

THE ANATOMY OF THAI FACE

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Abstract

This article, based upon qualitative ethnographic research from the perspective of social anthropology, clarifies the meanings of five abstract social constructs in Thai society: nata, kiat, saksi, chuesiang, and barami. The author proposes that these five words form the “anatomy” of Thai “face.” The central argument is that although these words adhere together in the minds of Thai people, data from field research reveal that they are distinct, though not mutually exclusive, in meaning. The author offers a visual model that demonstrates the dynamic relationship shared by these five constructs.

Introduction

The psychosocial phenomenon of face is embodied as a pervasive, dominant honor system in many East Asian and Southeast Asian societies. However, the store of cultural knowledge about Thai face is tacit. Its dimensions, rules of play, and effects upon daily living lay almost entirely unexamined.²

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² One could present a reasonable argument that “Thai face” is a fabricated and mythical notion, similar to such sweeping categories as “Chinese face” or “American face.” Most countries are ethnically diverse, and face is so molded by context, by localized expressions of cultural values, that to speak about face on the macro, national level is of limited value and

While many scholars now are researching face in China, Japan, and Korea, there is little research or writing coming from Southeast Asia. Since 1975 just two Thai scholars have written directly on the subject, and their claims are not linked to data from ethnographic research (Smuckarn 1975, Boonmi 1999). Suntaree Komin, in her research on the psychology of the Thai people, briefly cites face while describing “ego orientation” as the first of nine Thai value clusters (Komin 1990: 133). Three scholars have analyzed the Thai language for clues about face (Deephuenton 1992, Bilmes 2001, Ukosakul 2003). Christopher L. Flanders offers the first and only piece of *research-driven* writing on the meaning of Thai face from the perspective of social anthropology (Flanders 2005).

Thai face can seem as ethereal as thick fog shrouding an unfamiliar mountain path. You can see it right there before your eyes, but to explore its properties can be disorienting. The starting point for such a quest is not altogether clear. The Thai do not refer to this psychosocial phenomenon with the simple word “face.”³ To enter the dialogue about face, one must ask about *kan mi na mi ta*, or what I will refer to as ‘having face-eyes.’ Every competent Thai social actor behaves like he or she has face. Each can lose face or gain face. In fact, each staunchly defends and maintains

can cloud our understanding. I find this term useful, however, in referring to dominant expressions of face in Thailand—those demonstrated in national and local power structures and projected by the national media.

³ I was often asked by Thai friends, “What is your topic?” When I responded, “I am studying about face,” they were entirely confused. To dangle the term all by itself always conjured up its concrete connotation—the human face.

his or her possession of face.⁴ Yet only some Thai people 'have face-eyes.' I contend that, although face behavior is pronounced and highly visible among those who 'have face-eyes,' the notion of Thai face is multivalent—broader and deeper than the meaning of face-eyes. My research demonstrates this.

Methodology

Using the central Thai language, I conducted qualitative research in Bangkok, Pathumthani, Khon Kaen, Nakhon Phanom, and Chiangmai provinces over the course of two months in 2005, employing participant observation, unstructured interviews, eight focus groups, and twenty-one long interviews. My fifty-eight pages of field notes documented insights from observation and casual conversation.

The sixty-four informants were from diverse levels of society.⁵ The youngest was nineteen years old, and the oldest seventy-three. The median age was thirty-seven, and the average age thirty-nine. The sample was 60.9% male and 39.1% female. In terms of religion, 59.4% were Buddhist, 39.1% Christian, and 1.5% claimed no religion. Informants resided in a total of seven provinces, but they were originally from a total of twenty-three different provinces, approximately thirty percent of all provinces in the nation.

⁴ Thirayuth Boonmi alleges that Thais in general "believe the maintenance of their *nata* 'face-eyes' to be the most important matter in life" (Boonmi 1999: 275).

⁵ Because I was born and raised in Thailand, I was able to access a "purposeful" sample (Kreuger and Casey 2000: 204) of informants through networking with many friends and contacts.

The long interviews lasted an average of approximately 140 minutes and the focus groups 105 minutes. My questions probed the characteristics of those who possess *nata*, *kiat*, *saksi*, *chuesiang*, and *barami* in Thai society, along with the benefits awarded to a given social actor who may gain one of these forms of social capital.⁶ I also pursued an understanding of what happens to each possession in the case of face gain (*dai na*), face loss (*sia na*), and face redemption (*ku na*), as well as how a change in the possession of one construct might impact each of the other possessions.

I compiled a total of over fifty-six hours of digital recordings of interviews, which I analyzed over the course of 300 hours by listening to recordings and typing 242 pages of single-spaced notes containing quotes, dynamic equivalency translations, and personal insights.

Summary of significant data

Thirty years ago a Thai academic wrote that "the face of Thai people is of grave importance" (Smuckarn 1975: 505). I know of no scholar who would argue with him on that point. But what exactly is the composition of this precious abstract notion? What are its dimensions from within the Thai worldview?

I propose that to understand Thai face one must be familiar with five abstract words: *nata*, *kiat*, *chuesiang*, *saksi*, and *barami*. It is my experience that if you engage a

⁶ Each of these constructs is abstract and carries "cultural grammar" not found in English-speaking societies. For most of this article, therefore, I will not attempt to isolate English equivalents of each term, but will use *transliterations*. I prefer to let the meanings of each term rise from the data.

Thai person on the subject of how people maintain face, lose face, redeem face, and gain face, he is likely to use every one of the above five words within a span of fifteen minutes. When asked to pull the meaning of these words apart, however, virtually every one of my informants responded with comments like, “They go together. They are mixed together. They cannot be separated.” Yet these very same people, when asked if having *nata* is the same as having *saksi* would say, “No, there is a difference.” Or if I asked if having *kiat* is the same as having *chuesiang*, they would answer “no.” In the course of my interviews, I had just two instances when, after pressing an informant for clarity, he or she continued to maintain that a given pair of words had identical meanings. I argue confidently in this article that although these words adhere together in the minds of Thai people, they are distinct in meaning.

One would not conclude this, however, after reading the most current government dictionary. For the word *kiat*, the first meaning given is *chuesiang* (The Royal Institute 2542 B.E. 2003: 147). Predictably, the first meaning given for *chuesiang* is *kiattiyot*, a derivative of the word *kiat*, meaning, “honor by virtue of one’s position of status or one’s class in society” (The Royal Institute 2542 B.E. 2003: 147, 367). In defining the content of the connotation of “face” relevant to this paper, the dictionary says it means *kiat* and *saksi* (The Royal Institute 2542 B.E. 2003: 1245). For the word *saksi*, the meaning given is *kiatisak*, another derivative of *kiat* meaning “honor according to the status of each person” (The Royal Institute 2542 B.E. 2003: 147, 1094). The only word that is not semantically tangled, though still related, is the word *barami*, which is defined as

“accumulated goodness” (The Royal Institute 2542 B.E. 2003: 625).

