

# **The Thai Attitude Towards Japan : Heart felt Friendship or Skin-deep Relationships**

by

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Thailand and Japan have a long-standing relationship which dates back to the early Seventeenth Century. Both countries share certain cultural and institutional similarities and both have enjoyed political independence from Western colonial rule.

The two countries developed a closer relationship during the Second World War, a closeness which has in some ways been restored in recent years. Since the launching of Thailand's policy economic of import substitution in an effort to industrialization in the early 1960s, the Japanese role in Thailand has steadily been expanding. Japanese has more direct investment in Thailand than any other industrialized country. However, this very visible Japanese presence has also given way to friction; the trade imbalance and other "abnormal" practices were cited by many Thais, and some Thai scholars have written about a new form of Japanese imperialism. These feelings culminated in the anti-Japanese movement in the early 1970s. Nevertheless, as a result of great efforts by the Japanese government and various Japanese organizations, including Japanese firms in Thailand, the image of the Japanese in Thailand has improved considerably. Today many see the Japanese less as "economic animals" and more as representatives of a "Cooperative Japan".

## **II. THE "HEART-TO-HEART RELATIONSHIP"**

Following announcement of so called "Fukuda Doctrine" by the former Prime Minister of Japan, Fukuda Takeo, in Manila in 1978, many expected major changes in Thailand's relationship with Japan.

The Doctrine contained three basic ideas or principles. First, Japan would adhere to peace and never seek to become a military power. Second, by having a "heart-to-heart" dialogue with the other countries in Asia, Japan would endeavor to develop a bilateral relations based on mutual trust. Finally, Japan would contribute to the peace and prosperity of Southeast Asia as a whole.

Looking at the third point which seems most related to the economic relationship between Thailand and Japan, the facts are that a growing proportion of Thailand's total trade deficit is with Japan, that Japanese investment has increasingly come to dominate manufacturing in Thailand, and that Japanese economic cooperation to Thailand (including grant aid, technical cooperation and Japanese yen loans) is the largest injection made by an industrialized country into the Thai economy. As a result, Japanese influence is expanding simultaneously in many spheres besides the political, social and cultural life of the nation as well. The Japanese presence is increasingly felt. Accordingly, it is conceivable that the question of Thailand's multi-faceted dependence on Japan could be raised again, accompanied by another wave of anti-Japanese feeling among the Thai people.

So far, it cannot be said that the heart-to-heart relationship between Thailand and Japan is characterized by mutual trust. The problems which obstruct and retard the development of a balanced and healthy relationship between the two countries have not been solved. A heart-to-heart dialogue in trade negotiations is held every year without otherwise being fully satisfied, and the balance of trade continues to be in Japan's favour year after year. Problems in transferring technology and management techniques in Japanese-Thai Joint ventures are still being faced, although some signs of improvement can be seen. The low quality of cultural exchange is still a serious issue. Also, to some extent, memories of bitter times in the past still linger in the minds of some Thai people.

In the final analysis, the major variable may well be the determination of the Japanese to contribute to the prosperity of Thailand, or at least to some form of economic co-prosperity.

If this expectation is not realized, or if it is simply seen as no longer being a realistic expectation, the little "heart-to heart contact" which does exist will devolve into antagonism and cross-cultural misunderstandings.

### **III. THAI PERCEPTIONS OF JAPAN AFTER "HEART-TO-HEART CONTACT"**

Thai perceptions of Japan were very negative in 1975. According to the result of the survey conducted by Dr. Khiem Thiravidhya,<sup>1</sup> 78 percent of Thai intellectual leaders, 87.5 percent of Thai students and 45 percent of the general public felt that trade with Japan and Japanese investment in Thailand were characterized by economic imperialism on the part of the Japanese. Moreover, the majority of the Thai people also thought that Japan always took advantage of Thailand.

However, in the second attitude survey in 1977,<sup>2</sup> views of Japan seemed to be considerably improved. Only 37.5 percent of the general public and 68 percent of Thai intellectuals thought that Japanese trade and investment in Thailand could be described as economic imperialism.

