Changing Concepts of Work in Thailand[1]

by

Simon Baker

Population Council, Bangkok, Thailand

and

Michael Hess

Australian National University, Australia

Abstract

Historically in Thai society 'work' has been defined broadly but recent economic changes have led to a narrowing of ideas about what constitutes work. The commodification of labour this entails is familiar from the history of economic change in many nations. This article seeks to go beyond re-stating the obvious parallels. In particular, because the specificities of these changes in each nation reveal underpinning attitudes to work, we believe that they have significance for understanding worker attitudes and therefore for decision making on both labour policy and management practice.

Some Thais defining work will recite a 1950's slogan introduced by the military dictator Sarit that states 'ngan khu ngern, ngern khu ngan, banda suk', which means work is money, money is work and this brings us happiness. This article seeks an understanding of what this means in practice. It begins by looking generally at broad concepts of work and economic development. It then considers how this has impacted on language and normative values in other nations, and looks at how economic change in Thailand has led to a profound shift in attitudes to work. In particular attention is focused on the language used to describe work because this language is redolent of the process of cultural legitimisation by which working for money becomes normative. The article uses both Thai and Isarn (the name given to the dialect and region in Northeast Thailand) illustrations to show usage change in both urban and rural areas.

WORK ATTITUDES AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Work plays a dual role in development. First it is the means by which human improve the material base of social life and second it is a major avenue by which the benefits of economic growth are spread through communities. Work, however, is also a social process in which the organisation of production, the control of employees and the

establishment of shared (or at least overlapping) goals become crucial to successful outcomes. So on the one hand, work organisations develop rules and cultures to channel the efforts of their members towards the achievement of organisational aims, while on the other hand social culture establishes a range of normative attitudes supportive of the manner in which work is organised in particular societies. It is within this development of culturally supported concepts of work that the discussion in this article is located.

Work has always had a central place in human life and in general refers to any activity undertaken to produce a particular result. In non-industrialised societies work was an indistinguishable part of life; people did what was necessary for their own and their community's survival. Under the impact of the industrialisation of production, however, work becomes a more discrete activity. In particular it becomes physically and often psychologically separate from the, arguably more important, personal concerns of family, leisure and self-development.

Like all stereotypes this masks a more complex reality. The point here, however, is simply to establish that 'work', in market oriented economies becomes a commodity and is treated in varying degrees as such by both buyers and sellers of labour. Commentators from a wide variety of backgrounds have noted the problems to which this gives rise, even in the social culture of industrialism which creates a set of normative attitudes supportive of the commodification of work. So in the USA, Fassel (1990:2) notes that 'it seems people are killing themselves with work', while Schor (1991:123,125) claims that 'happiness has failed to keep pace with economic growth' so that 'the whole story [of US life] is that we work, and spend, and work and spend some more' This form of work is also seen to create a variety of psychoses producing various forms of anti-social behaviour in the 'workaholic .... [who] gradually becomes emotionally crippled and addicted to control and power in a compulsive drive to gain approval and success' (Killinger 1991:6). Even in Australia where the drive to succeed has been generally seen as less extreme 'getting paid for a fair day's work' has been seen as an alienated and alienating activity for the majority of employees (Aungles and Parker 1988:28).

The point may be illustrated by a brief consideration of the historical change that took place in the nature of work in the first industrialised society. In pre-industrial England work took place within a different set of constraints than those in today's market oriented economy. In particular, the bonds holding society together were personal rather than financial with the effect that work was an activity undertaken for someone, rather than for something such as a wage (Fox 1974:154-7).

In the English example one aspect of this can be seen in the opposition of economic and religious thinking. The orthodox Christian approach to work, derived from the New Testament writers, sees it as a means by which an individual 'satisfies his or her God-given role in the order of Creation' (Gordon 1994:25). The thirteenth century theologian Thomas Aquinas concluded that 'to live well is to work well' (*sum theol* I-II q.57, a.5). The contrast between this ideological tradition in which work is an essential part of individuals' living out of their createdness and the actual jobs of the 'dark satanic mills' of industrialising England could hardly be greater.

Some of the differences may be seen in the evolution of the terminology by which the English language recognised the commodification of work into jobs. This process has involved varying degrees of differentiation between traditional concepts of work as a natural part of life and the idea of a job as a means to an end. In this process the naturalistic organisation of work on the basis of kinship was replaced by an economistic form where work is bought and sold as part of a bargain between employer and employee. For the former any particular job became part of a wider scheme to generate profit and/or achieve organisational aims. For the latter a job became generally the necessary precondition for the income and social status essential to personal life.