NATA: The appearance of being honorable

What does it mean to have face-eyes? I gathered data in answer to this question by asking informants about: 1) whether or not as a young person they desired to have face-eyes (and why); 2) who in society has face-eyes (and why); 3) the key characteristics of people with face-eyes; and 4) the benefits of having face-eyes in Thai society.

A desirable possession

Seventy-three percent of respondents reported that as a youth they desired to have face-eyes, often mentioning the desire to be acceptable, respected, liked, and comfortable. The commonly repeated benefits were that: others accept you, others respect you, life becomes more convenient, life becomes more comfortable, others approve of you, you get special treatment, you get frequent gifts and favors, it is like having good credit, others cooperate with you, it gives you power over others, and you gain “connections.” I also asked, “True or false? Most Thai people desire to gain face.” Four out of five respondents said the statement was “true.”⁷

Those who possess *Nata*

In identifying people who ‘have face-eyes,’ informants shared an instinct to pick those who are famous: the prime minister,

⁷ Their answers were remarkable because the phrase “to want to gain face” (*yak dai na*) has a widespread negative connotation for most Thai people.

privy councillors, ministers of the cabinet, senators, members of parliament, the wealthy, movie stars, well-known singers, the “hi-so,”⁸ and sports stars.⁹

I suspected that the majority of people with face-eyes in society probably are not famous, so I asked, “True or false? Every society and every village in Thailand has people with face-eyes.” Ninety-five percent of respondents answered, “True,” citing the following examples: the village headman, the district officer, the governor, leaders in the community, successful business people, the supreme patriarch, abbots, priests, those who truly benefit society, doctors, teachers, soldiers, and policemen. Their answers suggest that having face-eyes is not so rare or unattainable as it may initially seem.

Characteristics of a person with *Nata*

Informants identified the following descriptions of “people with face-eyes,” listed in descending order of the number of informants who mentioned each characteristic: possessing wealth (55), being accepted by society (42), holding a position of authority (37), being respected (33), assisting society (23), having *chuesiang* (22), being known by others (21), being virtuous (20), being approved by others (19), having education (19),

being remarkably skilled or talented (18), being influential (17), being powerful (14), being successful (14), being lovable (12), having *barami* (11), having *kiat* (11), being popular (11), being credible or trusted (9), and having *saksi* (2).

What it means to possess *Nata*

The most prevalent connotation of this phrase in contemporary Thai society, by far, is that the possessor has money. It is remarkable that every single personal interviewee and four out of five focus group members mentioned this trait. There is good reason to suspect that today most Thai people assume that people with face-eyes are people with money.

This phrase is the most common way to say that a person “fits” in Thai society, that he has value that others must take into account. When one possesses face-eyes one wins acceptance from society, garnishes respect, and draws the approval of others. To possess face-eyes is to possess formidable social capital.

Informants commonly attributed this phrase to those who have official positions in society, those who have power to make decisions that affect others—especially those who serve society by means of some formal appointment or election.

There is reason to hypothesize that the phrase “face-eyes” is closer in meaning to *chuesiang* (number six in the progression above) than it is to *kiat*, *saksi*, or *barami*.

Summary of *Nata*

“To possess face-eyes” carries the most comprehensive meaning of all the constructs I am addressing in this article. The above list of characteristics is much

⁸ This term, taken from the English words “high society,” is used often in the Thai media to describe the extraordinarily wealthy who keep a high profile and spend money frivolously.

⁹ I am confident that the only reason His Majesty the King of Thailand and members of the royal family were not mentioned first is because it is a foregone conclusion that they have more face-eyes than anyone else in Thailand.

longer, more delineated, and contains far more variability in shades of meaning than the lists for the other four words.¹⁰ This appears to be the “umbrella phrase” for Thai speech about human worth. Often society awards this appellation based upon the *appearance* of a person. It confers that the person so judged is worthy of acceptance, respect, and special favors. It is often used to describe someone who possesses one or more of the other parts of the anatomy of face.

KIAT: Genuine respect and approval

Informants identified the following characteristics of people with *kiat*, listed here in descending order of the number of informants who mentioned each characteristic: being respected or listened to (18), feeling pride in oneself (15), being virtuous and doing good (14), having positional authority (12), being praised by others (9), sacrificially serving society (9), being competent or successful (9), being accepted by society (9), being influential (6), having status (3), having *saksi* (2), having *nata* (2), having *chuesiang* (2), having *barami* (1), having wealth (1), and having knowledge (1).

What it means to possess *Kiat*

True *kiat* commands genuine respect and approval. It conveys an aura of legitimacy. One informant called it “approval that really has value,” asserting that those with *kiat* have a broader acceptance than those with simple *nata*. *Kiat* is a lifter. It says to others, “This person truly deserves to be shown respect and listened to.” *Kiat* raises

certain people above others, and those people can be seen from a greater distance away. Still, this attribute is not a matter of breadth or girth; it is a matter of *height*. Awards, citations, certificates, prizes, promotions and trophies often serve to elevate a person. To do so is to award *kiat*. Only sometimes, however, will society recognize character and actions reflecting *kiat*; sometimes *kiat* goes unheralded.

According to the responses of many informants, there seems to be a strong correlation between *kiat* and being virtuous (*pen khon di mi khunnatham*).¹¹ One informant said, in speaking of virtue, “This is true *kiat*.” Another claimed that without virtue a person does not possess *kiat*—the two are attached. Possessing *kiat*, therefore, is something more than possessing power. It is more than wielding influence because of one’s position or wealth. It is more than being excellent, skilled, or gifted in a special way. It is more than being well known or famous. To qualify as truly possessing *kiat*, according to many informants, one must be a virtuous person.

Kiat often has a connotation of possessing rank or a position of authority, signified by a title or a prefix to one’s name. Members of the military and the police often feel this sense of *kiat*. Certain derivatives of this word carry the connotation of difference in status or rank: *kiattiyot* and *kiattisak*. One informant said that Thailand is like a triangle with His Majesty the King at the top, and it is the desire of most

¹⁰ However, I am not saying that it is the most abstract of the five words. That honor goes to “*saksi*.”

¹¹ Many informants claimed that when a person with *kiat* commits a major violation of moral standards, he instantly loses his *kiat*. This harkens back to the alleged moral bedrock of this construct—virtue.

Thai to raise their level of *kiat* to be as close to the King as possible. Another informant reported that, perhaps as a carryover from the era of absolute monarchy, Thai people still view positional leaders as having *kiat* because they are visible representatives of the King, serving His Majesty in helping the citizens of the country. Several informants cited the *ongkhamontri*, or members of the king's privy council, as having tremendous, uncontested *kiat*, because they are people whom the King has inspected and declared to have "made the grade."

Informants claimed that *kiat* has its counterfeits. Those with true *kiat* win genuine, spontaneous respect from others because they consistently assist others with no ulterior motives. However, there is a false *kiat*. Society sometimes awards *kiat* to a person who does not possess the quality inwardly. Informants commonly asserted that if someone holds a position of *kiat* yet is dishonorable in the way he treats others, or if he uses his position for selfish and dishonest gain, then he does not possess true *kiat*.

