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## **“BUNKHUN” THE IDEOLOGY EFFECT OF THAI BUSINESS MANAGEMENT**

*Sitti Jittichanon\**

Commerce and Business School, Burapha University, Chonburi, 20131, Thailand

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### **ABSTRACT**

It is an ordinary word for Thai people because it can be seen or heard in every place, everywhere and every time. “Bunkhun” or “Boonkhun” (บุญคุณ) is a crucial manner to be a good person in Thai societies. Unquestionably, this deep-rooted psychological dimension are strongly settled into every Thais. That why it is become a one large impact on operating business especially for business relationship. In this article, the topics will be argued on four aspects of Bunkhun which illustrated two contradictory appearances by separate into three parts of (1) overview of Bunkhun (2) two aspects of Bunkhun relationship related with business practice and (3) essential issue for future studies of Bunkhun effect on business operation. In future studies part, the author suggests two important issues: Refreshing Relationship Marketing by Bunkhun and the issue of HRM and Bunkhun relationship. Intentionally, these propositions would be insist the important of this cultural concept with

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Corresponding author

E-mail address: my2ndwings@hotmail.com

business practices and assist both scholars and managers to apply Bunkhun relationship to academic studies and business implementations.

**Keywords:** Bunkhun, Business practice, cultural impact, marketing, human resource management, management

## Introduction

Globalization of international exchange is leading to the integration of a diversity of multicultural exchanges. Understanding the impact of multicultural is requisite for organizations to creating a competitive advantage (Matthews & Thakkar, 2012) and reduced risk of failure in global market (Chen et al., 2011). In Eastern cultural studies, Guanxi of Chinese culture is the most interesting topic in worldwide academic research. One other cultural uniqueness from Eastern nation that never colonized by Western countries, Bunkhun are the deep-rooted psychological (Nicholls & Apiwattanakorn, 2015) sensations of Thai people. Bunkhun or BoonKoon (Pimpa, 2008) from Thailand, one of the most important principle, a “psychological bond between someone who is kindness and sincerity, renders another person the needed helps and favours and the latter's remembering of the goodness done and his ever-readiness to reciprocate the kindness” (Holmes & Tangtongtavy, 1995; Komin & Scholar, 1990, Ermongkonchai, 2008), persons bonded by Bunkhun which

means that one renders the help and favour while the other remembers the kindness (Jirachiefpattana, 2015). Bunkhun is important in many aspects such as the determination of Thai social hierarchy, social relationship and the most important Thai value (Corbitt, et al. 2002; Ermongkonchai, 2008; Taylor, 1997). In business relationship context, Bunkhun extensively convince the roles of people in close relationship that changes any activities of relational member to different demeanor.

Move away from traditional Bunkhun based definition on religious and societal studies to business management and marketing, there is a limited literature revealed to this concept. The academic papers related with Bunkhun concept in business and management science are still insufficient publishing for wider dissemination. A massive literature about culturally business relationship, Guanxi from China is the most interesting topics for academic researchers around the world. However, not over twenty years ago, other Eastern cultural relationships

are attracted the scholastic people to studied these cultural differentiations. Emerging in different forms of culturally relationship influences business to business relationships of many Eastern countries. Chinese's Guanxi, Russian's Blat, Saudi Arabian's Et-Moone and Thai's Bunkhun are the different typologies of interpersonal relationship. Over thousand literatures about Guanxi relationship illustrated various perspectives of Chinese interpersonal culture such as management science, financial study and political science. About a hundred academic papers criticized Blat relationship in the international journal and not over fifty papers in well-known academic journals represented Et-Moone relationship. Thai's most important relationship identity called Bunkhun is similarly disappeared from the internationally academic studies. By the related background of regional culture countries in ASEAN mainland, especially Buddhism countries as Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar are extremely believed ingratitude of people. Bunkhun is the social norms of most citizens in Buddhism-Indochinese peninsula that

affects interpersonal linking of people in this region. Even though, business relationships are globally formats but this deeper regional culture understanding of local norms may increased foreign investors' opportunities with long life and smooth connections for doing business in this country and region.

### Overview

There are no English words that ideally explicate the Bunkhun in directly meaning. Bunkhun is a "psychological bond between someone who is kindness and sincerity, renders another person the needed helps and favors, and the latter's remembering of the goodness done and his ever-readiness to reciprocate the kindness" (Holmes & Tangtongtavy, 1995; Komin & Scholar, 1990; Ermongkonchai, 2008), persons bonded by Bunkhun which means that one renders the help and favour while the other remembers the kindness (Jirachiefpattana, 2015). Selaratana (2009) suggested that Bunkhun is a "psychological bond, which recognises a sense of morality and religion, as well as the benefits to be gained".