'Job' is a relatively new word in English owing its immediate origins to the Middle English *gobbe* (lump) and the subsequent, but now obsolete, usage *jobbe* (piece). The term 'job work' was originally used precisely to differentiate a discrete piece of work from the more general and, in the thinking of the day, more genuine work of life. This is reflected in Samuel Johnson's definition of 'job' as 'petty piddling work; a piece of chance work' (Johnson 1963:22). The difference may also be seen in reference to the 'great work' of particularly creative or influential people standing in stark contrast to the 'it's just a job' attitude of 'ordinary' workers. There is a considerable literature investigating this dichotomy.[2] The point here is merely to note that at certain points in the histories of human societies, those that have organised their economies on the basis of markets have commodified labour. In these societies work became a creature of the market losing its direct relationship with broader issues of life. Attitudes to work underwent a parallel change as social culture made concepts supporting of working for money normative.

The result is that in developed market economies, acculturation to work is strong, with social attitudes generally supportive of work organisation. This is, however, the outcome of a gradual evolution and even today the disparity of interests between employers and employees as well as that between different types and levels of employees have been seen to create major difficulties in terms of establishing a shared commitment to organisational goals. The difficulties of understanding and the desire to manipulate attitudes to work have given rise to a huge literature ranging from sociological analysis centring on the importance of 'class relations' in the study of work to the highly prescriptive management literature advising ways of 'shaping employee expectations'. In between these extremes there is also a gentler discourse focusing on consultation and participation in workplace decision making.

Within these discussions of work and work attitudes culture has been seen as both a tool for change and a source of resistance to change over several centuries of industrialising development (Thompson 1983:101-6). Significant areas of this literature remain ambivalent about the impact of culture in either analytical or diagnostic terms with even the definition of the term being widely seen as problematic (Ortner 1973; Schein1985). Not only are attempts to define 'culture' notoriously difficult (Ortner 1973), but the varied perspectives from which and purposes for which culture is used in work related scholarship make its use even more problematic (Alevesson 1993:1). A general definition in terms of culture being 'a system of shared perspectives or collectively held and sanctioned definitions' (Bate 1984:44) is widely used and may be suitable provided the

group to which it applies is carefully defined. Careless use may, however, result in an approach, which sees it simply in terms of the customs, practices, beliefs, traditions, values and ideologies of work organisations with little attempt to unravel the underlying relations of power masked by the cloak of cultural acceptability. This has been noted as a particular danger in the case of studies of culture at an organisational level (Tyler,1973:1; Beer *et al*, 1985;246; Mullins, 1989:5). So it is hardly surprising that for sociologists culture is vague as an analytical category and for psychologists it is all but useless as a diagnostic tool. It also seems that the narrow focus of western scholarship makes it very difficult to use such a pervasive notion as culture. In terms of work organisations this is particularly evident where the blinkered vision of closed systems theory make exogenous culture, along with other external variables, all but invisible (Hall and Xu 1990).

The prospects of understanding the complexities of attitudes to work have been deepened by the largely prescriptive management literature which has failed to produce a systematic analysis of these problems. For many management commentators the (market driven?) desire to establish universal principles of management and organisational development regardless of cultural context has been irresistible (Hickson, 1993;Form 1979; Negandhi1979; 1985; Child 1981; Pascale and Athos 1981; Child and Tayeb 1983; and Leavitt 1983). So it has seemed simply a matter of 'common sense' to assert that

at some basic level, people and organisations think and act similarly, and ... these similarities can be the basis for a generic theory of organisational development. (Vengroff *et al* 1994:253)

Some studies have concluded to the contrary that the 'management [of work] cannot be separated from culture' (Alston 1985:v) and that therefore 'there is no universal applicability of ... styles of management' (Negandhi 1985:75). In the management literature, however, this has been a minority position. This may simply be the product of the general phenomena which has been termed 'management fadism' in which managers are seen as adopting whatever trend seems popular at the time with little attempt to objectively analyse its merits. In particular, however, the popularity of universalist approaches to management of organisations probably owes more to its inherent reductionism and over-simplification - the promise of a quick solution based on the apparently solid foundation of the experience of industrialised nations (Sievers 1994:7). This sort of reasoning may prove particularly seductive for managers in nations seeking to emulate this industrialising experience.

CONCEPTS OF WORK UNDER DEVELOPMENT

Some parallels between the evolution of 'work' in industrialised economies and developments in contemporary societies undergoing accelerated economic development are evident in both the history of industrialisation and the attempts to explain attitudes to work by reference to underlying cultures. For instance, the conclusions of western anthropologists regarding the nature of work in more recently non-industrial societies stress that the individual's role in work was often determined by their status in society (Applebaum 1984:3-12). Where this has been the case market oriented economic activity will clearly bring about major changes, with consequent social tensions as individuals and communities attempt to cope with the changes in attitude demanded by new approaches to work (Pinches and Lakha 1987). The problem for contemporary workplaces in Asia, as one Filipino commentator on management practices has put it, is that, 'we have cut our teeth on structural and systematic concepts from the West, yet beneath the Western veneer these have constructed we are, deep within, Asian in our values and feelings' (Ortegas 1994:6).

A major difference in the experience of those nations attempting a contemporary move to market oriented production is that the speed with which the process is being pursued leaves little room for gradual changes in culture. So there is typically a conflict between cultural attitudes in society at large and those required within work organisations. One generalisation of this concerns the extent of collectivism in non-western cultures. This contrasts sharply with much 'modern' management practice based on individualism which is typical of 'western' nations but which is much less powerful outside of these cultural contexts (Jocano 1990:2; Vente and Chen 1980).