Whether a person has face due to *nata* or *kiat* he is likely to be treated as honorable by other members of society. But it is possible to have *kiat* without face-eyes (to be highly respected, but to live a kind, simple and unassuming life), or conversely, to have face-eyes without *kiat* (to possess social capital but to lack the genuine approval of others). "I think people confuse face and *kiat* and speak of them as the same thing," mused one informant.

Kiat, therefore, is both something society bestows and something within. One informant claimed that every person has

kiat, but each demonstrates it to differing degrees. Also, it is possible to possess *kiat* inwardly, yet lack the proper affirmation of society.

It is advisable, then, to separate the words *kiat* and *kiattiyot*. Data suggest that *kiat* is much more widespread than *kiattiyot*. *Kiat* is the quality of being truly honorable, regardless of awards or titles. *Kiattiyot* has to do with rank and position. It is an echo of response that society sometimes gives to certain individuals—some deserving, some not so deserving.

Sometimes *kiat* that is great in height has a rather narrow base. There are circles of society within which a given title, award, certificate, or ability holds deep meaning and renders influential power. Yet someone right next door who is outside of that circle or in-group may be entirely unimpressed. An informant argued that having face-eyes often "cuts a broader swath" of societal recognition than having *kiat* does. However, to possess *kiat* or *kiattiyot* has more substance than simple, broad recognition.¹²

Summary of *Kiat*

Kiat is that quality in human beings that commends them to others as worthy of genuine acceptance and respect. It is founded upon virtue, but it has many counterfeits. It brings its possessor a sense of legitimacy and contentment.

¹² It is both valid and helpful to consider that the dimension of *kiat* connotes quality, and the dimension of broad recognition connotes quantity or extensiveness. To have either is to have face-eyes, and both lend significant social capital to the one who possesses them. If one puts the two together, however, one has an extraordinarily potent combination.

CHUESIANG: “How big is your stage?”

What does it mean to have *chuesiang*? The most common connotation is being known or broadly recognized by others. The word *chue* means, “a word that has been designated [for use] in calling a person,” and *siang* carries the meaning, “something received by the ears” (The Royal Institute 2542 B.E. 2003: 367). The etymology suggests that if someone has *chuesiang* his name has reached the ears of others. One informant said, “*chuesiang* is about acceptance,” and described it as “a fragrance that drifts a long distance.”

However, when I first began interviewing I found that if I asked, “What are the characteristics of a person with *chuesiang*?” I often heard a question in return: “What kind of *chuesiang*? You know, don’t you, there is both bad *chuesiang* (*chuesiang mai di*) and good *chuesiang* (*chuesiang di*). Which do you want me to talk about?” In other words, informants found it difficult to elaborate on this word without giving it a moral rooting. Since each of the other constructs I was researching—*nata*, *kiat*, *saksi*, and *barami*—had positive connotations, I decided to ask my informants about *chuesiang di*.¹³

¹³ At that moment I was not aware that I was making a classical researcher’s mistake: mixing two variables so as to make the analysis of data extremely tenuous. I wish I had exercised the wisdom to ask two questions: 1) What does the word *chuesiang* mean? 2) What are the characteristics of someone with *chuesiang di*? Had I done so, I would have been able to distill their distinct meanings.

Characteristics of a person with *Chuesiang Di*

I submit that the following data contains moral content that is extraneous to the pristine meaning of *chuesiang*. What the reader sees below reflects more than just the dimension of “being known by others.” To state it more clearly, I am confident that my data supports the following statement: “*Kiat* plus *chuesiang* equals *chuesiang di*. In other words, I believe that the data below lies in the impressive shadow of *kiat*.

Informants identified the following characteristics of people with *chuesiang di*. Once again, I list these in descending order of the number of respondents who mentioned each: having the acceptance or confidence of society (20), having virtue expressed through doing good for society (19), being known by others (12), feeling pride in oneself (8), being a good example (7), being capable, competent, or successful (6), being respected (6), having the cooperation of others (5), being lovable (3), being credible (2), and having *barami* (1).

What it means to possess *Chuesiang Di*

The word has a strong connotation of acceptance (*pen thi yom rap*). For example, when a person with *chuesiang di* meets others, they show acceptance toward him. They have confidence in him and are willing to interact and cooperate with him. He is known and accepted by others (numbers one and three in the list above).

Chuesiang di can have a high correlation with virtue. *Chuesiang*—wide recogni-

tion—can be good or bad, but the person with *chuesiang di* must show evidence of having strong moral values. He must do good works on behalf of society.

However, not all *chuesiang di* is rooted in *kiat*. I must expose the trickiness of this term. The word “good” can have two subtle but distinct meanings: 1) that a person is good because of truly selfless, virtuous living (he is renowned for being virtuous); or 2) that a person is the object of the interest and adoration of others. In this second case, people in broader sections of society “know” a person, like him, wish to see him, wish to observe his talents, and wish to express adoration for him. This second type of *chuesiang di*, captured by the English words fame and popularity, is rather like an impostor. A person is considered “good” not because he leads a truly virtuous life but because he is in some way unique, gifted, prominent, nice to look at, or excellent. It is advisable to keep in mind that, in practice, both kinds of *chuesiang di* exist.¹⁴ But the data show that most informants chose to describe the connotation of virtue more often than the connotation of fame.

¹⁴ Today, the media amplify the “recognition game.” A prevailing tendency to idolize entertainers, athletes, politicians, high-ranking police/military, the “hi-so,” etc., seems to have brought an increase in the incidence of this latter type of “good” reputation. Since fans and the public in general have little personal contact with famous persons, and since the media continually portray contrived and “retouched” images on behalf of the famous, it is possible that fans often grant to those who are famous an aura that they are also good *people*, without carefully weighing the level of true virtue in their attitudes and behavior.

To possess *chuesiang di* is to be held in esteem as being exemplary (*pen baep yang*) and respectable (*na nap thue*). One informant explained that *chuesiang di* could be either present or lacking in someone who has *kiattiyot*. If someone has rank or a titled position, people will show him respect whether or not he is truly honorable. If such a person lacks *chuesiang di*, however, he will almost certainly not receive respect (*khwam nap thue*) from others, because in their eyes he is not truly respectable (*mai na nap thue*).

Chuesiang di, like *nata*, can be fickle and unstable—depending upon its foundation. All five abstract possessions can be damaged, but *kiat*, *saksi* and *barami* are more stable, secure, and enduring than *chuesiang*. Yet if *chueusiang di* is built upon the goodness of *kiat*, it is less capricious. *Chuesiang di* built not upon goodness but upon grandeur (the greatness exhibited by possessing wealth, position, popularity and influence) fades easily on the day that a person diminishes in those things.

However, whereas *chuesiang di* based upon good character and good deeds is extremely difficult to redeem if lost, *chuesiang di* based upon things such as wealth, good looks, talent, or excellence is much easier to redeem. One must simply make another stab at success and then work the media to recall the mercurial affections of the public. As the managing director of a music company said, “Thai people forget *chuesiang* [*mai di*] easily. Wait six months. Try a new approach. You build an image for them.”

