

Cultural Do's and Don'ts: Thai Elderly

- Thailand is known as “the land of smiles.” Confrontation is considered rude, and Thais will try to avoid it whatever the situation; it is seen as an embarrassing loss of face.
- The Thai greeting is known as the *wai* and consists of the palms being pressed together and lifted towards the chin. Thai society is highly structured. The person with lower social standing initiates the *wai* and holds it higher and for longer than the person with higher social standing. As a general rule, do not *wai* children or workers such as waiters, waitresses, and street vendors. Monks do not return *wai*. When addressed to an elder, the *wai* is accompanied by lowering the head. This should also be done upon leaving the elder. Men accompany the *wai* with the phrase, “Sawadi Khrap,” and women say “Sawadi Kha.” Both mean “hello.”
- The head is considered a sacred part of the body. Never touch someone’s head or hair, not even that of a child. The feet are seen as the lowest part of the body. To point your feet toward someone or rest them on a table is rude. When sitting on the floor, put your legs away behind you or to the side. When sitting in a chair, cross your legs is disrespectful. When greeting a Thai of the opposite sex, refrain from touching or engaging in familiarities. Men and women generally do not express affection between each other in public. Touching people of the same sex, however, is appropriate and is considered a sign of friendship.
- Thais address one another by their first names, even in formal situations. The polite form of address is the gender-neutral title “Khun,” followed by the first name or nickname. Every Thai person has a nickname, usually a one- or two-syllable name with a simple meaning, such as Nok (bird) or Kung (shrimp). Asking about the nickname, addressing the meaning and correct pronunciation of it, and asking what a Thai person wants to be called is a comfortable way to build rapport. Thais will appreciate your consideration.
- The royal family is the most revered institution in Thailand. Criticizing or defaming it in any way will nearly always offend Thai people.
- The monkhood is a respected institution that comes just below royalty in Thai social hierarchy. Most taboos in dealing with monks concern women. For example, it is prohibited for a monk to touch a woman or for him to receive anything directly from her. Never use Buddha images for the purpose of decoration or display.
- Service providers need to be sensitive to the meaning of Thai smiles. They often mean friendliness or a desire to please, and are used to help maintain harmony. They do not necessarily indicate acceptance or understanding.
- Clothing should be respectable. Women should take care not to wear revealing skirts, shorts, or skimpy tops. Remove shoes and hats prior to entering a Thai home or *wat* (temple).

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- Talk to the family member who has the strongest family relationship to the elder, and allow that family member to introduce you to the elder. Ask the family member to help you in identifying the correct language in addressing the elder, especially if the elder is sensitive to being addressed by their first or last name.
- Personal questions are not appreciated. Avoid difficult terminology; translating English into Thai often results in misunderstandings. Avoid using open-end questions since they create confusion. Instead, use simple and short, close-end questions. It is also helpful to provide concrete choices from which the elder can pick an answer, for example, “yes” or “no.”
- The elderly will be offended if you do not accept their gift. You are expected to *wai* upon receiving a gift. It is appropriate--but not mandatory--to bring a little dessert dish or small fruit basket if possible when visiting a Thai home.
- Patience is a virtue. Thai elders are generally shy, and they don't like to “bother” others. It takes time, great patience, and multiple visits to find out how they feel and what they need. Your respect, friendship, and professional service delivery will gain you and your agency a reputation for caring and a quality of service that is extremely appreciated.

Traditional Holidays

Feb. or March	Makha Bucha is the third major Buddhist festival of full moon of the year.
April 6	Chakri Day commemorates the Rama I founding of the Chakri Dynasty.
April 13-15	Thai New Year (Songkran)
May 1	Labor Day
May 5	Coronation Day is a ceremony to mark the crowning of King Bhumibol
Early May	Royal Plowing Ceremony observes the official start of the rice-planting season with an elaborate royal rite.
May full moon	Visakha Bucha celebrates the birth, Enlightenment, and death of the Buddha.
July full moon	Asanha Bucha, the second major Buddhist festival of the year, and Khao Phansa, mark the start of the three-month Buddhist Rains Retreat, when monks remain in their temples to devote themselves to study and mediation.
August 12	Queen's Birthday
October 23	Chulalongkorn Day commemorates the death of Rama V (King Chulalongkorn).
December 5	King's Birthday
December 10	Constitution Day