To illustrate the point, a brief attempt is made here to identify some of those culturally engendered attitudes, which have posed problems for the management of labour in a handful of nations undergoing processes of rapid economic development. While reducing complex phenomena to stereotypical simplicity it does illustrate the impact of social culture on work in a handful of nations.

Kerukunan (harmony) and *nrimo* (submissiveness) are two Javanese concepts, which have been seen as impacting on work behaviour. The concept of *kerukunan* encapsulates the necessity of acting in a way conducive to the maintenance of society through unity. This is not so much a positive striving for unity as an active avoidance of action, which will disturb harmony - regardless of the individual's 'real' feelings. So a proposition may be reject by answering 'yes' rather than 'no', because such an answer does not disturb harmony, with the 'real' picture not being clear until action is required. In the practical management environment it may therefore be quite inappropriate for managers to speak directly. When giving orders or correcting subordinates managers may require a more subtle approach, for instance, reminding the person to consider - 'what if we do it this way...' (Geertz 1961:146).

Nrimo involves accepting everything without protest. It is not so much a position of apathy as a rational response, which avoids excessive pain or useless challenge. This has

an ideological history in which acceptance is an active response breaking the 'diabolic' cycle of fear for the future and regret for the past (Bonneff 1994). For work behaviour the problems this poses arise from the view that wealth is illusory and not worth striving for (Hardjowiroyo 1983), overlaid with an Islamic view that hard work is not efficacious because God determines everything. The effects on employee motivation have been noted as including lack of assertiveness (Sunyoto 1995:120), low labour turnover, high levels of co-operation, little need for achievement, strong need for social affiliation and lack of initiative (Taruna 1987:43).

Pakikisama (togetherness) is a central concept of Filipino social life, most literally translated as 'to accompany or go along with' (Lynch 1964:8-9) and reflects a desire for smooth interpersonal relationships. It results in an avoidance of conflict and in communication, which involves extravagant praise, metaphor rather than frankness, smiling and not losing one's temper (Guthrie 1968:63). *Pakikisama* has similar implications to the Javanese attitudes mentioned above particularly in respect of yielding to the will of a leader despite one's own ideas (Andres 1981:17). It leads to a 'constrained conformity' in which, while silence is not consent, there are severe limitations placed on the exercise of individual initiative (Jocano 1990:3-4).

The social sanction operating in the Filipino sense of shame, *hiya*, is also seen by Filipino commentators as having a direct limiting effect on the capacity of managers where collective pressure makes 'avoiding personal affronts which could put a person in a socially unacceptable position' imperative (de Leon 1987:29). This has been observed as leading to a style of organisational communication in which euphemism and 'double talk' are common (Roces 1992:40) and where persuasion is preferred over argument which may offend personal sensibilities (Jocano 1992:11). So in a situation, for instance, in which managers are called on to provide feedback on employees' performance the type of opinion expressed publicly may focus primarily on maintaining self-esteem and inter-personal relations rather than on organisational objectives (Roces 1992:40).

The consequences of Filipino culture for work attitudes have been summarised by foreign observers in terms of low levels of trust, the need for close supervision, central decision making and the avoidance of conflict (Richards 1993:362). For Filipino commentators, however, the factors, which appear so negative to an outsider, have positive value with Jocano arguing that the implications of cultural familiarism are simply that work relationships rather than work functions are of primary importance in the Philippines cultural setting. So she concludes that

Effective management is a function of the congruence of the modern and professional management used in the corporation and the *elements of culture* in the environment in which the corporation operates ... [while] within the corporation, effective management is a function of the fit in the perceptions and expectations managers and workers have of each other (Jocano 1990:15).

In Papua New Guinea (PNG), a nation of enormous ethnic diversity with literally hundreds of languages and 'cultures' those social concepts, which are common, seem to gain increased strength especially in urban areas where the subtleties of localised culture are lost. *Wantok*, is one of these. It refers literally to those who speak the same language. It is used throughout Melanesia to identify the primary loyalty of the individual to clan, language group and region. In terms of work attitudes there are many implications of this cultural orientation. Its positive aspect may be seen in a PNG scholar's definition of it as 'mutual support and co-operation within mutually acceptable rules of social and economic behaviour' (Warakai 1989:45). Foreign observers, on the other hand, have seen *wantokism* as involving invidious responsibilities noting particularly the plight of employed Papua New Guineans who are obliged to give their time and resources to unemployed relatives as a major disincentive to work at all (Monsell-Davis 1993:8).