Chuesiang di is usually achieved, and very rarely ascribed. It is possible for a son of a man with this quality to be ascribed the same quality because he shares his father’s

famous family name. But if that son does not behave in virtuous ways, society will withdraw its genuine approval no matter what his surname may be.

Most people, according to informants, want their goodness to be known. This might be described as “placing gold leaf on the *front* of the image of the Buddha.”¹⁵ On the basis of data, however, I argue that such behavior does not generate *chuesiang di* quite as easily as one might think. *Chuesiang di* is more difficult to acquire than *chuesiang* by itself. It is won by proving one’s truly good qualities over a long period of time. It often can have a smaller radius than simple *chuesiang*, but it commands a greater level of respect. People really know the person, and they cannot deny that he is worthy of honor. Many of my informants showed a healthy skepticism in evaluating face-gaining behaviors. They assured me that when a person is exposed as having done good deeds with ulterior motives, his *chuesiang di* is diminished.

Summary of *Chuesiang*

The element of *chuesiang* is about the recognition of society. It adds to the greatness or the goodness of a person by giving it the reinforcement of societal feedback. It is either a fragrance or a stench that drifts a long distance.

¹⁵ This is a twist on a common Thai idiom: “to place gold leaf on the back of the image of the Buddha.” The term comes from the custom of making merit by placing gold leaf on an image of the Buddha. Those who do good with no ulterior motives quietly place the gold leaf on the back of the image because they do not wish for their actions to be noticed.

SAKSI: A view from the inside outward

It is now time to dissect a word that is the most obtuse of the five. Informants had the most difficulty isolating the meaning of this term. One person called *saksi* “a very loosely defined word.” Another called it “beyond abstract,” noting that it is a concept that varies according to how much each individual maintains it or believes in it. He also added, “Thai people believe that *saksi* is more significant than any other thing.”

In terms of etymology, the word *sak* comes from the Pali and Sanskrit languages and has three related meanings: power or ability, strength, and status (The Royal Institute 2542 B.E. 2003: 1094). The word *si*, also from those ancient languages, carries the following meanings: shining brightness, auspiciousness, beauty, and progress (The Royal Institute 2542 B.E. 2003:1093).

I accept that there are many connotations of meaning for this word and I have been careful to avoid reductionism in analyzing it. Still, I am confident that I have uncovered valuable information that separates this word as being clearly distinct from the other four. The key was my good fortune in investigating the meaning of this word from the perspective of face and facework theory. It is difficult to unmask its phantom-like qualities if you do not study Thai face. A majority of informants claimed that Thai face is founded upon *saksi*.

Characteristics of a person with *Saksi*

Informants identified many characteristics of people with *saksi*, listed here in descending order of the number of respondents who mentioned each: self-determination or willfulness (27), being aware of and defensive of one's own worth (27), having a moral compass (16), being human (12), feeling content about oneself (10), possessing something innate, not fabricated (7), being confident in oneself (6), being responsible and not unnecessarily dependent on others (6), having society's respect (5), having good *nata* (2), and having rank or position (1).

One can see immediately that this list of characteristics is decidedly different from the three previous lists. This is significant. In the minds of many Thai people, *saksi* is tangled in a giant ball of conflated terms. Yet despite its whimsical adhesion to the other constructs, it is paradoxically the easiest to separate from the others. I am aware that this claim will be met with healthy skepticism on the part of many scholars, so I will tread carefully in articulating both the many shades of meaning of this term as well as the ways in which it is so distinct from the other major components of Thai face.

What it means to possess *Saksi*

Saksi is the independent, individualistic force within a Thai person that stands in contrast to the strong collectivist sanctions and pressures to conform. It is a counter-force that helps individuals retain a satisfactory equilibrium or balance between individuality and community. It is a substratum that lends a person freedom to think for himself. It is a reservoir of personal convictions and

principles that enables one to stand up for what he thinks is right.¹⁶ It frames the "bottom line" non-negotiable issues that a person will fight for. In a society of people known for an easy-going outlook and a lack of rigidity, *saksi* appears to be an anomaly. It is, as many informants explained, the essence of being your own person (*pen tua khong tua eng*). One might attempt to translate this particular connotation as "autonomy" or "willpower."

Saksi is rooted in the self. In the informants' descriptions, the word *tua eng* (myself) surfaced repeatedly—many times over.¹⁷ Every one of the first nine characteristics above has to do with a person's self and not with the awards of society.¹⁸ My findings clearly and strongly suggest that although *saksi* is many things to many people, in present-day Thai society it is conceived most commonly as

¹⁶ One of the most common phrases used was "*mi chut yuen*"—the person has a "standing place."

¹⁷ This flatly was not the case with regard to the other abstract words.

¹⁸ I am aware of the Buddhist teaching that there is no such thing as "the self," but based on the behavior of many Thai people one can suspect that many give only lip service to this. Suntaree Komin has written: "The Thai are first and foremost ego oriented, characterized by the highest ego value of being Independent—being oneself (*pen tua khong tua eng*), and a very high value of Self esteem. Closer inspection reveals that it is constantly ranked top priority . . . Thai people have a very big ego, a deep sense of independence, pride and dignity. They cannot tolerate any violation of the 'ego' self. Despite the cool and calm front, they can be easily provoked to strong emotional reactions, if the 'self' or anybody close to the 'self' like one's father or mother, is insulted" (Komin 1990: 133).

an inward quality, not an external possession.¹⁹

I am not claiming that Thais never treat *saksi* as an external possession. In fact, some of my informants did exactly that. I found this tendency especially among the many policemen I interviewed.²⁰ Still, as far as my careful notes tell me, all of my informants acknowledged that *saksi* is something within a person. It is the proprietary space within, the space from which a social actor speaks, and in this way it is similar, though not identical, to the Western concept of ego.

Saksi is the amount of worth accorded by a person to himself. It is a personal opinion held by a person that says, "I have value."²¹ This instinct can be seen in the oft-quoted saying, "You can kill a real

man, but he won't let you despise his worth" (*luk phu chai kha dai tae yam mai dai*).

This construct appears to stand in contrast to the other four components of Thai face, all of which represent worth awarded by society. This word does not.²² One informant said, "*Saksi* adheres to the person always." Another contended that *saksi* and *kiat* are similar but differ in that *kiat* is given by society, whereas *saksi* is something from within us that we establish ourselves (*pen chak tua rao eng...pen thi rao kamnot khuen ma eng*).

This is not to say, however, that others in society will not make judgments about a person's *saksi*. They reportedly do, and not infrequently. If someone behaves in a socially unacceptable manner, such as lying around drunk in public or raping a young girl, most members of society will respond by speaking the following phrase: "He has no *saksi*" (*khao mai mi saksi*).²³ Broad public consensus concerning such a judgment can obliterate any *kiat*, *chuesiang*, *nata*, or *barami* previously awarded by others to the person, but it is not the determining factor in establishing his *saksi*. Ultimately, the person himself

¹⁹ "We commonly believe," writes Boonmi, "that everyone has his or her own *saksi*. *Saksi* has abstract characteristics that are concealed within every person." (Boonmi 1999: 265).

