

## 1 Ego Orientation

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The Thai are first and foremost ego oriented, characterized by the highest ego value of being Independent-being oneself (*Pen tua khong tua eng*), and a very high value of Self esteem. Closer inspection reveals that it is constantly ranked top priority, with the exception of farmers who ranked it relatively low (8<sup>th</sup>) among all Thai groups. Thai people have a very big ego, a deep sense of independence, pride and dignity. They cannot tolerate any violation of the “ego” self. Despite the cool and calm front, they can be easily provoked to strong emotional reactions, if the “self” or anybody close to the “self” line one’s father or mother, is insulted. There are countless numbers of examples in the media, where people can readily injure or kill another person for seemingly trivial insults. Take for example, at a party in which the host was celebrating his winning the black-market lottery (*Huey tai din*), a guest (guest A) was getting impatient for the delayed local puppet show (*Nang talung*) and started making noises. Angry when he was reprimanded by another guest (guest B), he yelled at guest B to mind his own business. Apparently, guest B’s big ego cannot take guest A’s remark, he beat A’s head with a whisky bottle, and gunned him down right between his eyes (Matichon, January 3, 1991). Another similar example (reported in Bangkok Post two years ago) occurred in Los Angeles, when a Thai musician shot a Laotian to death, after he finished playing his guitar with the Laotian and his friends sitting with their feet on the table pointing at him while listening to his playing. Last was the case of former Deputy Prime Minister General Chavalit Yongyaiyuth who promptly resigned from the Cabinet in June 1990, after PM’s Office Minister Police Captain Chalerm Yoobamrung criticized General Chavalit’s wife as a “walking jewellery case” in public. This incident triggered off the Supreme Commander General Sunthorn Kongsompong to defend the former Army C-in-C’s dignity by demanding the Prime Minister to remove Chalerm. The sequence of these overt conflicts finally led to the resignation of the Prime Minister in December 9, 1990. Although Prime Minister Chatichai reshuffled his Cabinet, the open rift with the military elite was irreparably widened. And eventually it led to another coup d’etat on February 23, 1991, driven the prime Minister to exile in England and Chalerm in Denmark.

Basically, it boils down the question of “face” and “dignity”. Violation to the “ego” self cannot be tolerated. Numerous examples can be found everyday to illustrate this important value orientation. This ego orientation also explains the reasons of many examples of foreign bosses’ complaints about their uncooperative attitudes and behaviours—the passive “silent boycott”—of their Thai employees. Further inspection has found that in fact, for example, the foreign boss did not realize his frustrated exclamation like “Damn it” in front of his Thai employee was mistaken as swearing or reprimanding the Thai employee himself. Or, the boss’ statements of unsatisfied job outcomes are taken personally. And dissatisfactions are usually demonstrated by silent boycott or at best, passive cooperation.

This value finding confirms the intuitive feeling of the Thai, and disproves Herbert Phillips' statement about the emotionless Thai who, due to low expectations about events or people, "rarely live at, or even reach, a high emotional pitch" (Phillips, 1965, p. 60). Because the Thai are quite emotional when their dignity is slighted or provoked. This is why many analyses using Buddhist influence to explain about the Thai being so gentle, ever-smiling, non-aggressive, affable and have high tolerance vor uncertainty, fail to explain the sudden emotional outburst of Thai behaviour. Incidents of violent actions ranging from breaking up of relations, verbal and physical fights, to killing, can be found both in the less religious urban Thai as well as in the more religious oriented rural Thai, and more so with the hooligan (*Nak-leng*) class who can easily be provoked with just a non-verbal stare.

Since the "ego" of the Thai is so important, it naturally follows that the Thai have the "avoidance mechanism" to fend off unnecessary clashes. And this intricate mechanism is delicately and keenly observed by all parties involved in an interaction. It is only in cases where indirect means are not used that interactions will result in negative feelings and emotional outburst if provoked in public. Therefore, using the "Buddhism-explain-all" blanket approach, that Buddhism teaches non-self, avoidance of emotional extremes, detachment, etc., might have missed quite a bit of reality.

This "ego" orientation is the root value underlying various key values of the Thai, such as "face-saving", "criticism-avoidance", and the *Kreng jai* attitude which roughly means "feeling considerate for another person, not want to impose or cause other person trouble, or hurt his/her feelings". The "face" is identical with "ego" and is very sensitive. Since the Thai give tremendous emphasis on "face" and "ego", preserving one another's "ego" is the basic rule of all Thai interactions both on the continuum of familiarity-unfamiliarity, and the continuum of superior-inferior, with difference only in degree. Even a superior would also observe not to intrude too much of the subordinate or the inferior's ego. For a Thai, this is not something to be taken for granted. They intuitively observe this root or interpersonal social roles. Each knows his appropriate role, appropriate means to handle interactions when roles come into contact, and how far one can go, and so on. Countless numbers of events and situations can be cited to illustrate this theme.