Arttachariya (1997) said Bunkhun is “any good thing, help or favour done by someone which entails gratitude and obligation on the part of the beneficiary”, it is an ongoing stream of favors, material and services, building a moral debt. Bunkhun should not and cannot be measured quantitatively it is ongoing nature that binding of good reciprocal sensitivities for lasting relationship and there are not diminish by the factors of time and distance (Komin, 1990).

Because, there is no English equivalent in terms of Bunkhun, many scholars endeavored on its meaning as virtuous kindness, reciprocity of kindness (Servaes, 2000, Knutson, et al., 2003), reciprocity of goodness or exchange of favours (Siengthai & Bechter, 2001), significant favours (Adithipyangkul & Prasarnphanich, 2008), the reciprocity of goodness, showing kindness, giving and obtaining favours (Thapatiwong, 2011) and a trait of meritorious magnanimity possessed by the giver. Foley (2005) definition was the benefit and benevolence deliver to someone like Smuckarn (1985) that gave its meaning on helping or favour done

by someone which entails gratitude and obligation on the part of the beneficiary and Boonchai and Beeton (2015) said it is “the gratitude, appreciation of the assistance given from others”. Bunkhun can explained the expectation of social behaviors of a person in altruistic dimension that is a keystone of the unfailing moral order (Joungtrakul, 2005). Thai people that very act to carry out on another's duties is to some extent an act of bunkhun (Taylor, 1997) that receiver always feel respectful, grateful and obedience (Sri-Amnuay, 2012) like a children that obedient and showing respect to parents, and taking care of them (Methitham, 2009) or students feel to owe a debt of Bunkhun to their teacher (Methitham, 2009). This kind of gratitude is highly valued through the concept of Bunkhun (Wangkijchinda, 2011) that unpayable by someone who will forever be indebted (Adithipyangkul & Prasarnphanich, 2008).

Scholars defined Bunkhun into various kinds such as the favor-based relationship (Persons 2008), the relationships in a Thai style (Srisai, 2011), the social orientation (Meissonier et al.,

2012) grateful relationship orientation (Servaes 2000, Jirachiefpattana 2015) but its important is more than that (Nicholls & Apiwattanakorn, 2015) and deeper meaning than just having a relationship (Srisai, 2011). Bunkhun can explained the expectation of social behaviors of a person in altruistic dimension (Meissonier et al. 2013) that is a keystones of the unfailing moral order (Joungtrakul, 2004). Thai people that very act to carry out on another's duties is to some extent an act of bunkhun (Taylor, 1997) that receiver always feel respectful, grateful and obedience (Sri-Amnuay, 2012) like a children that obedient and showing respect to parents, and taking care of them (Methitham, 2009) or students feel to owe a debt of Bunkhun to their teacher (Methitham, 2009). This kind of gratitude is highly valued through the concept of Bunkhun (Wangkijchinda, 2011) that unpayable by someone who will forever be indebted (Adithipyangkul & Prasarnphanich, 2008). If the Bunkhun is well established it possibly through long-term relationships (Sri-Amnuay, 2012) and the one who begin a Bunkhun relationship are

generally required to continue (Taylor, 1997). Normally, receiver always seen as mercy and kindness person (Taylor, 1997) with usually do it without expectation of return (Komin & Scholar, 1990). In general situation, givers have more power and are ranked higher than receivers (Selaratana, 2009) but givers and receivers may feel more secure when they are together (Selaratana, 2009).

### BUNKHUN Aspects

#### Benefits of Bunkhun:

Normally, Bunkhun make the younger feel a moral obligation and enthusiasm to do work (Komin, 1991; Holmes & Tangtongtavy, 1997). Some scholar defines Bunkhun as concepts of Thai culture integrated in the Thai industrial democracy model (Joungtrakul, 2005). Tontisirin, et al., (1986) suggested that Bunkhun helped to explain the effectiveness and efficiency of successful completion of jobs and projects, which have been accomplished basically through good connections and social relation and it can be one factor of succeed as a manager in Thailand (Srisai 2011). The