According to Dr. Khien's second attitude survey in 1977, the majority of Thai people (41.6 percent of the general public and 63.3 percent of Thai intellectuals) still thought that Japan always took unfair advantage of Thailand. Whereas only 10.3 percent of the general public and 3.9 percent of intellectuals thought that Japan had been fair to Thailand, the majority of the Thai people also felt that Japanese aid to Thailand was motivated primarily by Japan's own interests (45.7 percent of the general public and 68 percent of intellectuals). Only about 25 percent of the Thai sample felt that the Japanese were motivated by a desire to work for mutual benefit.

Although certain attitudes may have been unfairly and inaccurately associated with many Japanese, what counts is the impression that the Thai people have in their minds, for here we are not talking about the right or wrongs of the relationship, but about the way the relationship is perceived. The results, of the survey serve as a primitive barometer to the gauge the mood, the feelings and the attitudes of the general public about Japan and about the Thai-Japan relationship.

In order to assess accurately the quality of Thailand's relations with Japan the mutual images of Japanese and Thais should be surveyed in depth. In particular, attention should be paid to the impressions of Thais who work with the Japanese and who have a close relationship with Japanese people.

According to the results of a 1982 survey by the author on the attitude of 306 Thai employees working in 53 Thai-Japanese joint ventures in manufacturing,<sup>3</sup> the relationship between Japanese and Thai employees is relatively satisfactory. Four percent of the Thai employees indicated that they had very good relations with Japanese experts in their companies; 33 percent, good relations; 45 percent, normal relations. Only 6 percent of the Thai employees replied that they had bad relations.

If we look in detail at the human relationships between the Japanese experts and the Thai employees, we can perhaps uncover some factors accounting for the improved relations between the peoples of the two countries. Some tentative findings are given. On personal relations, a relatively high percentage of the Thai employees favour the present situation: 26 percent of the Thai employees indicated that they have a good personal relationships with the Japanese in their company; only one percent replied that they had a bad relationship. With regard to relations at work, the percentage of employees who indicated that they had a good relationship was 46 percent while only 2 percent indicated that they had a bad relationship.

On reliability, however, the percentage indicating a bad relationship jumped to 10 percent. In terms of cooperation, 32 percent of the Thai employees said that they enjoyed good cooperative relation with their Japanese counterparts while 10 percent said they had uncooperative relations. It is interesting to note here that 21 percent of the Thai foreman had a negative view of Their relations in this regard.

Overall, we can say that some Thai employees in the joint ventures still retain a negative view of their relations with Japanese experts. The problem does not appear to be so serious at this stage but there is still room for improving the relations.

The views of Thai employees on steps the Japanese staff could take to improve their ability to relate to their Thai employees are summarized in Table 2.

#### IV. THE "SKIN-TO-SKIN RELATIONSHIP"

It is well known that Thailand, especially Bangkok, can also provide the foreigner with a very pleasurable experience; after all, the "Siamese smile" is still an important symbol. Bangkok is known as a haven for men because of its charming Thai ladies who are available at many places and at relatively low prices. Thus, among the tourists who visit Thailand are some sex-oriented tourists who have contributed to the growth of "skin-to-skin relations" since the mid-1970's.

At the same time, the number of Japanese who reside in Thailand has increased to over ten thousand (most of whom are in Bangkok), and Japanese restaurants, Japanese style night clubs and *Karaoke* bars have become increasingly common. Since Thailand consists of a mixed culture (including Chinese, Indian and the Thais' original cultures), the Thai people easily accept foreign cultures; it is not surprising, then, that Japanese culture too is easily accepted as Japan's economic influence increases and the physical presence of Japanese residents is felt. Japanese food is now gaining popularity among the Thai middle and upper classes. Even *sashimi* (raw fish), which is not really suitable for a hot country like Thailand because it spoils easily and which has never become a traditional dish in Thailand, is available in nearly all big Thai restaurants. Thai people also frequent the two dozen or so Japanese restaurants in Bangkok. Finally, Thailand's trade deficit with Japan is maintained in part by the increasing volume of *Wasabi* being imported for the eating of *Sashimi*. At the same time, it should be noted that the spread of Japanese culture is not and cannot be even across the Thai population: the cost of Japanese food is relatively high, one dish costing an amount equal to the minimum wage per day for the average Thai worker (e.g., 64 baht).

