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## What do Thais think of you?

Since I've given you some clues on how to be judgmental and mercilessly critical of Thai women, and how to determine their social status, it is only fair that I also discuss you, the Westerner, and warn you of the stereotypes Thais have of you.

What is the Thai stereotype of a Westerner? Here are the most common descriptions: temperamental, paranoid, distant from his/her family, and stingy. From a Thai viewpoint, these labels are justified. But for many Westerners, they are victims of cultural misunderstandings. You should try your best to avoid having one of these labels attached to you.

## Temperamental

In Thai, the word is *jai lorn* or hot-hearted. Think of it as ‘hot-headed’ in English. Raising your voice, regardless of the situation or your emotions, is a big no-no. You will make the Thais around you uncomfortable; maybe even reduce some to tears. For many, they’ll harbor negative feelings about you forever (or until they learn to better understand Western culture, which they may not want to any more). You may probably wonder why raising your voice is so bad, even if you are telling an exciting story. But it is true; especially if you are just telling a story, don’t raise your voice!

Here’s a typical scenario many Westerners find themselves in. A man comes home to his Thai partner after having a rough day at work. He wants to share with his wife how a person at the office pissed him off that day. He proceeds to tell the story as he experienced it, with all the drama. He raises his voice, he flings his arms, and he boldly proclaims his disdain for that person at the office. A Western woman might say to her husband, in the most supportive way, “Wow, that person IS a total bitch! I don’t blame you for being angry!” But the Thai will have a completely



You won't believe  
the day I had  
at work,  
honey!

Why are  
you angry  
at me?

different response. She will either give you the silent treatment, throw something at you, throw many things at you, run away while throwing things over her shoulder hoping at least one thing will hit you square in the face, or cry uncontrollably and ask why you are angry with her.

Meanwhile the Western man is left standing there wondering how the conversation suddenly became about his wife. He says, “No, honey, I was talking about someone at work.” And he says her name again. But his Thai ‘honey’ is not satisfied. She still thinks he is angry with her. She won’t stop crying or hitting him out of anger. Suddenly, he *does* become angry and the whole thing escalates even more.

So what happened? The Thai woman paid more attention to the style of the man’s delivery than what was being said (for those of you who have noticed how Thais focus so much on the surface and appearance and not substance, this should make perfect sense). The man feels even more frustrated because he thought he would score points for ‘sharing’ his feelings, and rightfully so. But as soon as the volume increases, the Thai woman blocks out the meaning and interprets the raised voice as an attack against her. This situation happens wherever and whenever

there is an opportunity for cross-cultural misunderstandings: in offices, restaurants, 7-11s, and taxis, between males and females, males and males, and females and females. It doesn't matter. Keep the volume of your voice down, no matter how exciting your story is.

There are other ways of showing yourself as someone who is *'jai lorn'*: Rolling your eyes, sighing, dropping things on your desk or table, or any type of body language or noise that shows you have run out of patience. These actions will always work against you, especially in a marriage. The Thai woman will always escalate what you didn't intend to start, and then justify her anger by believing you started it.

## **Paranoid**

This is another adjective Thais use to describe Westerners. In the West, there's an axiom: don't sign anything you don't understand. Well, here in Thailand, where most documents are written in Thai script, this could cause a problem, particularly if you can't read Thai. Few things annoy Thais more than someone who says, "What is this? I won't sign it unless I know what it is!"

If you and your wife are trying to buy a condo or car in her country and she passes documents to you and asks for your signature, just sign the darn things. Don't make her go through every point. It is fair to ask her for a brief explanation of the documents, but if you behave as if you don't trust her in front of a stranger and believe she is asking you to sign away your soul (or money in your savings account), then be prepared for more silent treatment, angry punching, sharp objects thrown at your head, or tears.

This advice is helpful for those working in Thailand too. If your office asks you to sign things, just sign them. They're trying to sort out your insurance, work permit, visa, accommodation pay, etc., and that means a lot of red tape and headaches they have to go through for you. All that hard work – and instead of receiving any thanks from you, you say, “I ain't signin' nut'n' 'less ya 'splainit tuh me!” The Thai rolls his or her eyes (actually you will see a smile or laugh, which often is the Thai equivalent) and says to him or herself: “This is just Western culture, calm down. The *farang* is just being paranoid like all other strange white people.”

Another way to show distrust and paranoia is to always have the feeling that Thais want something from you every time they approach. This attitude doesn't have to be verbalized to be noticed. Your body language or lack of warmth among family or colleagues makes it clear. Yes, perhaps there are times that they might need something from you, but if you constantly keep everyone at arm's length, you'll never enter society and make lasting friendships. You may complain about the rent or electrical bill because there are many figures on it. But don't huff and puff and tell your wife that the Thais are tricky. The bill has been itemized and it's your fault if you cannot read the Thai description of each item. Go buy a Thai-language book!