²⁰ Boonmi documents how this construct is often linked to status, rank or a titled position. "In Thai society," he writes, "*saksi* is important in establishing the 'place' or position of people in society, and it has many possible meanings that have to do with other terms, such as *kiat* and *kiattiyot*, which we are prone to use to refer to 'groups,' 'institutions' and 'formal positions'.... In the era of *sakdina*, there was rather clear division in levels of honorable rank" (Boonmi 1999: 269).

²¹ Georg Simmel was very close to the meaning of *saksi* when he wrote, "An ideal sphere surrounds every human being...into which one may not venture to penetrate without disturbing the personal value of the individual. Honor locates such an area. Language indicates very nicely an invasion of this sort by such phrases as 'coming too near' (*zu nahe treten*). The radius of that sphere...marks the distance which a stranger may not cross without infringing upon another's honor" (Simmel 1906: 453).

²² There was some contradictory evidence to say otherwise, however. Three members of a focus group of six lower-ranking policemen said that society determines one's *saksi*. Nevertheless, they were the only informants to answer in this way.

²³ One informant shed light on what the Thai are really saying when they declare that someone "has no *saksi*." Seeing her neighbor lying inebriated in his yard and shouting profanities at eleven in the morning, she said with both disgust and pity, "He is behaving as though he has no value" (*tham tua muean wa mai mi khun kha*).

must decide if he agrees with society's low opinion of him.

Every human being has worth, but others often cannot resist judging his claims of inherent worth against the way he lives his life.²⁴ In other words, a person's actions will either prove to others that he has *saksi* within, or they will cast doubt upon his *saksi*.

For many informants, *saksi* was linked with virtue (number three in the list of descriptions of this word).²⁵ The association between this construct and virtue can be seen in how quickly one is judged as "not having *saksi*" if caught violating either a moral code or a widely shared social convention.

²⁴ Informants seemed to display diverse standards and convoluted reasoning in judging if a given person has *saksi*. For instance, one informant, when asked if beggars had *saksi*, said no. His reason was because they do not take responsibility for themselves, so they obviously do not have a sense of their worth as human beings. Road-sweepers, however, do have *saksi*, because they are law-abiding and they do their work. The disabled have *saksi*, but not if they go begging. However, a blind beggar who makes his living by walking down sidewalks and singing over a portable sound system has *saksi*, because he gives something in return for the generosity of others. If a former governor becomes addicted to alcohol after he retires and lies around drunk in public, he loses his *saksi* because he is "behaving inappropriately" (*praphruet mai mo som; tham tua mai di*). "People like this don't even think about *saksi*," he said. In Buddhist language, "they are a lotus still beneath the surface of the water" (*khon praphet bua tai nam*).

²⁵ As one informant said: "The human animal is good. But how much virtue does a given human actually have in his heart?...If we share, if we assist others, our *saksi* in being human, like a lotus, will be very alluring."

According to the majority of the informants, *saksi* is innate, not manufactured or fabricated. It is a possession from birth. One informant called it the "resident locus" (*chut pracham tua khao loei*) of a person. Another said, "It is already within human beings." In the opinion of most informants, this possession is not something that can be accumulated in greater quantities, as can be done with *nata*, *kiat*, *chuesiang*, and *barami*.²⁶ A third informant suggested that when a person speaks of "gaining *saksi*" due to rank or a recent promotion, he is confusing the term with other concepts, such as *kiat*.

In the opinion of all who responded to my questioning, *saksi* can be diminished or even terribly damaged. Yet no one was ready to say that it can simply disappear or be irretrievably lost altogether.

²⁶ Boonmi states otherwise. He cites the Buddhist word *watsana* "that does not refer to *saksi* directly, but communicates the idea of something concealed and buried deep in individuals or [something] that might spring into existence during a certain interval of time that will cause an increase in a person's *saksi* or status....*Watsana* is power within an individual that can wax and wane over the course of time. There is also a belief regarding certain 'magical objects' (fetish[es]) which, if one is able to gain control of them, will enable one to increase the power of one's *watsana* and *saksi*" (Boonmi 1999: 270–271). Furthermore, a number of the informants identified the word with the idea of "self-confidence." This conception views *saksi* as dynamic and expandable, as something that remains internal but grows greater with success and good fortune. One informant articulated this view of *saksi* as expandable when he said, "See, the potential increase in *saksi* is infinity [using the English word]!" He came the closest of all informants to conflating this word with the other four major constructs.

Informants often referenced the Thai constitution which states that *saksi* as a human being is something every person has with him from birth, regardless of ethnicity, skin color, gender, language, religion, political views, or other things. This connotation of *saksi* seems similar to the Western concept of human dignity. However, if *saksi* is a measure of worth, which it most certainly is, my data are not clear in answering the question if all human beings in Thailand are believed to have equal inherent worth.

Many social actors instinctively bind *saksi* to the external.²⁷ I will explain this in two ways. First, according to my informants, in discourse this internalized construct has a tendency to drift outward and mix into various commentaries on what is taking place in social space.

²⁷ Boonmi claims that since ancient times Thai people have characteristically attached *saksi* to things in three categories: (1) valuable material possessions; (2) women or lineage; and (3) certain vocations in society. Specifically, he notes the connection between *saksi* and external objects, citing how Simmel “suggests that people tend to create symbolic attachments between themselves and certain physical objects, turning them into ‘honor spheres.’ If anyone appears to offend these spheres it is tantamount to insulting that person’s *saksi*. For example, nobility in past eras cared deeply about *lawm phawk* (a *chada*, or a headdress worn to display one’s rank). It had to be stored in an appropriate place. If someone else touched it or acted disrespectfully [toward it], that action would bring contempt into the relationship.” Boonmi claims that “in former Thai societies, before the development of the *sakdina* system, there were vestiges that indicate that certain material things had absolutely no dispensable value except as symbols of *saksi*” (Boonmi 1999: 265–266).

It was not uncommon to hear informants use the word *saksi* interchangeably with the four other outward concepts. I acknowledge that most Thai people conflate these terms to a considerable extent.²⁸ Consequently, the word *saksi* still finds its way into contexts that are normally the domain of one of the other four words.²⁹ One informant suggested that when people lose face and immediately reference their *saksi*, what they are really saying is, “This is an affront to my power.” Another informant hypothesized that these days, as people have turned outward toward material things, their general concept of *saksi* has drifted from the inside to the outside.

According to a great majority of informants, another way that this construct is “bound to the external” is that the public often considers a person’s major loss of face to be a loss in *saksi* as well. *Saksi* is organically related to the other dimensions of Thai face. If you damage or even “touch” (*tae tong*) any part of a person’s face (*nata*, *kiat*, *chuesiang*, or *barami*), often he will feel it instantly in the depths of *saksi*.

So after arguing on the basis of data that *saksi* is largely an internal affair, I want to be clear to concede that it is organically

²⁸ Yet when I pressed my informants as to whether *saksi* is outward or inward, the overwhelming majority said that it is inward and self-determined.

