern of continuity and change in how people go about their lives in the new society (Berry, 1997). Integration asks for mutual accommodation of the immigrant and the host society. This host society should be a multicultural society: a society where people of different cultures and background are expected and not discriminated. Multiculturalism should be the characteristic. This is obviously the case of Thailand, where – as already stated – 3 million foreigners live in a total population of 65 million.

Integration consists of two parts: psychological and socio-cultural adaptation. Challenges in the psychological adaptation “often increase soon after contact, followed by a general (but variable) decrease over time; socio-cultural adaptation, however, has a linear improvement over time” (Berry, 1997, pg 20). The success of psychological adaptation is predicted by personality variables, life change events and social support from people of both cultures, the culture of origin and the host culture. Success of socio-cultural adaptation is predicted by cultural knowledge, degree of contact and intergroup attitudes. Berry (2011) supposes that less intergroup contact is sought in private spheres than in the more public ones. He thinks that in the private area immigrants will more live the life of their culture of origin while in the more public area (and in work) people are more confronted with the new culture. Successful adaptation is therefore related to the cultural distance between the culture of origin and the host culture.

2.3 Dimensions of cultural differences per country

The most known researcher concerning the cultural differences between nationalities is no doubt the Dutchman Hofstede. In his newest book (Hofstede, 2010) he adjusted his theory of the five dimensions of cultural differences. These five dimensions are: power distance, individualism, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity and long term orientation. Power distance is the extent to which the less powerful members of organizations and institutions (like the family) accept and expect that power is distributed unequally. Cultures with low power distance accept power relations that are more democratic. People relate to one another more as equals regardless of formal positions. Subordinates are more comfortable with and demand the right to contribute to and critique the decision making of those in power. In high power distance cultures, less powerful accept power relations that are more paternalistic. Subordinates acknowledge the power of others simply based on where they are situated in certain formal, hierarchical positions. As such, the power distance index reflects the way people perceive power differences.

Individualism can be seen as the degree to which individuals are integrated into groups. In individualistic societies, personal achievements and individual rights are more important. People stand up for themselves and their immediate family, and choose their own affiliations. In collectivist societies however, individuals act predominantly as members of a lifelong and cohesive group or organization. People have large extended families, which are used as a protection in exchange for unquestioned loyalty.

Uncertainty avoidance index reflects a society's tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity. It can be regarded as the extent to which members of a society attempt to cope with anxiety by minimizing uncertainty. People in cultures with high uncertainty avoidance tend to be more emotional. They try to minimize the occurrence of unknown and unusual circumstances and to proceed with careful changes step by step by planning and by implementing rules, laws and regulations. In

contrast, low uncertainty avoidance cultures accept and feel comfortable in unstructured situations or changeable environments and try to have as few rules as possible. People in these cultures tend to be more pragmatic and they are more tolerant to change.

Masculinity vs. femininity: the distribution of emotional roles between the genders. Masculine cultures value competitiveness, assertiveness, materialism, ambition and power, whereas feminine cultures place more value on relationships and quality of life. In masculine cultures, the differences between gender roles are more dramatic and less fluid. In feminine cultures men and women have the same values emphasizing modesty and caring.

Long term orientation vs. short term orientation. This dimension describes societies' time horizon. Long term oriented societies pay more importance to the future. They foster pragmatic values towards rewards, including persistence, saving and capacity for adaptation. In short term oriented societies, preferred values are related to the past and the present, including steadiness, respect for tradition, saving of one's face in public and fulfilling social obligations.

We saw already that in the theory of integration the way the individual copes with both cultures (his own and the culture of his host country) is very important. This counts for the emotional aspect (liking the new culture or aspects in it) and the knowledge aspect, the ways an individual copes with everyday life in the new culture. Berry (1997) mentions that psychological and socio-cultural adaptation both can be predicted by a minimal cultural distance between the culture of origin and the new culture. The greater the cultural distance, the less positive the adaptation. "A greater cultural distance implies the need for greater culture shedding and culture learning, and perhaps large differences trigger negative intergroup attitudes and induce greater culture conflict leading to poorer adaptation" (Berry, 1997, pg.23).

2.4 Thai culture

"Thai society values smooth interaction and the avoidance of overt conflict. When everybody knows his or her place and behaves accordingly, these ideals can be achieved. ...smooth and pleasant interaction is a purpose in itself, an expression of Thai ethos, of a tone of life that seeks a peaceful and pleasant atmosphere. It is not a symbol for commitment. The surface of communication is also the essence of social reality. Consequently, the art of role playing is highly developed and essential for the success of the social show." (Mulder, 2000, pg 47). We could say that the front-stage (the public side of social interaction) is more important than the back-stage. The front-stage can also be characterized as drama, as a theatrical performance. The symbols of status should be displayed in Thai society and people should live up to them. However, the investment in smooth interaction and the projection of prestige and dignity is not simply an investment in cosmetics but also serving the feelings of identity and acceptance. The performance in public underlines, strengthens the back stage performance and the feelings of individuality.