most important values in Thai culture that effect workplace relationship (Ermongkonchai, 2008) that can be the factors influencing who will get promoted on their career opportunity (Selaratana, 2009) and may be affecting work assessment (Ermongkonchai, 2008). However, deeper understanding Bunkhun leads to a correct understanding of “Patron-Client” relationships (Taylor 1997) because it is strong impacted on the relationship between Thai employer and employee (Joungtrakul, 2005). In many workplaces, the subordinate then feels grateful to his superior for resolving difficult situation. The Bunkhun relationship starts from this point (Selaratana, 2009) and some employers claimed that to hire labour was to render ‘Bunkhun’ in the form of money income to employees (Joungtrakul, 2005) then leaders are repaid in the form of services and loyalty (Bunkhun) by the followers (Arttachariya, 1997). Bunkhun creates a part of social harmony order (Sri-Amnuay, 2012) and the effective way to receive a Thai’s cooperation (Sri-Amnuay, 2012). In Thailand, business commitment was an ongoing process

implicitly built through relationships and Bunkhun throughout the project (Sri-Amnuay, 2012) which reinforces the interdependence between members in a workplace or community (Boonchai&Beeton, 2015). Farmers in Thai Agricultural Co-operatives related to the managers base on Bunkhun (Chieochan, 2005) that establishing the obligation of loyalty (Sri-Amnuay, 2012). Bunkhun operates in all forms of relationships (Ermongkonchai, 2008) such as impacting significantly in an e-business when the actual user’s requirements may not be the same as their superiors’ (Corbitt et al., 2002). Many people use Bunkhun to influence or make it easier processes of access the information (Selaratana, 2009).

The role in Bunkhun relationship value, these roles required “great respect and obedience in order to return the Bunkhun” (Sri-Amnuay, 2012). Some used Bunkhun values to legitimate and force. Komin and Scholar (1990) comments that one may exploit this Bunkhun relationship to generate power or influence over the recipient of favours. Bunkhun obligation is especially

strong within the family and kinship circle, the younger generation is very much obligated by the Bunkhun rendered by the older generations (Arttachariya, 1997). Such as Bunkhun influence the propensity of managers in the Thai agricultural co-operative (Chieochan, 2005) that entail unequal relationships in either power or status between two groups (Selaratana, 2009). The “influence” exerted related to the extent of Bunkhun, they possess (or potentially possess) over the other members (Taylor, 1997), working with the Thai people, created gratitude is necessary in order to establish Bunkhun and a basic power connection. Bunkhun utilized by those with high power needs, by creating power cliques that spread their tentacles by saang Bunkhun (creating gratitude)(Srisai, 2011). Clientelism and Bunkhun relationships themselves not corrupt in nature rather it depends on the parties involved in the relationships and how they use power (Selaratana, 2009).

#### **Bunkhunin the dark side:**

Limitations in applying this Bunkhun concept as it may go beyond proper

practice (Joungtrakul, 2005), when a person had Bunkhun to another person or being a relative to an influential person and if that person asks him to do something he will follow without asking for any reason (Joungtrakul, 2005) because it very important and they will try to find every way to pay back at all costs (Joungtrakul, 2005). Sila-on (1999), Andrews and Chompusri (2001) noted that powerful networks form the crux of Thai commercial activities, supported by a set of social valued to express the dark side of the local business (Thapatiwong, 2011). Such as, the negative on appraisal employee performance, it can be occurs bias of human beings (Thapatiwong, 2011), bias may occur in regard to the sense of Bunkhun which would intrude on the performance appraisal or the fairness of policies (Thapatiwong, 2011). Patron-client relationships, possibly deter accountability mechanisms. Accountors may favour one person over another (Selaratana, 2009). Bunkhun effects is quite strong, while loyalty can sometimes be an obstacle to accountability (Selaratana, 2009), it may support corruption (Selaratana, 2009)

and difficult to be egalitarian because Bunkhun (Selaratana, 2009). Clientelism and Bunkhun relationships can be a cause of corruption (Selaratana, 2009).

The table below illustrates the summary of Bunkhun disadvantages that affect the business operation:

| Disadvantages                                                                                   |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Can help someone escaping from penalty, and which can support misbehavior towards the public |
| 2. Obstruct auditors from performing well                                                       |
| 3. Hinder the effective performance                                                             |
| 4. Can make cases take longer to sort out and can end up being unresolved                       |
| 5. Support fraud and corruption and may obstruct the scrutinizing process                       |
| 6. Cannot stand prejudice and will complain organization                                        |

| Disadvantages                                                                                                      |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 7. Affect peer rating by not giving honest feedback                                                                |
| 8. Strengthen inequality in society, such as those who feel indebted will be obedient and not express disagreement |
| 9. Lead to difficulty in putting forward a dissenting voice                                                        |
| 10. Binding effect which limits and constrains individuals to certain patterns of behavior                         |