Thaniya Lane (a business area in Bangkok) is famous among Thai people as the centre of Japanese business activity in Thailand. It is also known as a night town for Japanese, and we can say that it is a center of other Japanese activities at night because

there are now about 30 Japanese-style clubs and *karaoke* bars in that area. Thus, both during the day time and at night, the parking lots in this area are full of big Japanese cars with their drivers in waiting. This phenomenon leads to the Thai perception that the Japanese people are all very rich because the price of having such a large cars in Thailand is equal to that of an average house in which a Thai could live. The expense just for such drinking at one of these establishments for just one evening is easily equal to half of a month's salary for the average Thai worker.

Drinking and entertainment establishments for the Japanese have also had a big impact on Thailand's economic and social development by helping to boost the "underground economy". This business helps Thailand to correct the trade imbalance with Japan in some small way; it also serves to effect a redistribution of income from the relatively rich Japanese to the relatively poor Thais. Money transactions at night are very quick, and large amounts of money are involved. This kind of business creates employment for about 3,000 persons. Thai girls who working only a relatively few hours at night can get much more than they can by working in the day time in a manufacturing firm. There are also many students from poor families who work as part-timers in order to support their families and to cover the costs of their own education. They do not like to work in these kinds of jobs, but they do it as a way of overcoming poverty and of coming to grips with the failure of Thailand's socio-economic development. The evening industry for the Japanese continues to grow at a rapid pace. There is also a Japanese night town in the Sukumvit Road area in Bangkok.

The demonstration effects of Japanese-style night clubs can seen in the night life for Thais as well. There are now more Japanese-style night clubs for the Thai people. In this regard, the influence of Japanese songs might be cited. In Japanese *karaoke* bars they are sung both by Japanese men and by Thai girls, and such bars are now appearing throughout Thailand. The Thai versions of many Japanese songs are popular and have become top hits although many Thais do not know the Japanese language. In 1982 there were about twenty Japanese songs which had Thai versions broadcasts on the local radio stations. It thus seems that the Thai people are quite ready to absorb a certain amount of Japanese culture. Japanese cartoons, movies and fashions are also popular in Thailand for these reasons and because of the low quality of many Thai products.

Nevertheless, the Japanese night towns representative the state of Thai-Japanese "skin-to skin relations" at the present time. Many Japanese men come to drink and enjoy night life in Bangkok for various reasons: individual curiosity and enjoyment, the need to release tensions after a hard day's work, the obligation to entertain business associates or friends, a desire to practice the Thai language, the hope of having a closer relationship with their Thai girl friend,

The exact purpose of their visit to this part of Thailand is not important in this paper. However, in one way or another they contribute to the promotion of Thai-Japanese skin trade and we can thus refer to the skin-to-skin relations between the two societies both in a real sense and in the cynical sense of *hiniku*. In the real sense, Japanese men have been in close touch with Thai girls, and have a good relationship with many Thai people. In the cynical sense, the relationship is developed with only short-term goals in mind. It is a superficial relationship because the money involved is an important factor for this kind of relationship. Japanese men have a good relationship with Thai girls and seem to be very polite and generous from the standpoint of the Thai girls. But in the day time and from the view of Thai people as a whole, the relationship is seen quite differently. "Heart-to heart contact and relations" between Thais and Japanese which are based on mutual understanding are still a dream for many involved in and concerned with relations between the two countries. Further efforts from both sides are needed.

From This perspective, then, it may be useful to know the attitude of the Thai girls who have the closest relations with Japanese men. Their opinions may be the best complement to the results of earlier attitude surveys on Thai-Japanese relations and on Japanese people from the views of Thai people, and may be shown the other aspects of the Japanese who populate Bangkok at night. To this end, the author surveyed 109 Thai girls working in twelve Japanese-style night clubs and *karaoke* bars in the area of Thaniya lane and Sukumvit Road which is the second Japanese night town in Bangkok in March and April 1983. Some of the results are summerlized in Table 3.

The majority of the girls (44 percent) thought that Japanese are honest in the same degree as other foreigners; 27 percent thought that the Japanese are more honest than other foreigners. Compared with Thai people, the Japanese were seen as being more generous and polite by 41 percent of the girls; 44 percent thought they were the same as Thais in that regard. Although 44 percent of the girls felt the Japanese were reliable and trustworthy, 37 percent said they were not sure.