²⁹ For example, one informant spoke of *saksi* in the sense of “behaving appropriately according to one’s status.” He claimed, for instance, that if someone with a lot of *nata* eats at a small restaurant or a noodle stand alongside the road, he will lose *saksi*. If he does something for entertainment, it must be first-class. These are issues appropriate to maintaining *nata*, but he alluded to *saksi*.

related to all that is going on in social space. This is not so difficult to understand if one considers that Thai society is highly collectivist (Komin 1990).³⁰

Based upon data provided by informants, I am inclined to describe the relationship of *saksi* to the other four constructs as one living organism with distinct parts so interconnected that if someone touches one part, it is felt in all the other parts. If my sampling of informants is representative of their fellow Thai citizens, I suspect that most Thais assume there is an immediate connection between *saksi* and any significant loss of one or more of the other four possessions.

When I probed as to which of these abstract attributes “leads” the others, 81.5% of respondents said that *saksi* must come first—that it precedes the others and is the foundation for building the rest. *Saksi* appears to be the critical core of Thai face. It is the starting point for the accumulation of *nata*, *kiat*, *chuesiang*, and *barami*. As one informant put it, a person must have “*kiat* within” for society to be willing to give a public grant of *kiat* to him.

Summary of *Saksi*

Saksi is a view of Thai face from the inside outward. It is both impossible and

inadvisable to attempt to capture its many complex shades of meaning with just one English word. It carries connotations of such words as autonomy, self-determination, dignity, self-esteem, self-confidence, conscience, pride, and sometimes possession of rank or status.

BARAMI: A large tree giving shade

In gathering data on this word I did not ask, as I did for the previous four words, about the characteristics of a person with this possession. My adjustment was for two reasons: (1) based on my review of literature regarding Thai face, I concluded that the other four constructs had not been researched with the care and interest that researchers had given *barami* (see Conner 1996; Johnson 2002; Maha Chakri Sirindhorn 1989); (2) I wanted to research *barami* within the context of another line of questioning regarding power, by exploring how leaders view their own *nata* and how they treat the *nata* of others.³¹

Characteristics of a person with *Barami*

One ethnographic researcher explains that *barami* “originates in the moral goodness or virtue of the individual,” and that it drafts power from the perceptions of others who have observed and benefited from the leader’s consistent expression of “meritorious selfless behavior” over a period of many years (Conner 1996:240–242, 275).³² According to my informants,

³⁰ A distinction between independent and interdependent construals of the self can assist us in understanding the attachment of *saksi* to things that happen in social space. “According to this perspective, the self is not and cannot be separate from others and the surrounding social context. The self is interdependent with the surrounding social context and it is the self-in-relation-to-other that is focal in individual experience” (Markus and Kitayama 1994: 97).

³¹ I will reserve my data on face and power for another publication.

³² Based upon his own research, Alan Johnson argues that Conner may have dismissed “evidence of linguistic diversity and multiplex usages” of the term *barami* (Johnson 2006:

such a person—usually a natural leader in a local community—tends to respond to others from the perspective of virtue. He is not self-serving but uses his social capital to mobilize others to work together for the collectivity.

What it means to possess *Barami*

In speaking of the five components of Thai face, my informants found it easiest to describe a person with *barami*. Their descriptions were virtually the same every time: such a person must have a truly virtuous heart. Although at times this word is attributed to certain non-virtuous patrons who are “good” to their entourage and certain clients, the pure meaning of the term implies that the patron is a virtuous person.

Barami reportedly flows downward in Thai society from His Majesty the King,

167). Johnson isolates four distinct connotations of the word: (1) “an ideal moral sense;” (2) “a prestige sense;” (3) “a negative sense in which it is used to refer to *chao pho* (godfather types);” and (4) “a charismatic sense as used by Weber” (Johnson 2006: 168). This reality of multiple connotations is immediately evident, I suggest, in that no single English word can suffice in capturing the meaning of this Thai construct. However, my opinion is that Conner acknowledges all of the above connotations and consistently addresses connotations one, two and four in his definitions of *barami*. He downplays connotation number three because many of his informants claimed that it represented a case of false attribution. Although my informants acknowledged that people sometimes attribute the term to a leader who lacks virtue, I discovered (as Conner did) that informants consistently contended that such attributions were illegitimate—that they were merely attempts on the part of leaders to gain social capital by subverting the honor system.

by means of his virtuous example in leadership. The ultimate stamp of approval that certifies one’s *barami* status is an appointment by the King as a privy councillor. But according to data, *barami* is found outside of that elite circle at many levels of leadership in Thai society. This kind of person uses goodness, not position or power, to gain the cooperation of others. In response, others accept him willingly. This facet of Thai face is an accolade awarded to a person who is judged broadly as having a truly good heart.

An indispensable characteristic of someone with *barami*, however, is that he must also use his resources for the good of others. In other words, his goodness is judged to a great degree by the way that it frequently and consistently expresses itself in selfless assistance of others. In doing so a social actor comes into the view of many people and builds a wide audience, expanding and solidifying *chuesiang di*. This quality is not accrued by just any act of kindness, however. Informants were quick to explain that people with *barami* are kind toward others with no strings attached—they do not act for the purpose of receiving reciprocal kindness.

Although it is possible for one’s *barami* to give rise to considerable power, the person with this attribute does not set out with power in mind.³³ He does not seek power,

³³ Boonmi makes a connection between *barami* and a sacral power that may or may not be related to moral strength. *Barami*, he claims, is “a kind of *saksi* that comes from the highest of things, things sacred, or things ‘above the earth.’ [The term] *barami* tends to be used to refer rather specifically to kings, magicians, the meritorious, or prominent gangsters in the countryside....Those with *barami* in Thai society frequently are those with great power

and does not “use power” (*chai amnat*). Nevertheless, he wins a potent influence over others as they respond to his kindness by rallying around him in loyal support.

My data also suggest, however, that this trait is the most scarce of the five that are the subject of this paper. Several informants contended that true *barami* is increasingly rare today.

Its scarcity may be due to at least two things. First, to simply do good or make merit is not enough. One must have a virtuous heart. It is likely that power and money, available to leaders in Thai society today, serve as temptations that test their level of virtue by wooing them to pursue these things as goals in and of themselves. Second, it takes a long time before others willingly ascribe *barami* to a person. One must serve others honorably and successfully within the bounds of various positions of authority. One must nurture good relationships with others over a very long period of time, negotiating with fairness through the relational and political fractures that often occur due to disagreements and contention.

The overwhelming majority of informants claimed that a person with true *barami* would have little interest in gaining face. He does everything with sincerity, with a pure heart, without thinking of what he might gain if the other party reciprocates. “He will have almost no interest in possessing face-eyes,” claimed one informant. “This [selfless behavior] reflects *barami* back to him.” His motivation is love and mercy, and he does not view his own repository of *nata* as something to which he must cling.

who have a great number of attendants or people serving them” (Boonmi 1999: 270).