The back stage (the private domain) is the more authentic part of social interaction between Thai people. Here they find the persons with whom one feels to be related and to whom one is good, and here lies one's true self. For most Thai people the relationship with these persons is of the greatest significance, a haven to peace and security in a world that is animated by power and prestige. Mulder (2000) concludes that - for Thai people - identity and showing your own identity is restricted to the relationships with all those people they have 'bunghun' with (parents, elders, and teachers).

3. Research

The research on cultural integration of expats in Thailand contains the results of 36 individual interviews with expats (from 10 different countries) who have lived at least 6 years in Thailand. We choose this period of six years to be sure that the interviewees finished their introduction period (their 'culture shock') to a new country and environment; and found a way to cope with Thai culture in their private and professional life. That means it should be possible to measure their psychological and socio-cultural adaptation.

3.1 Design and method

The interviews were conducted in the period from September 2011 till December 2011 by 4th years students of SUIC (Silpakorn University International College), participating in the BBA-course cross-cultural management. The structure of the interviews can be called semi-structured and included the filling out of the standard survey regarding cultural difference dimensions by Geert Hofstede. The interviews took place at the home or office of the interviewee. By exception the interview was conducted online, using MSN and webcam. The interviews were reported in the form of essays and elaborated by the researcher. As the instructions, the interviewee should be a person:

- Having a non-Thai nationality, and also NOT a nationality of a country that belongs to ASEAN (no double nationality);
- Living in Thailand already for 6 years or more. Living means staying in Thailand for at least 10 months per year, so NOT foreigners that have a condominium/house and live there 3 or 4 months per year;
- Being older than 25 years;
- Having lived in another country than Thailand for at least 5 years (NOT necessarily the country of his/her nationality).

Questions to be asked concerned the following subjects:

- his/her home country

culture, actual knowledge about subjects like politics, following news in the home country, speaking native language (how often, with whom), frequency of visiting family and friends, memories, dreams, opinions, looking for information about home country, membership expat clubs, contact online with people in home country, owning real estate or company in home country, bank accounts, partner/children living in home country, watching TV of home country, reading news websites or papers from home country, actively voting for elections.

- Thailand

Opinion about living/working in Thailand, reason to be here, married with Thai or not, speaking/writing/reading Thai language, having Thai friends/colleagues, contacts with Thai in- and outside work, feelings, experiences with Thai governmental services, likes and dislikes, not understandable things, eating Thai food, lived in different regions of Thailand, has a company in Thailand, type of work, contact with Thai people in work.

- Future

Future plans: staying here or going back to home country: when, why. Other plans: starting a family, a company; where to live after retirement.

3.2 Results

The results focus on the (total of) differences between the home culture and the Thai culture. And on the extent in which the interviewee adjusted to Thai culture in the sense that his/her opinion on different aspects of culture (as defined by Hofstede) changed from the scores of the home country in the direction of the scores of the Thai culture. In theory we could say that if a person would change his/her cultural opinions and attitudes in that way that his/her scores were similar to the Thai score, this person could be regarded as completely (=100%) assimilated in Thai society. A score of 0% would mean that the person did not change any cultural opinion compared to the general opinions of his/her home country.

Table 1 shows the results of the scores of the interviewees on the Hofstede dimensions.

Table 1. Scores of 36 interviewees on the 5 Hofstede cultural difference dimensions, grouped per country.

No. Interviewee	Home country expat	PDI	IDV	MAS	UAI	LTO
32	Australia	45	75	40	55	60
33	Australia	40	80	55	60	35
34	Australia	40	65	25	50	65
24	China	65	35	50	30	75
25	China	75	20	45	60	95
35	France	25	60	75	80	70
36	France	68	70	40	85	39
26	Germany	70	65	20	60	50
27	Germany	40	50	50	65	40
28	Germany	45	80	65	40	25
29	Germany	60	65	50	55	45
30	Germany	30	70	30	65	40
31	Germany	45	75	80	50	35
21	India	80	40	55	80	60
22	India	65	75	35	65	25
1	Japan	75	45	70	70	45
23	New Zealand	30	70	35	60	25
14	Poland	55	40	60	85	25
15	United Kingdom	40	80	60	50	50
16	United Kingdom	35	75	50	55	25
17	United Kingdom	35	50	50	70	45
18	United Kingdom	40	85	65	35	35
19	United Kingdom	5	75	30	85	70
20	United Kingdom	25	65	65	45	25
2	USA	25	85	65	40	45
3	USA	55	70	62	60	50
4	USA	45	80	40	40	20
5	USA	45	75	35	55	60
6	USA	55	65	50	65	40
7	USA	35	40	25	40	35
8	USA	50	80	75	40	25
9	USA	30	75	60	50	30
10	USA	60	80	65	55	50
11	USA	25	60	25	70	45
12	USA	30	100	60	70	45
13	USA	50	80	30	60	30