Tambus (literally in-laws) may be even more problematic than *wantoks* in this respect. In PNG *tambus* are not 'just the in-laws' as Europeans might say. Marriage is a major means of bringing clans into harmony and of establishing economic and political links. A Melanesian's *tambus* have an importance as partners and allies for life. Furthermore the respect paid them is traditionally seen as ensuring the numbers and health of children, essential to the economic well being of the community and particularly its older members whose physical well-being is often dependent upon this next generation of labour. The situation in which managers are placed through the need to employ their *tambus* and show them the traditional respect creates a conflict of interest which is rarely resolved by subordinating this customary order of necessity to the demands of organisational objectives (Ramoi 1986:88).

Submissiveness to authority, an orientation to collective identity and loyalties based on place of birth seem to offer amongst the more extreme contrasts with the individualism assumed as the basis of economic activity in the 'west'. So, in these accounts of attitudes to work in 'developing' economies, the economically rational utility maximiser is either invisible, or takes a different form than that with which 'western' observers are familiar.

CULTURE AND WORK IN THAILAND

For much Western management commentary the relationship between work attitude and culture in Thailand has focused firmly on the role of social status in determining work relationships and roles (Siffin 1966:240). This has particular implications for the expression of ideas, where a lack of bottom up communication has been noted as limiting the usefulness of information available to managers (Haas 1979:30), while grievances of employees fester as unarticulated sources of demotivation (Shor 1962). More recent work has focused on the role of seniority in decision making. This is seen as limiting the extent of accountability because there is no requirement for decisions to be logical or open to debate (Redding 1993:223). The decisions of senior officials are accepted as correct

because they are the decisions of senior officials. Added to this absolute authority is the fact that work relationships are more reflective of personal than of organisational realities so that the employee and manager never stand in a purely professional relationship (Redding 1993:226).

Some Thai commentators reach similar conclusions including that submission to authority is, in general, seen as a prized personal characteristic (Ruktham 1981:23). The work attitude results are said to include the fact that lower status employees cannot communicate effectively with their superiors because of the distance between them. While senior bureaucrats officiate 'like feudal landlords' whose rights to exercise authority need not be related to performance or subject to accountability (Ruktham 1981:104). On one side of the work relation's equation this might result in managers being unwilling to openly criticise employees because of the breach of the personal relationship this would entail (Ruktham 1981:120).

As with the more general management literature mentioned above, the commentary on the management implications of culturally legitimate work attitudes in Thailand has been driven by a desire for prescriptive outcomes. Management commentators are expected to and do make recommendations for action which are inevitably over-generalised resulting in reductionist analyses in which all Thais are assumed to share a set of attitudes. These are in turn seen as arising from an unchanging cultural monolith. The more subtle approaches of non-management literature are required to reveal and explain the complexity behind the simplistic suggestion that culture can be a tool of management. In the following analysis we look at changes in the language used to describe work in Thailand[3] and ask what this reveals about the work attitudes behind the country's economic growth and social development.

CHANGES TO THE THAI ECONOMY

Rice production has dominated Thai society. From the signing of the Bowring treaty with Britain in 1855, which increased Thailand's contact with the world's trading system, this crop has dominated the country's economy (Falkus 1991:54; Kemp 1991:318). As late as 1960 the traditional 'five R's', rice, rivers, rain, religion, and the royal family dominated Thai society (Falkus 1991:56). So dominant has farming been that in 1956 close to 88 per cent of the working population was employed as 'farmers, fishermen, hunters, loggers, and related workers', and only 2.1 per cent in manufacturing (Falkus 1991:56). In the 1960s, not only was Thailand an overwhelmingly agricultural country, but its output was based on one crop. The country's farmers produced rice on over 80 per cent of the cultivated land (Falkus 1995:15).

From the 1960s onwards, the importance of farming started to decline. There was a steady shift away from agriculture towards industrial and export production (Podhisita and Pattaravanich 1995:1). In 1960, agriculture accounted for close to 40 per cent of Gross Domestic Production (GDP). This share fell to 27 per cent in 1970, 21 per cent in

1980, 12 per cent in 1990 and to less than 10 per cent in 1996 (Chandravithum 1995:1; Sussangkarn 1995:237; Duncan 1996:3). Around 1986 industry exceeded agriculture in its contribution to GDP. The economy's engine was no longer agriculture but industrial exports, construction, banking, transport and other services (Falkus 1995:13). By 1990, agriculture had been reduced to a minor role in the Thai economy. Industry was growing at 15 per cent a year while agriculture was stagnating. Industry by 1990 contributed twice as much to GDP as did agriculture. The countryside had changed from being economically important to being peripheral (Phongpaichit and Baker 1996:141 and 146).

The share of employment in agriculture has declined, although not to the same extent as the decline in the importance of agriculture to the nation's GNP (Sussangkarn 1993:358; Sussangkarn 1995:242). Even though agriculture has become less important in 2000 just under half of the country's labour force was still employed in agriculture (National Statistical Office 2000).