Barami is based upon respecting others. Someone with this quality shows deference to the faces of others (*wai na khon uen*). He treats as honorable those who are worthy of honor. The fact that he consistently gives *kiat* to others causes him to gain *barami* in increasing measure as a byproduct of his virtuous leadership. “If someone has *barami* you can see it,” said one informant. “There is no need for him or her to ‘build up his *barami*.’ *Barami* is a personal characteristic that [simply] emerges.”

On the basis of my limited data, I feel very confident that *barami* is the most valuable of the five abstract treasures. Someone with true *barami* has a monumental stock of the other four assets as well. It is the height of honor. Genuine *barami* clings to a person long after he has left a position of power or influence.

Summary of *Barami*

Barami is accrued by virtuous people of means who selflessly and equitably use their resources to solve problems in the collective. This path is risky because this kind of person may not be able to compete with those who desire face for the sake of face or those who desire power for the sake of power. Yet, in the end, if someone is granted this possession his *saksi* is incontestable, and he is granted everything else with it: *nata*, *chuesiang di*, and *kiat* of the highest order.

The integration of Thai face

I have described each of these five valuable treasures so that its unique aspects might emerge, much as facets of a diamond become visible when held in the bright halogen light of a jewelry shop. Nevertheless, my data argue convincingly

that these terms are fused as one in the minds of most informants. Virtually every informant expressed discomfort in attempting to explain how one term differed from the other. It is certain that I was probing into unplumbed depths of tacit cultural knowledge, investigating things that few Thai people have ever subjected to analytical scrutiny. Because of the consistency of my informant's reactions, I assume that the conflation of these five terms is very widespread in Thai society.

On the other hand, informants competently identified unique aspects of each term. When they hesitated to answer, it was simply because they had to think very hard before answering. On the basis of their assertions I argue confidently that *although these five constructs adhere together in the minds of Thai people, I*

have data documenting that they are distinct (though not mutually exclusive) in meaning.

In light of my descriptions of these pivotal components, what might the big picture look like? How do they fit together? I now present a visual model with a view towards integration and explanation (Figure1).

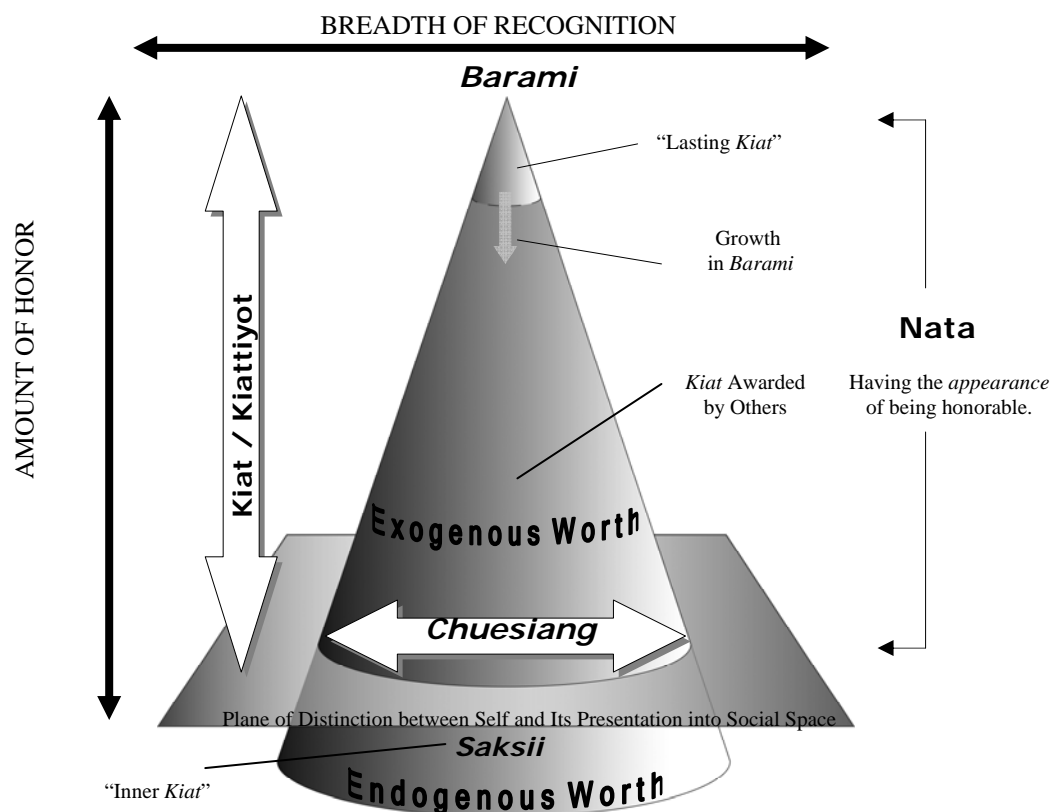


Figure 1 The anatomy of Thai face

The first thing the reader should observe is the thin horizontal plane of distinction that separates a person's sense of self from the varied face presentations he makes in social space. Everything below that plane represents *endogenous* honor—the amount of worth granted by each person to himself. Everything above this plane represents some form of *exogenous* honor. It is a loan of worth from society, not an outright gift. Society can rescind *nata*, *kiat*, *chuesiang di*, or *barami*.

It is also important to notice that by virtue of this model's design, *saksi* is organically related to the other constructs. Whatever happens in the outer dimensions is often immediately felt below.

Saksi

I argue that *saksi*, though it has many Gordian shades of meaning, functions as the foundational piece of all Thai face. Lying below the imaginary plane (above), it is the only valuable possession that is not granted by society. It is the amount of worth an individual in society grants to himself. Others in social space often will comment upon the validity of a person's *saksi*, but it is just that—a comment from afar. They do not give him his first grant of *saksi*, and it is not their place to remove it.

When in the midst of severe interpersonal conflict, a Thai will sometimes resort to using a vulgar personal pronoun (*ku*) to refer to himself. This pronoun communicates that he is making a stand, holding his ground, resisting the threat or intrusion of another person. He is intimating that he is willing to put up a fight for that which he sees as valuable. *Saksi* is the “*ku*” in face threatening situations—the part of a Thai person that

will doggedly argue for his own worth and rights. It is not “the self,” but it appears to be a volitional part of the self that functions as an attorney to represent one's case in the face of the conforming powers of Thai society. Understanding the essence and dimensions of this highly abstract indigenous construct is pivotal to understanding Thai face behaviors. In fact, it is impossible to talk with any degree of depth or specificity about Thai face without first pondering the mysteries of *saksi*.

The sense that one “has *saksi*” is the source of a claim-right to honor that initiates face behavior.³⁴ It is what lends to most Thai a formidable, seemingly inexhaustible tenacity to avoid a loss of face at almost any cost. In highly collectivist Thai society, shame plays a major role as a social sanction in gaining the cooperation of the individual for the sake of the community. *Saksi* functions as a counterforce to constraining pressures. It is that part of a person that argues for the validity of his own worth in the face of shame.

Saksi is intrinsically tied up with shame. Yet it is remarkable that the Thai language has relatively few common words for shame. When informants talked at great length about face values and the loss of face, very seldom did they use the common word for shame (*khwaam ap ai*). On the surface, this appears to be somewhat of a mystery. The concept of *saksi*, however, sheds light on this mystery.