Still, 32 percent of the Thai girls answered that the Japanese people look down on the Thai people, whereas only 26 percent felt that was not the case and 31 percent were not sure. Thirty percent of the respondents believed that Japanese men took advantage of Japanese women to a certain extent, whereas 36 percent did not think like that.

These results are not surprising because Japanese men tend to be very generous and polite, especially those who are older or who have newly come to Thailand or who are staying for only a short time as tourists.

For the most part, the girls surveyed admired Japanese woman as a good follower in their relationship with their husband; their reputation as being good housewives was also mentioned by some of the respondents.

The Japanese were also highly praised as being solemn and calm by 27 percent and as having a sense of humour by 22 percent. Sixteen percent thought that the Japanese got angry easily; most of that 16 percent also felt that the Japanese clam down rather quickly after getting angry. A few felt that some Japanese are rather shy and an equally small number felt they were arrogant.

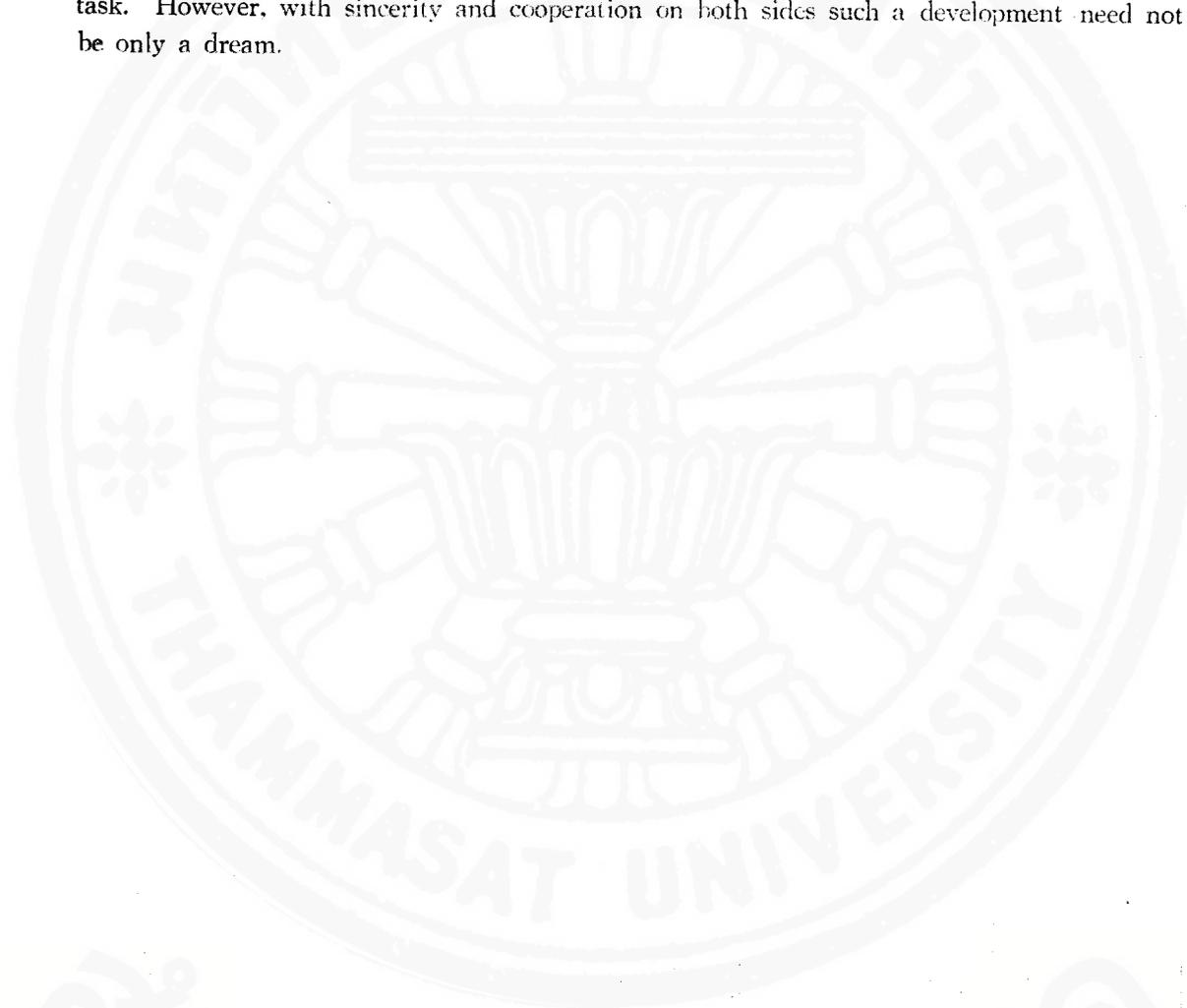
Nevertheless, the majority of the Thai girls (63 percent) thought that Japanese people are economically minded, and 45 percent felt that Japanese economic activities are dominating Thailand's economy. Here it should be noted that most of the Japanese style clubs and *karaoke* bars are owned by Japanese or are jointly owned by Thais and Japanese. This situation is common in other related businesses as well.