Many rural families no longer see themselves as having a future in agriculture. Poor conditions have led many families to look beyond farming in their efforts to increase their incomes. Among the young there has been a widespread perception that agriculture is not sufficient to meet their needs and they have increasingly turned to income-generation activities (Rigg 1988:342). Further, raising aspirations have meant that villagers no longer wish to maintain traditional lifestyles. Every parent that we interviewed told us that they did not want their children to be farmers. The following replies from two farming women to the question 'Do you want your children to be farmers?', were typical of many responses:

Mim: No, I don't want them to be farmers. My husband and I have struggled. Yes, they have farmed in the past but they had to. They can't just become rice farmers, as the cost of living is so high. Farming is not enough. You have to also earn money in other ways. We have had to struggle to ensure that our kids received good things. We have had to work very hard (31-year-old woman, Ban Nam Jai 23/3/96).

And:

Uut: No, I don't want them to grow rice, as it is difficult. You have to be in the sun and your face turns black. You are bent over all day and you end up as a hunchback. Your back hurts. It is very difficult. Growing rice you have to use your own labour not machines (40-year-old woman, Ban nam Suiy 30/8/96).

WHAT IS WORK IN THE THAI CONTEXT?

Traditionally the Thai word *ngan* has had a broader meaning than the English word. Not only is it used to mean paid work, agricultural work, housework and school work as in

English but it is also used for funerals, festivals, marriages, making merit and religious ceremonies. For many Thais *ngan* is multi dimensional. A man listing the different types of work stated:

Tui: There are many different types of work. First there is work around the house. Second there is the work concerned with Isarn traditions. Third there is marriage. Fourth there is the work when people die, the *ngan sop* [cremation]. Fifth to give rice to the spirits, sixth *bunkhun* [making merit], seventh *bun banfai* [a festival where Isarn people send rockets into the sky calling for the rains], eighth *Kheewphansa* [the beginning of Buddhist lent], ninth *Orkphansa* [the end of Buddhist lent] and tenth *Katin* [a day to make special offerings to all the monks in a temple usually in November] (42-year-old man, Ban Nam Suiy 15/8/96).

This man listed a series of important events when Thais make merit. For some individuals that we have interviewed making merit is seen as the most important *ngan*, it ensured the continuation of traditions, beliefs and customs.

It is noteworthy that Tui did not include in his list a *ngan* associated with earning money. Indeed historically in many parts of rural Thailand the importance of money was limited. On visiting Khon Kaen, Prince Damrong, the Minister of Interior at the beginning of the last century wrote that:

[I] asked villagers about their livelihood and found it to be very amazing. ... People in this area live self-sufficiently; and there is virtually no need for using money ... Each household lives independently from the others. There are no masters and no servants. Household members are simply looked after by their household's leaders, village headmen, and commune leaders, in that order. But there is no single rich man who has up to 200 *baht*. Neither is there a single person who is as poor as turning himself into a servant (bao). They may have lived like this for hundreds of years ... Because money is not important, nobody accumulates it ... (Nicrowattanayingyong 1991:139).

However, with the changes to the Thai economy as noted above the Thai and Isarn words for work have changed. Although the connotations to these words for many still retain the traditional meanings they are now becoming heavily influenced by the importance of money. Even in rural areas of Thailand money dominates life. Two old women interviewed in Bam Nam Suiy seemed to be capturing broadly held views when they told us that

before, there was enough to eat, but now there is nothing to do. Now when you finish school you have to go to Bangkok to work ... But before to eat you didn't have to buy things. These days if you don't have money you can't eat. You have to work for everything. Now you have to buy everything (Ann, Ban Nam Suiy 30/8/96).

And:

I have enough to buy things to eat, if you don't have money you can't buy anything. The economy today is based on buying. Come the end of the month there is the bank, the life insurance, the electricity, and the water to be paid off. Each month it is no small amount (Puk, Ban Nam Suiy 30/8/96).

A second and narrower Thai definition of work is now commonly heard. That is *ngan khu ngern, ngern khu ngan, banda suk*. As noted above this means that work is money and money is work and this brings happiness. Work is what you do to get money, and it is only by having money that you can have happiness. For those holding this view earning money was of utmost importance; they claimed it was more important than making merit as in order to do that they needed to have money in the first place. Many respondents repeated the proverb in part or in full. For example:

Pong: Work is money, money is work. For education if you have money you can enter a very good school. If you have good education you can do everything (57-year-old labour official, Si Liam 1/10/96).

ISARN CONCEPTS OF WORK

There are differences between the Thai concept of work as discussed above and the Isarn one. The Isarn word for 'work' has a narrower meaning than that of Thai and also that found in English. Comparisons of the words used between these two language groupings indicate the differences.

The Isarn equivalent of the Thai word *tam* meaning to 'do' is *het* and instead of the Thai word *ngan* for work, in Isarn it can be either *wiak* or *ngan*. *Ngan* has been adopted from Thai for certain types of work. When we interviewed Isarn people on the difference between the two words *wiak* and *ngan*, many said that they were the same and that they are interchangeable. Further questioning about when and why they would use one or the other resulted in clearer definition of the differences.

Simon: What is *het wiak?*

Chai: It is work within the family at home, when working the fields. When we are talking about *het ngan* this is a new meaning, but *het wiak* it is a term that has been around for along time. *Het wiak* is work around the family and in agriculture. *Het ngan* is work where you are employed by another (NGO 'child labour' worker, Khon Kaen 16/9/96).