### Essential issues for future studies of Bunkhun effect on business management

#### Issue 1: Refreshing Relationship Marketing by Bunkhun

Generally, relationship marketing is a strategy that emphasizes customer retention, satisfaction, and lifetime customer value. Relationship marketing can be defined as marketing to current customers and new customer

acquisition through sales and advertising (Ciotti, 2016). Differences of relationship marketing from other forms of marketing is in that it recognizes the long term value of customer relationships and extends Communication beyond intrusive advertising and sales promotional messages (Palmatier,

2008). Peppers and Rogers (1998) determined relationship marketing is a vogue that the companies should assert to do it in new and better ways and academics extol its merits. There are no company exclusively used the

The three ways to take the customer retention to the new heights or refreshing their relationships as (1) make the best brand impression, (2) deliver high quality touches and (3) bond the company with customer. Marketers attempts to maintain their customer relationships by launching the loyalty program, CRM and any sales promotion while every rival do the same things so if they want to increase the brand impression deeper binding the customer by Bunkhun is an appealing choice for Thai marketer. This fundamental cohesive force that binds Thais together (Arttachariya, 1997) is an ongoing binding of good reciprocal feelings and long lasting relationship(Corbitt et al., 2002) therefore if Thai marketers select this cultural tie, it should be the new strategy to impress their customer. To deliver high quality touches, the famous channel for present marketing

relationship marketing approach because some were merely utilizing the traditional marketing concept of 4Ps and others were blending a relationship and transactional marketing mix (Zineldin& Philipson, 2007).

approaches is electronic channel or online platform. Most customer prefer to receive exceptional content on a less frequent basis rather than disappointing brand cheerleaders, it lost nothing by concentrating on producing high-quality, every-other-day posts over subpar, everyday pieces so quality content won over quantity in every time (Jeff, 2018). While company ties customer to business network by Bunkhun relationship, they stay inequality connection (Sri-Amnuay, 2012). This kind of connection seems unfairness but it necessary and usefulness for a larger power distant society like Thailand(Hofstede, 1984). Delivering massive contents to customer may not productive connection in some societies but in Bunkhun relationship only quality contents should make the customer feels worthless in business network. However, evaluating the questions they ask all the time and then turn those

answers into content is the key concept for distribute high quality touches (Epstien, 2018). Finally, one of the best applicable properties of Bunkhun relationship is binding people together because receiver of Bunkhun will have the feeling of gratitude and indebtedness. This feeling runs very deep and will normally result in some form of reciprocity, especially in the form of loyalty (Taylor, 1997). Numerous scholars accepted the emotional connections influence more on customer decision therefore this cultural pre-disposition of Thai's to expect a strong tie of personal, emotional and obligatory relationship (Colignon et al., 2007) should be the crucial strategy to bond Thai customer with company.

## **Issues 2: HRM and Bunkhun relationship**

In this issue, Bunkhun is distinctly impacted the human resource management in two sides of considerations as the beneficial and dark side effect. Three interesting trends of human resource management in 2018 are employee experience, gig

economy and recruiting passive candidates incorporate in this article due to describe the current HR trend harmonize with cultural comprehension.

With the growing impacts of new generations and the increasing transparency catalyzed by the digitalization age, employees are expecting a more engaging and enjoyable work experience. Nowadays, leaders should start to focus on developing the "Employee Experience", an ecosystem that integrates three core dimensions: engagement, culture and performance management. This new focal point will drive leaders to examine their employee journey map and optimize it much as customer experience teams do for customer journeys. It will be an exciting time where HR will continuously experiment with technology in the market such as pulse feedback tools, employee wellness apps, modern communication and productivity tools that will help facilitate the understanding and development of the employee experience (Chee, 2017). HR's role is therefore being revisited and

reshaped to ensure that it works towards improving an employee's overall experience. It starts with the interactions at the interview stage and remains a focus area until the employee exits (Archana, 2018). Developing employee experiences are encouraged and obstructed by Bunkhun at the same time.