### **"Face-Saving" Value**

As a result of the top concern for "ego", whenever there is any problem to be solved that would directly or indirectly involve persons, the first criteria to consider is saving the "face"—the "ego"—of the person involved. The Thai would usually find the indirect ways to soften the negative message. Most important is to avoid public confrontation, regardless of whether it involves an inferior, an equal, and worst still a superior. To make a person lose "face", regardless of ranks, is to be avoided at all cost. The conflict between the Prime Minister and the military was again the matter of "face" and "dignity", when the Prime Minister after promised the military in public to sack Minister Chalerm failed to do so, the military top commanders then boycotted the regular weekly breakfast meeting with the Prime Minister on Wednesday, on the pretense that they had colds or sudden matters in the provinces to attend to, etc. In a culture of high "ego orientation", being absent from a weekly breakfast of the case in point was highly meaningful. The intended meaning expressed was "We are angry with you, because you have intentionally slighted us". One thing that is certain is, that all those violations of "face" can hardly be said to have occurred without intention.

### “Criticism-Avoidance” Value

The Thai are very “ego” oriented, to the extent that it is very difficult for the Thai to dissociate one’s idea and opinion from the “ego” self. This is why strong criticism to the expressed ideas, is often automatically taken as criticism to the person holding those ideas. This characteristic has been observed by some anthropologists. For example, Mulder stated that “criticism of whatever type is therefore a social affront and insult of the person” (Mulder, 1979, p. 171). However, Mulder used it to support his assumption that knowledge is equated with *Phoo yai* (superior, elder, authority-power figures). Therefore, to question knowledge or ideas is to question *Phoo yai*—the power—and thus, an insult. This is not true, the Thai would avoid criticising not just superior, but their equals, and to some extent, their inferiors as well. Such characteristic is deeply internalized. Even in academic seminars where intellectual criticism has a legitimate place, the Thai still try to avoid direct strong criticism if possible. If they really have to criticize as in the role of a critique, they often end up by hiding their toned-down criticisms in general and vaguely stated terms, for the person being criticized to figure out himself. And if the person truly wants comments, he can seek out the critique afterwards and discuss it in private. Foreign observers would rarely find heated debates or arguments or strong criticisms in Thai meeting of any nature. Therefore, Mulder’s analysis of Thai social scientists’ criticism-avoidance behaviour as caused by fear of the superior’s power over their chance of advancement, is not valid. His “power” framework cannot explain the same kind of social behaviour outside the realm of power. In fact, his own personal experience when he asked for criticism and feedback for his proposed theoretical framework from a number of Thai academicians is a good proof. He did not receive much feedback, as he stated in his Appendix. Certainly, those Thai academicians do not perceive Mulder as having “power” over their advancement and inhibit their academic criticism on his work when they were asked for. In general, criticism does not come out easily, unless one makes an effort to individually seek them out.

### “Considerate *Kreng Jai*” Value

This *Kreng jai* concept underlies a significant portion of everyday interpersonal behavioural patterns of the Thai. As stated by an American social scientist and a long time resident in Thailand (Klausner, 1981, p. 199), it is one of the most difficult Thai concepts for foreigners to comprehend. Its closest meaning is “to be considerate, to feel reluctant to impose upon another person, to take another person’s feelings (and “ego”) into account, or to take every measure not to cause discomfort or inconvenience for another person”. *Kreng jai* refers to such attitude predisposing to one’s resulting behaviour towards someone else. *Kreng jai* behaviour is observed by all, superiors, equals, and inferiors, including intimate relationships like husband-wife, and close friends, with difference only in terms of degree. A Thai knows how far he/she can go in displaying the degree of *Kreng jai* in accordance to different degree of status discrepancy, degree of familiarity, and different situations. It is a basic social rule to *Kreng jai*.

With regard to the scope of meaning covered by this *Kreng jai* concept, it is very important that some clarification should be made, because some serious analyses made use of this concept in a narrower sense, and thereby result in the misunderstanding and misinterpretation of Thai social behaviour. The present researcher would hereby respond to the few prominently known ones:

- (a) Some social scientists have used this *Kreng jai* concept to refer to the attitude of “diffidence, deference and consideration merged with respect” shown to superior person. For example, Klausner stated that it is “an attitude displayed towards one higher in the rank, social status or age scale. It is diffidence, deference and consideration merged with respect” (Klausner, 1971, p. 199). It would be correct to mean consideration and respect for one another’s ego and feelings, but not accurate to mean ‘diffidence’—meaning distrustful of oneself or of one’s power, or ‘deference’—meaning submission to the views and opinions of another. One can easily observe a very egocentric or even egoistic Thai displaying *Kreng jai* behaviours toward his power-wise unconnected equals in a number of situations. The problem is the underlying meaning that is misinterpreted.
- (b) Another misuse of this concept by foreign scholars led by Mulder, is the conception of ‘fear’ as the root element in *Kreng jai*. Mulder’s proposed “Moral-amoral power” theoretical frame is based on the two basic attitudinal feeling of *Kreng jai* (consideration) and *Kreng klua* (fear) to distinguish between the “Second person” moral power and the “Third person” amoral power (Mulder, 1979, p. 64). The “Second person” moral power is the “insider” interaction, represented by goodness figures of “Mother” and teacher, where there is trust and kindness, etc. It is threatened by a surrounding world of “Third person” amoral power, which is characterized by “outsider” interaction, represented by all kinds of power eliciting fear, distrust, suspicion, hate, etc. (Mulder, 1979, p 89). He conceives of the two attitudes of *Kreng jai* and *Kreng klua* as belonging to the same continuum of the meaning of *Kreng* (to feel awe and fear), ‘awe’ or ‘reverential fear’ of moral goodness for “Second person” interaction, and ‘fear’ of amoral power for “Third person” interaction. His treatment of the concept of *Kreng jai* in this sense, although neatly fitted with his “Moral-amoral power” theoretical frame, is inaccurate. Because while *Kreng klua* means ‘fear’, *Kreng jai* does not mean ‘fear’, although in some situations it might be broadly used to vaguely cover ‘awe’ feeling towards superiors, but again it is often followed by a clarifying element like *Kreng jai mai klaa* or *Kreng jai mai yak* (emphasizing not wanting). The point is one cannot just take a compound noun apart and only take the literal meaning of half of the noun. The whole is definitely more than the sum of the parts. Besides, the misuse or at best, the narrow usage of this concept by Mulder, also allow him to conceive of *Kreng jai* and *Kreng klua* as belong only to the small man’s attitude towards superior of hierarchical power (p. 123). This is not true, because a Thai would *Kreng jai* (in the correct meaning) another person outside the power realm.
- (c) Obviously, Mulder might have adopted the narrow definition of *Kreng jai* from Weerayudh’s definition (written in Thai) whose “Affiliative society” framework happens to fit in with Mulder’s “Power” framework. *Kreng jai* is defined as:

a psychological strategy that is used by persons to maintain or to improve the existing social atmosphere, interpersonal relationships, attitudes, and one’s self-image, through inhibition, such as not following one’s personal goals or wishes, or even by going against them. In general *Kreng jai* occurs on the side of the person who holds a lower position in respect to another...as a feeling,

it is often inspired by the fear that the other person will be worried, irritated, lose his kindness, or will lose face. *Kreng jai* is further linked as a core strategic element to achieve an affiliative society that is characterized by a quest for the security and social acceptance. (Mulder, 1978, p. 123)

There are two obvious mistakes here:

- (1) As a mistake by content, the meaning of *Kreng jai* taken by Weerayudh is unrealistically narrow, if not mistakenly confounded with fear. *Kreng jai* is not restricted only to persons of low position toward higher positions. Because a Thai, even Weerayudh himself, would feel *Kreng jai* toward his equal (i.e. a colleague, a friend, or even an acquaintance whom he does not have to pay respect or fear of any power) or even his inferior or his subordinate, if situations require him to bother them for some help, some inconvenience, or sheer verbal interaction that would seem to intrude the other person's ego. Besides, there are persons of lower position who would *Kreng jai* without fear (i.e. inferiors/subordinates outside the line of control). The reason for this narrow usage might stem from Weerayudh's enthusiasm to develop the "Affiliative society" framework for Thai society, to be parallel to the "Achieving society" of the Americans.
- (2) As a mistake of translation, there is a mistranslation of Weerayudh's Thai sentences of "*Klua waa khaw ca pen huang*" ('fear' that the other person will be worried) as an illustration of the concept of *Kreng jai*. The word *Klua* which was literally translated as 'fear', in fact does not mean 'fear' in this context. Instead, it means to feel concerned that the other person will be worried. The misunderstanding is even clearer when Mulder refers to Weerayudh's and Sensenig's work (Sensenig, 1975), who has made use of Weerayudh's "Affiliative society" model and who has obviously translated Weerayudh's theoretical frame. Sensenig came up with the translation of *Kreng jai* as meaning 'respectful fear' (Sensenig, 1975, p. 119), narrowly translated to fit in with Weerayudh's frame of *Phoo yai-phoo noi* (superior-inferior/subordinate.) Mulder might feel uneasy to accept *Kreng jai* as meaning 'respectful fear', that is why he equates *Kreng jai* with "consideration" and *Kreng klua* with "respectful fear", which is more correct. But he keeps the meaning of "fear" as the core element nevertheless throughout his conceptual frame, which is not correct.

In short, the concept of *Kreng jai* cuts across the dimension of superior-inferior, as well as intimate or familiarity-unfamiliarity relationships dimension, even husband-wife, and close friends observe some degree of *Kreng jai*. A Thai knows how far he should go in displaying the degree of *Kreng jai* in accordance with different persons, different degrees of familiarity, and different situations. But definitely, it is a basic social rule to be *Kreng jai*.