As for a marriage, this distrust can cause serious problems. The Western man is always quick to blame his wife's family when she comes to him and asks for money. Let me stress that this topic must be dealt with before placing the ring on her finger, or you may have a very rough road ahead.

Try to get some idea from your wife how much she needs from you each month to help support her family. Do what you can and make it

clear (in a polite way; remember, soft voice!) that you can't do more. Perhaps promise you can do more after you get a raise. Also, you can let your wife know your salary and monthly expenses. Yes, Thai women know that money does not appear out of thin air. If there is a discrepancy in what is available each month and what she needs to send to her family, then she will help you find ways to save money each month or try to find extra work for herself. Being open about finances will give her a strong platform to stand on when answering her family's request for more money and she will then know how to respond to a family member who comes to her. The point is that it's best to deal with this issue early, so you won't have to distrust her throughout your marriage and perpetuate her stereotype of the paranoid foreigner.

### **Distant from Family**

Imagine you have already married your Thai sweetheart and one day she wants you to come along when visiting her family. Perhaps your Thai is not good enough to have any meaningful conversation, and the little English they might know is used to ask you personal questions regarding

salary, when you'll have children, and whether you'll buy a house or condo (then they'll tell you exactly what you should do). Meanwhile, the matriarch is busy putting all kinds of fruits, snacks, and drinks in front of you, without asking if you are hungry or thirsty, and making assumptions about your inability to eat anything spicy. All this doesn't sound too appealing, so you beg your wife not to make you go, or even flat-out demand that you be allowed to spend some time at home while she goes alone.

For many Westerners the Thai relatives can be pushy and annoying. But you'll need to socialize with them for your marriage's sake. Thais already have the idea that Western families are not close. To Thais, 'close' doesn't necessarily mean emotionally; it often refers to physical proximity. Grandparents live with their children; a niece or nephew is sent to live with an uncle or aunt for a time because there is a better school where he or she lives. Siblings build houses next to each other. 'Close' in Thai also means that many family members are consulted or have a lot of influence in a young person's major decisions: what university to attend, which major to choose, who to marry, where to work and which house

to buy. So if you boast to your potential Thai in-laws that you made decisions independently for your own life and that you got to where you are now without help, especially from your parents, be prepared for odd stares. Your accomplishments may make you seem an undesirable fit for their family. I can't think of any Thai folk songs or proverbs celebrating the 'self-made man.'

To avoid the stereotype of being distant, you're going to have to tag along on family visits sometimes. If your in-laws are constantly trying to feed you things you don't particularly like, drop hints with your wife beforehand. She'll then be able to pass on your requests to her parents that you are unable to eat certain foods, especially durian! Dropping hints with third parties is probably the best way to get things across in Thai culture. Let your wife know in a calm and uncomplaining manner and she will relay your hints to the appropriate family members, also in an indirect manner. There is always hope that someday, at some point, your in-laws will be able to adjust to you.

When they want to discuss those major life decisions you've made, such as university and work, maybe mention how a parent or uncle had

I've accomplished  
everything by myself,  
without help from  
my family.



offered advice to you and you really took that advice to heart before you went ahead with a decision. Those odd stares will be replaced with smiles and nodding heads.

### **Stingy**

Now we've come to probably one of the worst tags or labels in Thai culture. Stinginess is not something you want to be known for. But you should not take this to mean that you always have to be a pushover.

Think of your own culture. Westerners value independence. In everything you do you want to show people that you are capable, skilled, able to do things on your own. This is what you strive to show your family, your colleagues, your superiors. What if one day you completely lose your independence? You find yourself living with your parents again and needing their financial support to supplement your moonlighting income from your busboy job and help pay for the insurance payments on your run-down Japanese compact car because most of your salary goes to pay alimony. Pathetic indeed.

Well, as much as you don't want this to happen, so a Thai does not want to be known as a tightwad. Thais strive to show themselves to be generous just as the Westerner wants to be seen as strong and independent. How does this pertain to your marriage with your Thai wife? Well, by occasionally showing yourselves (as a couple) as generous with her family, you're fulfilling her basic cultural need for self-esteem. If you deny her this, just think how you would feel if someone took your independence away from you. For a Westerner, doesn't your independence provide you with self-esteem? Then who are you to prevent your Thai bride from gaining her own self-esteem, just because she, as a Thai, will find it through other means?

So how will your wife show generosity? Don't fear, most acts of generosity can be small, and usually stay within your budgets. It can mean paying for ice cream when you and friends meet at the ice cream parlor, going the extra kilometer when dropping them off at a bus station that is more convenient for them, or sharing with them something that you have. The little things done in Thai culture add up exponentially.