PDI = Power Distance

IDV = Individualism

MAS = Masculinity

UAI = Uncertainty Avoidance LTO = Long-term Orientation

Table 2 shows the similarity between the cultures of the interviewees and Thai culture. We can conclude that within the sample, the Indian and the Polish culture are most near to Thai culture. It is not surprising that the biggest difference between Thai and Western culture (like e.g. Germany) is on the dimension individualism. With Eastern cultures (like e.g. Japan) the biggest difference is in long-term orientation.

Table 2. Scores cultural dimensions, per country;
Ranking similarity with Thai culture, and absolute cultural distance home country expat to Thailand

Home country expat	PDI	IDV	MAS	UAI	LTO	Similarity culture with Thailand (rank)	Cultural distance home country to Thailand (abs.)
Australia	36	90	61	51	21	7	149
China	80	20	66	30	87	4	137
France	68	71	43	86	63	3	117
Germany	35	89	66	35	51	10	188
India	77	48	56	40	51	1	106
Japan	54	46	95	92	88	9	181
New Zealand	22	79	58	49	33	5	141
Poland	68	60	64	93	38	2	109
United Kingdom	35	89	66	35	51	8	178
USA	40	91	62	46	26	6	147
Host country: Thailand	64	20	34	64	32	-	

PDI = Power Distance IDV = Individualism MAS = Masculinity
UAI = Uncertainty Avoidance LTO = Long-term Orientation

Table 3 shows the final results of integration of the interviewees in Thai society. We calculated the difference between the score on cultural dimensions of the interviewee and his home country. We already calculated the difference of cultural dimensions between the home country of the interviewee and the scores of Thailand. Comparing both these scores, we can see to which extent the individual foreigner managed to bridge the cultural gap between his/her home country and the country he/she is living and working, in this case Thailand. From the table we can conclude the following:

- The average integration for 36 interviewees is 37 %;
- The variation is big. The lowest score is 0 and the highest score is 70;
- The high scores are not from the interviewees from India or Poland, which countries showed the lowest cultural distance scores with Thai culture;
- Also in the lowest scores there is not an obvious pattern (the highest score is from a German interviewee whose culture differs most from Thai culture) although it seems that adjusting individualism to the Thai collectivistic culture is not easy for Western foreigners.

Table 3. Degree of integration in Thai culture, for 36 interviewees, in % of bridging the cultural distance between home country culture and Thai culture.
(Sum of differences in culture according to the 5 dimensions)

No	Home country expat	Cultural distance score Interviewee to home country	Cultural distance score: Home country to Thailand	Integration (in %)
32	Australia	21	149	14
33	Australia	31	149	21
34	Australia	90	149	60
24	China	58	137	42
25	China	48	137	35
35	France	21	117	18
36	France	29	117	25
26	Germany	131	188	70
27	Germany	63	188	34
28	Germany	51	188	27
29	Germany	91	188	48
30	Germany	101	188	54
31	Germany	42	188	22
21	India	61	106	58
22	India	57	106	54
1	Japan	112	181	62
23	New Zealand	59	141	42
14	Poland	58	109	53
15	United Kingdom	36	178	20
16	United Kingdom	76	178	43
17	United Kingdom	100	178	56
18	United Kingdom	26	178	15
19	United Kingdom	51	178	29
20	United Kingdom	51	178	29
2	USA	49	147	33
3	USA	74	147	50
4	USA	20	147	14
5	USA	29	147	20
6	USA	60	147	41
7	USA	86	147	59
8	USA	1	147	0
9	USA	16	147	11
10	USA	61	147	41
11	USA	98	147	67
12	USA	46	147	31
13	USA	39	147	27

After this quantitative analysis, we did a small qualitative research by reading again the interview protocols of two categories interviewees: the less integrated persons (score from table 3 lower than 20) and the well integrated (score higher than 50). This analysis leads to the following remarks, which can be considered hypothesis to explain the extent of integration of a foreigner in a new culture:

- People that are/were confronted with more cultures in their life are better integrated in Thai culture. An example of an interviewee: *“Her father was English, her mother from the Philippines. She was born in India, grew up in Thailand, where her father got a job. Her mother died young and her father raised her in a Western way. She went to university in the Philippines and returned to Thailand. There, on the job, she met her Thai husband. Her brothers still live in the UK.”* Very probably these past multicultural experiences increase the competency to adjust to and integrate in different cultures. This is called the intercultural mindset.
- Between low and well integrated persons there is **not much** difference in their private lives when it comes to living with a Thai partner, having children with a Thai partner, the extent to which they have contact with people in their home country (made easier by the internet) or being able to speak (read and/or write) Thai. The remark of Oberg (1960) that learning to speak the language of the new culture is the way to overcome the culture shock is not valid anymore. In essence, all expats in our research liked a lot of aspects of Thai society: the friendliness and helpfulness of Thai people, the climate and the food. In their private lives they can deal with Thai people because there is a mutual adjustment;
- There seems to be more difference between low and well integrated persons when it comes to their professional lives. Less integrated persons are more confronted with their home culture on the job: either they are teaching their native language (English, French, Japanese) or they work in an international company where their home culture is an advantage, used daily on the job;
- Less integrated persons mention more aspects of Thai culture and society that are ‘unfair’ to foreigners such as higher prices for foreigners for the same products or services, the inability for foreigners to own a house or their own company. Also corruption as a general negative aspect of Thai society is mentioned;
- Next to that, less integrated persons still (after 6 years) face difficulties in working with Thai people. Well integrated persons seemed to have found a way to cope with the ‘inefficiency’ of the Thai working culture. Most challenges foreigners are facing with Thai people regard their non-punctuality (in finishing and checking work, Thais are regarded as lazy, they seem not to learn from their mistakes, too much ‘sabai, sabai’ and being in time). This is what Mulder (2000) called the social show in front-stage behavior of Thai people.

4. Conclusion

This research among 36 expats, living at least 6 years in Thailand, shows that the cultural distance between their country of origin and the host country (Thailand) in average is bridged for 37 %. The highest score was 70 % and the lowest one 0%. The level of integration is different for private life than in professional life. In private life, we did not see many differences in the factors that influence adaptation according to the theory like proficiency in the new language, having a Thai partner (and children) and having a job. The less integrated persons had a more international working culture: English, French teacher; international business environment; having own business in Thailand and neighboring countries. Very probably these persons used and needed the cultural characteristics of their home country to perform well on the job. And because of their more international scope, they had more negative remarks on the way Thais deal with foreigners. The more integrated interviewees were working in a more Thai working environment and seemed to have found a way to cope with the different working culture from the one of their home country. For the Asian interviewees the challenges lie in the field of punctuality and labor

productivity, for Western interviewees in the hierarchy between employees and the fact that Thais do not seem to learn from their mistakes.

We could not find support for the assumption in the theory that integration is more difficult as the cultural distance is bigger. On the contrary: the highest integration score is from an interviewee from a country that has the highest cultural distance score to Thailand.

5. Some thoughts

In the near future more people will come and live (or study) in Thailand. Two developments can be mentioned here. The first one is the start of the Asian Economic Community (AEC). Because of the strategic position and the available resources (manpower, infrastructure) of Thailand companies from other ASEAN countries will open new offices in Thailand to be able to do business with the neighboring countries like Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia (which have less good infrastructure). That will generate a flow of Asian businesses, including employees (on management and middle-management level). A second development is the growing number of retired Westerners that want to live in this country. The baby-boomers generation will retire within 10 to 15 years. These retirees are – in general – healthy and wealthy and some of them are looking for a (cheaper and more convenient) place to spend the rest of their lives. Compared to most Western countries, the cost of living in Thailand is lower, the climate is better and the quality of services like health care and internet technology is good. This will bring more retired people to Thailand. In the first place these older immigrants will go and live in places where there are already foreigners (the bigger cities like Bangkok, Chiang Mai and Phuket and the tourism regions like Hua Hin and Cha-am) but slowly also in other more remote areas like the islands. For integration mutual adaptation is necessary, according to the theory. This is happening now in a lot of places in Thailand. We only have to look at the growing diversity in restaurants that serve international food and the fact that already in local markets Thai people can buy French fries or chicken nuggets. These retired people do not have to work anymore and will therefore not experience the different working culture of Thai people. Important is if these retirees will be single when they come to live in Thailand or whether they move to Thailand with a partner. Single persons will have to cope privately with Thai people more than partnered people. Most immigrants in our research entered Thailand as a single person. Probably a mix of these categories is the best for real integration, and also reflects more the demographics of the country of origin.

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