The results of the survey suggests that Thai impressions of Japan and the Japanese are relatively better than might have been expected. Most of the Thai girls have found Japanese men to be personally acceptable and to be very generous. On the other hand, most Japanese who come to Thailand belong to the middle income class in Japan and cannot enjoy a great deal of luxury at home; when they come to Thailand, however, they immediately join a much higher income class and are able to have a fairly high standard of living with a big house or mansion, maid service, and a big car with a driver. They enjoy playing golf every weekend, eating relatively cheap Japanese and Thai food, and seeing the night life. However, since they are living at a level on par with the upper class in Thailand, they tend to have an understanding of only one part of Thailand. At the same time, the small group of Thais who have "money" interests with the Japanese receive some benefit from having relationship with the Japanese; as part of that relationship they are willing to adopt various Japanese customs and/or practices and, as might be expected, are less sensitive to the Japanese "over-presence" in Thailand.

## V. CONCLUSIONS

The point to be made is that Japanese people are very rich from the viewpoint of the ordinary Thai people. Accordingly, in their eyes the Japanese should also have a rich mind and good morals as well. However, some Japanese are seen as following too closely the Japanese proverb which relates how, one is not known in a foreign country and is free to behave as he or she wishes without and reservation ("*tabi no haji wa kakisute*"). Part of adapting to a new cultural environment is the willingness to step back from such trite ethnocentric "truisms" and to be more sensitive to the feelings of the local population.

In conclusion, many Thais are fond of the Japanese, they see the Japanese people as good friends and Japan as a model for development. Thus, their expectations towards Japan and the Japanese are considerable. The real "heart-to-heart relationship" must still be developed and a much deeper level of mutual understanding is required if relation between the two countries are to be improved. Excessive concern with short-term and with narrowly defined self-interest will serve to retard the development of mutual trust between the two peoples. The development of a healthy relationship focused on long-term concerns for the mutual benefit, interest and prosperity of all the people in both countries is not an easy task. However, with sincerity and cooperation on both sides such a development need not be only a dream.



สำนักหอสมุด

Table 1  
The Percentage Distribution of Thai Views on Human Relations between Japanese Experts and Thai Employees

	Managerial Staff		Section or Department Head		Engineers		Foremen		Group Leaders		Workers		Total	
	%		%		%		%		%		%		%	
<b>A. The Assessment of Personal Relations</b>														
Very good	6	7	2	2	2	2	3	2	2	3	2	2	4	4
Good	32	32	31	21	31	21	13	14	13	13	14	14	26	26
Normal	46	57	38	29	38	29	61	57	61	61	57	57	49	49
Bad	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	3	-	-	3	3	1	1
No relation	6	4	16	13	16	13	13	11	13	13	11	11	9	9
No answer	8	-	13	35	13	35	10	13	10	10	13	13	11	11
<b>B. The Assessment of Relations at Work</b>														
Very good	8	5	4	6	4	6	-	-	-	-	-	-	4	4
Good	52	53	47	40	47	40	35	35	35	35	35	35	46	46
Normal	27	42	32	48	32	48	58	38	58	58	38	38	40	40
Bad	4	2	4	-	4	-	-	5	-	-	5	5	2	2
No answer	9	-	13	6	13	6	7	22	7	7	22	22	8	8
<b>C. The Assessment of the Extent to which Japanese experts are trustworthy</b>														
Very much so	8	1	5	8	5	8	-	-	-	-	-	-	4	4
Above average	17	41	31	6	31	6	29	16	29	29	16	16	26	26
About average	54	44	44	46	44	46	58	51	58	58	51	51	48	48
Below average	15	10	7	15	7	15	3	11	3	3	11	11	10	10
No answer	6	4	13	25	13	25	10	22	10	10	22	22	12	12
<b>D. An Assessment of the Extent to which Japanese experts are co-operative</b>														
Very much so	6	4	2	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	3	3
Above average	23	38	40	23	40	23	42	27	42	42	27	27	32	32
About average	56	45	33	44	33	44	39	46	39	39	46	46	44	44
Below average	9	5	9	21	9	21	13	8	13	13	8	8	10	10
No answer	6	8	16	2	16	2	6	19	6	6	19	19	11	11
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
N	52	93	45	48	45	48	31	37	31	31	37	37	306	306