Het wiak is used for work in the fields, such as planting and harvesting rice, or for work around the house, looking after children, weaving and other traditional women's tasks. It is used for forms of work that existed before the market economy penetrated Isarn. Today, some forms of *het wiak* can result in money, for example when the rice crop is sold. Nevertheless, these forms of work usually do not involve a wage.

Het ngan, on the other hand, is used to indicate paid employment. The residents of villages such as Ban Nam Jai and Ban Nam Suiy, who were in paid employment, such as construction workers in Bangkok or those working in fish-net factories in Khon Kaen were *het ngan*. *Het ngan* is the new form of work, the work that arrived with the changes brought by the market economy. Isarn communities have changed as households sought supplementary income particularly wages. To gain consumer goods that increasingly became available the importance of money grew and with it the form of work that is now called *het ngan*.

CONCEPTS OF WORK AND RELIGIOUS PRACTICE

Further understanding of the Isarn concept of work can be gained by studying the connection between Buddhism and work. Every seventh day is *Wan Pra*, a day when traditionally rural Isarn people would rest from their work. This concept, however, is being transformed as the market system gains greater dominance.

Each morning monks will leave their temples to receive alms, except on *Wan Pra* when they stay in their temples and those who wish to make merit enter the temple to do so. *Wan Pra* coincides with the full moon and every other seventh day as it waxes and wanes. *Wan Pra* is not only a day to enter the temple to make merit, it is also a day of rest. Traditionally, there was no concept of a weekend, but instead *Wan Pra* was the day Isarn people did not work. This is illustrated by a conversation we had with Dok, a 30-year-old woman from Ban Nam Suiy (11/9/96):

Simon: On Wan Pra you are not meant to work, isn't that so?

Dok: You aren't allowed to do certain things. ... In this village you can't kill any animals. On *Wan Pra* you aren't allowed to kill animals. ... You can't mill rice. ... It is a sin. We don't even want to take the rice to the mill on *Wan Pra*. We don't take the rice from the rice store to mill on *Wan Pra*.

Simon: In this village you can't work but the children will go off to study.

Dok: Yes, they will.

Simon: If there are government workers in this village, would they work. Lets say there is a person working at the district office, would they work?

Dok: Yes, they will. ... Because government workers don't stop, their work doesn't stop.

With *Wan Pra* the difference between *het wiak* and *het ngan* is further illustrated. The kinds of work not performed on *Wan Pra* were the *het wiak* forms of work. Work on the farm and around the house were not performed, while work that earned a wage, *het ngan* was carried out. There was a divide in the importance of this day between those living in rural areas and in cities, as many people we asked in the city could not tell us which day was *Wan Pra*.

Certain activities took place on *Wan Pra*. When we interviewed Dok, she and other women were sewing which was not considered to be work by the women. Also during *Wan Pra* other traditional women's work, such as looking after children and cooking, still took place. This is not to say that men stopped while women continued working. Women, like men, stopped working the rice fields. Women also stopped rice milling, an activity predominantly carried out by them in the research sites. While, men still carried out activities such as fishing.

The growing dominance of the market system is reducing the importance of *Wan Pra*. The importance of this day for children, in particular, has declined greatly. This is because children's time is now controlled by the school calendar. They have to go to school from Monday to Friday and their days off are on the weekend and not *Wan Pra*. For children in the paid workforce *Wan Pra* had also lost much of its meaning as they have to work as determined by their employers and not by the Buddhist calendar.

A similar illustration arose in the interviews when the issue of children's work was considered. Here the Thai concept of *nati* (duty) led to much that we thought of as work being considered in quite a different light. We were surprised, when asking village people either in Thai or in Isarn if they were working, to be told that they were not as they were *yuu ban suu suu* meaning in English staying at home doing nothing. Our surprise was because only a few moments before we had seen both adults and children working hard. While the issue of children's work is too complex to canvass in this article it is significant that much work we observed was regarded not as 'real' work but as the fulfilment of duty.

We intend to explore this further elsewhere. Here, however, it is worth noting that the difference appears to involve activities undertaken for money. 'Real' work was for money.

CONCLUSION

A profound shift in attitudes about work has occurred in Thailand as economic forces have reshaped the structure of that society. The shift from a predominately agricultural society to one increasing dominated by industries and services has altered people's understanding of what work is. No longer is it derived from people's own and their community's survival, or personal concerns of family, leisure and self-development. Now for many, the repetition of the slogan 'work means money and money means work' has the ring of self-referential truth. Often, however, the second part of the slogan 'and this brings happiness' is pronounced with some irony. Work has been turned into a commodity to be bought and sold. Reflecting this change the Thai language has adapted with the meaning of *ngan* increasingly being associated with those activities that result in money.