To maintaining employees are crucial experiences occur from many parts of the organization. Normally, Bunkhun are maintained on the basis of favor reciprocity and mutual support. Employees within Bunkhun always feel indebted with giver thus this feeling runs very deep and will normally result in some form of reciprocity, especially in the form of loyalty (Taylor 1997). Therefore, employees within Bunkhun tend to increase their career lifetime. Contradictory, Bunkhun may compel employees to resign job because the used of Bunkhun values to legitimate and force (Meissonier et al. 2013). Bias may occur in regard to the sense of Bunkhun which would intrude on the performance appraisal or the fairness policies (Thapatiwong, 2011), however

this strong impact on the relationship leads employer understand their employee more deeper (Joungtrakul, 2005) that experienced a direct and accurate assessment. One core dimension of an employee experience ecosystem is culture that illustrates workplace norms and method of working together. If companies apply Bunkhun to their management, it might be the best way in workforce management or be opposite.

The BBC exposes the 'Gig Economy' as "a labor market characterized by the prevalence of short-term contracts or freelance work, as opposed to permanent jobs". On-demand hiring promises lower costs, but it also creates more competition for talent where traditional workers' career paths are phased out and are now replaced with temporary jobs focused on skill. Talent sourcing practices need to build speed and agility in order to quickly identify work/projects in need of attention, source employees with the required skills, and staff project teams that can quickly perform the necessary task. Also, the decoupling of location from

productivity has been accelerating; research has shown that the volume of employees who have worked by telecommuting has risen to 44%, up from 39% in 2012. Having flexible work provisions will drive a firm's employer value proposition, expand the candidate talent pool and is a great way of retaining highly valued employees.

It seems like Bunkhun cannot related with Gig Economy but in reality manager also hire people that they familiar with or someone connected with Bunkhun. Unavoidably, collectivists societies are flavoured individuals belong to an "in-group" such as an extended family or clan from which they cannot detach themselves. This "in-group" protects its members and expects their loyalty in turn and Thailand is this kind of societies (Hofstede, 1984). Practically summarise that people within Bunkhun are gained more opportunities than talent workers for unprofessional career hiring but finally the suitable one in every aspects is more advantages.

Headhunting of passive candidates has always been part of the recruitment process but these days, it's much different from simply screening through resumes on a career website. The advent of social media has made getting in touch with candidates easier than ever before. Similarly, talent pools can now be identified simply by searching hashtags, sub-forums or other online communication methods. By engaging these types of candidates, either in groups or individually depending on the platform, recruiters can get a sense of what they're looking for and if they'd be willing to make a change in their careers. (Millet, 2017)

Bunkhun is the one factor that intervene employment process even active or passive candidates. Especially for passive candidates who not attempt to seeking new employment might be lost their opportunities if their recruiters remain within Bunkhun relationships. Generally, passive candidates are accepted for more qualified talent than active candidate, a lot of effort for hiring and bigger costs for employment consequently they get lesser chances

especially if the organisations experienced for Bunkhun obligation. Even online or offline talent pools, if the company compel with Bunkhun, they seem not important for recruitment process. These earlier suggestions seem like an unfair recruitment for people who not confine within Bunkhun relationship but if we look through their eyes that hiring someone you not know the background instead well known candidates from Bunkhun relationship, what is the better for your business?

## Conclusion

Bunkhun is Buddhist principles that related to a long-term orientation of social relationships (Meissonier et al., 2012), deeply rooted in all persons and are particularly powerful (Sri-Amnuay, 2012). This cultural pre-disposition of Thais affect every steps of people by not excepting the business practices. The article presents two aspects of Bunkhun effect even in social science and business management and two fields of business operations that related with Bunkhun. Most important benefit of Bunkhun is to regulate the

society such as social hierarchy, merit and demerit (Pongsapich, 1994) also it can be the basic principle of strong and smooth business operations. Spontaneously, Bunkhun relationships themselves are not corrupt (Selaratana, 2009) but improper using make this good thing to be an inappropriate manner to community. The study on how to consolidate cultural belief into business management is attracted multifold scholars and researchers for long time, great opportunities to understand various cultures from worldwide. Bunkhun relationships in business management orientation, the concept can be an applicable strategic approach to concrete stronger relationships between company and customer.

In future study suggestions, two selected fields of business management as marketing and human resource management are reflected an obvious illustration of relationship. Acquisition, retention and satisfaction with deeper comprehend the customer are still a recent marketing trend that everyone try todemolish a great wall of cultural

barrier. Understanding people into their mind is one key of personnelmanagement but insufficient condition for current market situation. Engagement, e-business and new economy system as Gig Economy are necessary elements of today's HR operations. Combination of unique culture and recent trends of operation may leads the organization avoid various risk of people factors. Deep into subconscious, Thai People are still belief in this over thousand year doctrine that form this country to be peacefulness as today. Consequently, even Thai or foreign business person, understanding and utilizing this concept to actual business practice might be the one best choice to achievement.

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