**Table 2**  
**Suggestions on How Japanese Staff can Improve Their Image in Thailand :**  
**Percentage Responses to Multiple Answers**

	Managerial Staff	Section or Department Heads	Engineers	Foremen	Group Leaders	Workers	Total
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
1. Learn Thai Culture and adjust themselves to Thai customs	23	14	16	38	13	16	20
2. Respect the capabilities of Thai people	29	19	20	19	16	16	20
3. Show sincerity in their relations with Thais	25	13	20	21	16	5	17
4. Put more effort into transferring technology to Thais	19	15	27	13	13	5	16
5. Study the Thais language	15	16	9	6	13	8	12
6. Be more polite and have better manners	6	11	4	17	23	8	11
7. Be less patriotic	4	3	4	13	13	3	6
8. Pay more attention to Thai feelings and needs	10	3	9	4	3	8	6
9. Listen to the Thai point of view	8	3	7	10	3	—	5
10. Be less selfcentred	4	2	11	8	3	5	4
11. Improve the welfare and salary of Thai employees	2	2	13	—	13	—	4
12. Treat the Thai people less like machines	8	—	4	8	3	—	4
N	52	93	45	48	31	37	306

Table 3

1. Do you think Japanese are honest compared with other peoples ?	
1. more honest	27.52
2. more fraudulent (cheating)	7.34
3. about the same as others	44.04
4. don't know	21.10
2. Do you think Japanese are polite and generous compared with Thai people ?	
1. more generous and polite	41.28
2. worse than Thais	9.17
3. the same as Thais	44.04
4. don't know	5.50
3. Do you think Japanese are trustworthy ?	
1. yes	44.04
2. no	9.17
3. not sure	37.61
4. don't know	9.17
4. Do you think Japanese look down on Thais ?	
1. no, they don't look down	26.61
2. yes, they do look down	32.11
3. not sure	31.19
4. don't know	11.01
5. Do you think Japanese men always take advantage of Japanese women ?	
1. yes	30.28
2. no	36.70
3. not sure	22.94
5. don't know	11.01
6. Which of the following best describes Japanese women? (answer more than one)	
1. polite	18.94
2. intelligent and self-reliance	7.49
3. managing a good house	22.47
4. high education and modern	3.96
5. diligent and patient	18.06
6. a follower to her husband	29.08

7. What do you think about Japanese people's emotional composition? (answer more than one)
- |   |       |
|---|-------|
| 1. get angry easily                         | 16.87 |
| 2. get angrily easily but quickly calm down | 14.46 |
| 3. moderate                                 | 13.26 |
| 4. solemn                                   | 27.71 |
| 5. humourous                                | 22.89 |
| 6. don't know                               | 4.22  |
8. Which of the following best describes the manner of the Japanese people? (answer more than one)
- |                      |       |
|----------------------|-------|
| 1. arrogant          | 10.98 |
| 2. solemn            | 17.34 |
| 3. calm              | 16.18 |
| 4. polite and humble | 29.48 |
| 5. rather shy        | 15.61 |
| 6. don't know        | 10.40 |
9. Do you think Japanese people are economical ?
- |                             |       |
|-----------------------------|-------|
| 1. yes, they are thrifty    | 63.30 |
| 2. no, they spend on luxury | 16.51 |
| 3. don't know               | 18.35 |