This parallels changes in language and meaning in English where the commodification of labour altered working for money in a 'job' from 'a petty piddling type of work' in the days of Samuel Johnson to the principal avenue of livelihood and indicator of social status. The second part of the Sarit slogan hints that the changing usage of *ngan* may similarly conceal deeper levels of significance. If the picture of changing Thai attitudes to work, glimpsed in our limited research, is generally true then the activities today called *'ngan'* may carry the weight of a range of expectations going beyond simple income generation. For many Thais the *ngan* of making merit, contributing to the community and ensuring the welfare of the family may remain significant. If these are present as under-pinnings to the *ngan* of making money then work for Thais will be a multi-layered activity in which satisfaction will depend on aspects additional to the income it brings. Labour policies and management practices, which neglect these subtleties, are unlikely to generate the *ngan*, which brings happiness.

ENDNOTES

[1] An earlier version of this article was presented as a paper at the Fifth ASEAN Inter-University Seminar on Social Development, National University of Singapore, May 2001.

[2] Recent innovative work includes Sievers (1994) and Fox (1994).

[3] The research upon which this is based was conducted during doctoral fieldwork in Thailand during 1996. Simon Baker, one of the authors of this article, lived in four

different communities in and around Khon Kaen, a city in Isarn, investigating the changing nature of child labour. As part of his research he interviewed community members about the meaning of work and how it differed over time and for different people.

REFERENCES

Alevesson, M. (1993). *Cultural Perspectives on Organisations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Alston, J.P. (1985). *The American Samurai: Blending American and Japanese Management Practices*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.

Andres, T. (1981). *Underlying Filipino Values*. Quezon City: New Day Publishers.

Applebaum, H.A. (ed) (1984). *Perspectives in Cultural Anthropology*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Aungles, S. and Parker, S.R. (1988). *Work Organisation and Change: Themes and Perspectives in Australia*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin.

Bate, P. (1984). The impact of organisational culture appraoches to problem solving. *Organisational Studies*, 5, 43-66.

Beer M., Spector, B., Lawrence, P., Mills, D.Q., and Walton, E., (1985). *Human Resource Management: A General Manager's Perspective*. New York: Free Press.

Bonneff, M. (1994). Ki Ageng Suryomentaraman: Javanese Prince and Philosopher. *Indonesia*, 57, 49-70.

Chandravithum, N. (1995). *Thailand: The Social Costs of Becoming the Fifth Tiger*. Washington, DC: The Woodrow Wilson Center Asian Program.

Child, J. (1981). Culture, contingency and capitalism in the cross-national study of organisations. In L.L.Cummings and B.B.Shaw (eds.), *Research in Organisational Behaviour*, 3, 303-356.

Child, J. and Tayeb, M. (1983). Theoretical perspectives in cross-national organisational research. *International Studies of Management and Organisation*, 12(4), 23-70.

de Leon, C. (1987). Social categorisation in Philippine organisations: values toward collective identity and management through intergroup relations. *Asia Pacific Journal of Management*, 5(1), 28-37.

Duncan, B. (1996). *The EC-MOAC Rural Development Projects: Adapting to Social and Economic Changes*. Khon Kaen: NEWMASIP.

Falkus, M. (1991). The economic history of Thailand. *Australian Economic History Review*, 31(1), 53-71.

Falkus, M. (1995). Thai industrialization: an overview. *Thailand's Industrialization and its Consequences*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 13-32.

Fassel, D. (1990). *Working Ourselves to Death*. San Francisco: Harper.

Form, W. (1979). Comparative industrial sociology and the convergence hypothesis. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 5, 1-25.

Fox, A. (1994). *Beyond Contract: Work, Power and Trust Relations*. London: Faber and Faber.

Geertz, H. (1961). *The Javanese Family: A Study in Kinship and Socialisation*. Glencoe: The Free Press.

Gordon, B. (1994). Theological positions and economic perspectives in ancient literature. In H.G.Brennan and A.M.C. Waterman (eds.), *Economics and Religion: Are They Distinct?* Massachusetts: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 237-48.

Guthrie, G. (ed), (1968). Philippine temprement. In his *Six Perspectives on the Philippines*. Manila: The Bankanak.

Haas, D.F. (1979). *Interaction in the Thai Bureaucracy: Structure, Culture and Social Exchange*. Colarado: Westview Press.

Hardjowiroyo, M. (1982). *Manusia Jawa*. Jakarta: Yayasan Idayu.

Hall, R.H. and Xu, W. (1990). Research note: run silent, run deep - cultural influences on organisations in the far east. *Organisational Studies*, 11(4), 569-76.

Havanon, N. (1992). Rice, labor, and children: a study of peasants' livelihood strategies in Northeast Thailand. In *Fertility Transitions, Family Structure, and Population Policy*. C. Goldscheider (ed.), Boulder: Westview Press, 209-229.

Hickson, D.J. (1993). *Management in Western Europe: Society, Culture and Organisation in Twelve Countries*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.

Jocano, F.L. (1990). *Management by Culture: Fine-tuning Management to Filipino Culture*, Quezon City: Punlad Research House.

Johnson, S., (1963). *Dictionary of the English Language: A Modern Selection by E.L. Adams and G. Milne*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Kemp, J. (1991). The dialectics of village and state in modern Thailand. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 22(2), 312-326.

Killinger, B. (1991). *Workaholics: The Respectable Addicts*. Toronto: Key Porter Books.

Leavitt, T. (1983). The globalisation of markets. *Harvard Business Review*, 61(3), 92-102.

Lynch, F. (1964). *Four Findings of Philippine Values*. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila Press

Morre, L.F. and Jennings, O.D. (eds.), (1995). *Human Resources Management on the Pacific Rim: Institutions, Practices and Attitudes*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter,.

Monsell-Davis, M. (1993). *Safety Net or Disincentive? Wantoks and Relatives in the Urban Pacific*. Port Moresby: National Research Institute.

Mullins, L.J. (1989). *Management and Organisational Behaviour*. London: Pitman.

National Statistical Office (2000). *Labour Force Survey, Round 3*. Bangkok: National Statistical Office.

Negandhi, A.R. (1979). Convergence in organisational practices: an empiracle study of industrial enterprise in developing countries. In C.J. Lammers and D.J. Hickson (eds.), *Organisations Alike and Unalike*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 323-345.

Negandhi, A.R. (1985). Management in the third world. In P.Joynt and M.Warner (eds.), *Managing in Different Cultures*. Oslo, Universeitforlaget, 69-97.

Nicrowattanayingyong, S. (1991). *Development Planning, Politics, and Paradox: A Study of Khon Kaen, a Regional City in Northeast Thailand*. Syracuse: Syracuse University.

Ortigas, C.D. (ed) (1994). *Human Resource Development the Philippine Experience: Readings for the Practitioner*. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press.

Ortner, S. (1973). On key symbols. *American Anthropologist*, 75, 1336-1346.

Pascale, R.T. and Athos, A.G. (1981). *The Art of Japanese Management: Applications for American Executives*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Phongpaichit, P. and C. Baker (1996). *Thailand's Boom*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin.

Pinches, M. and Lakha, S. (eds.), (1987). *Wage Labour and Social Change: The Proletariate in Asia and the Pacific*. Melbourne: Centre for South East Asian Studies, Monash University.

Podhisita, C. and U. Pattaravanich (1995). *Youth in Contemporary Thailand: Results from the Family and Youth Survey*. Salaya: Institute for Population and Social Research, Mahidol University.

Ramoi, G. (1986). Ethics and leadership. In S.Stratigos and J.P.Hughes (eds.), *The Ethics of Development: The Pacific in the Twenty First Century*. Port Moresby: UPNG.

Redding, S.G. (1993). Cultural effects on the marketing process in South-east Asia. In T.D. Weinshall (ed.), *Social Culture and Management*. Berlin: Walter de Grutyer.

Richards, D. (1993) Flying against the wind? Culture and management development in South East Asia. In Peter Blunt and David Richards (eds.), *Readings in Management, Organisation and Culture in East and South East Asia*. Darwin: NTU Press, 356-371.

Rigg, J. (1988). Land ownership and land tenure as measures of wealth and marginalisation: evidence from Northeast Thailand. *Area*, 20(4), 339-345.

Roces, A. and G. (1982). *Culture Shock! Philippines*. Singapore: Times Books International.

Ruktham, A., (1981). *Prutikarn Karachakarn (Behaviour of Thai Bureaucrats)*. Bangkok: Odian Store Press.

Schein, E. (1985). *Organisational Culture and Leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Schor, J. B. (1991). *The Overworked American*. New York: Harper Collins.

Shor, E.L. (1962). The Public Service. In L.J. Sutton (ed), *Problems and Politics of Administration in Thailand*. Institute of Training for Public Service: Indiana University, 23-40.

Sievers, B. (1994). *Work, Death and Life Itself*. Berlin: Walter de Grutyer.

Siffin, W. (1966). *The Thai Bureaucracy: Institutional Change and Development*. Honolulu: East West Centre.

Sunyoto, A.1(995). *Manajemen Sumber Daya Manusia*. Jakarta: IPWI,.

Sussangkarn, C. (1993). Labour markets. In *The Thai Economy in Transition*. P. Warr (ed.), Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 355-400.

Sussangkarn, C. (1995). Labour market adjustments and migration in Thailand. *ASEAN Economic Bulletin*, 12(2), 237-254.

Taruna, J.C.T. (1987). *Ciri Budaya manusia Jawa*, Yogyakarta: Penerbit Kanisius.

Thompson, P., (1983). *The Nature of Work*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.

Tyler, E.B. (1973). *Primitive Culture*. New York: Henry Holt.

Vengroff, R., Ndiaye, M. and Lubatkin, M. (1994). Culture and management: are Western management styles transferable? In A. Farazmand (ed.), *Handbook of Bureaucracy*, New York: Marcel Dekker: 253-64.

Vente, R.E. and Chen, P.S.J. (eds.), (1980). *Culture and Industrialisation: An Asian Dilemma*. Singapore: McGraw Hill.