³⁴ Frank Henderson Stewart conceives of honor as a “claim-right,” a right to be treated as having a certain worth (Stewart 1994: 21–22).

To “have *saksi*” is a delightful feeling of having honor within. It is to feel a sense of worth. To “not have *saksi*” (*mai mi saksi*) is to feel shameful. When others accuse a person of being in this state, it means that they are doubting his basic worth. When a person feels this way, *he* is questioning his inherent worth. It is this accusation—“you have no *saksi*”—that is the juggernaut of shame in Thai society.

I submit that to gain an increased understanding of *saksi* is to take a significant step toward understanding the paradoxical “loose” aspects of collectivist Thai society that anthropologists have pondered for decades (Embree 1969; Evers 1969; Kirsch 1969; Phillips 1965, 1969). This claim-right to personal worth is powerful. It is always there, though most of the time it seems to lie dormant. Only when one is pushed too far does one become self-aware of this insatiable hunger within, yet it forever lies ready to pounce into action at a moment’s notice.

One might even contend that *saksi* is at the heart of what the Thai mean when they use the word “*khwam pen thai*” (“the state of being free”). It lends courage to the lesser party in situations of abuse due to asymmetry in power. If a certain patron “touches the face” (does not give proper regard for the worth) of a client, *saksi* might empower that client to turn on a dime and pursue a better patron.

Saksi is the volitional epicenter of face attachment. To “have *saksi*” is to fight for respectability. It is to acknowledge that the rules of face are important, and that one is willing to behave in ways that

demonstrate and defend one’s worth in social space.³⁵

Kiat

Kiat is honor. *Chuesiang* is not honor; neither is *nata*. *Kiat*, though it has counterfeits, is a person’s true honor as displayed in social space, and often (but not always) this display of genuine honor will receive society’s echo of genuine acceptance, approval, and respect. *Kiat* is the guarantor of Thai face. It is what lends (and denies) quality to every avowal of *nata*, *chuesiang*, *barami*, or *saksi*. It is both the height and the depth of value.

Kiat is based upon moral goodness—upon a virtuous character and moral deeds. It is to the benefit of those who wish to subvert the honor system to have *nata*, *kiat*, *chuesiang*, and *saksi* all lumped together, because it confuses the whole issue of what is truly honorable. Because these four constructs “always go together,” if an individual appears on the surface to possess any one of them, society often jumps to attribute to him all the rest as well. But such a practice is both fallacious and unfortunate. *Kiat* is morally founded. Unlike *nata* and *chuesiang*, true *kiat* cannot be purchased with money.

³⁵ I contend that a publicly inebriated person is considered to “not have *saksi*” (*tham tua yang mai mi saksi*) because the alcohol makes him disregard the normal conforming pressures of face rules and sanctions. Others are pejorative because he appears to have given up the fight for respectability. As Boonmi puts it, “*Saksi* is in part a standard of measurement in society...that plays the role of regulating people in their various states to play their roles with caution and propriety” (Boonmi 1999: 272).

To grant *kiat* is to make a judgment of worth about a human being. To judge worth is to ask a deeper question: “By what standard is worth to be judged?” In dissecting my data, I could not resist the strong sensation that beneath the social games of face occurring daily in Thai society there is a primordial tug-of-war taking place over the question, “What is honorable: power, or goodness?” At first glance, it seems advisable to answer, “Power.” Those with power control society. They are prominent; they possess most of the key characteristics of what it means to have *nata*. It is prudent to treat a person of power as someone who is also honorable, because to do otherwise can attract threats to one’s own well being. Our survival instincts beg us to feign respect whether or not we really respect the person.

But is our act of pretense proof that such a person is truly honorable? We know otherwise. Something within us implores us to say, “You are powerful. You have money. But do you have true honor?” To suppress this thought is to suppress the notion of honor altogether. Is having face-eyes simply about hegemony? If so, we would do well to separate it from honor altogether, for there is nothing inherently honorable about having a bigger piece of the pie than someone else.

An honorable person, by my informants’ descriptions, is a good person. He is spontaneously other-centered, merciful and just at the same time. He is sincere in sharing resources—giving out of heart-felt affection, void of any scheming to obligate the other. The honorable person is *not* necessarily the person with great power, but the one who chooses to use his power for the benefit of others.

The crowning evidence of this is to be found in the unrivaled reverence Thai citizens feel toward His Majesty the King. One informant described the King as “a fountain of honors.” All that is truly honorable in Thailand seems to trickle downward from the throne. His Majesty’s power resides in his goodness, a quality that wins the unbridled affections of his people. His goodness sets the standard of what is truly worthy of honor.

Barami

In the upper reaches of what is truly honorable lies *barami*. To say that one has *barami* is to say that one has great *kiat*, but not all possessors of *kiat* have *barami*. Candidates for *barami* must be those who, over a very long period of time, display a truly virtuous heart and do good works on behalf of others with no thought of what they will receive in return.

A person of honor can grow in *barami*. As he accumulates material resources and social capital, he can willfully choose to assist others, show kindness to them, and put the good of society over his own vested interests. As he continues to do this with sincerity and consistency, his *barami* can grow, as can be seen in my visual model by the small arrow pointing downward near the top of the cone.

Chuesiang

Chuesiang is the breadth of recognition in society. It can be great or it can be very small. If someone is allegedly honorable, *chuesiang* is the dimension that answers the question, “Who knows about it?”

Sometimes it lends social capital to a person who has done little to prove that he or she is truly honorable, such as a popular

movie star who is really quite self-absorbed. In this case, the person's "cone of honor" might be broad but very short in height, a case of "simple *chuesiang*." At other times a very honorable person may not be very widely known at all. His good deeds may not receive the amplification of *chuesiang*, yet his honor is evident to those who know him. Such a person's "cone of honor" is tall, but has a narrow base, representing a case of "unheralded *kiat*."

The evolution of modern day media has served to add a ghastly speed to the processes of increasing or damaging a person's *chuesiang*.³⁶ Those who showcase their success, status, beauty, talent or goodness over the air waves or through the print media will often experience a decided gain in face. Prominent leaders must use the media to manipulate a desired image. The very same media, however, can also severely damage a person's repository of face. To have one's failure, misstep, weakness, or violation of the law printed in a newspaper or magazine is a grave loss of face. Because this is an area of potential face loss that is difficult to control completely, the media are a source of considerable anxiety for acclaimed members of society. At the heart of this dread is a fear of a loss of face.

³⁶ In ancient Siam, the *chuesiang* of most prominent persons had a small geographical circumference. When a person's *chuesiang* was disassembled by the wildfires of gossip, news took time to travel geographically. In the present day, wildfires rage into infernos as the media impact viewers and readers, increasing exponentially the potential for damage due to gossip. It is this sinister synergy—the media fueling gossip, gossip feeding the media—that strikes fear into the hearts of high-profile people.

Nata

To "possess *nata*" is the umbrella phrase for all alleged instances of honor in Thai society. Often this label is granted to a person on the basis of things like money, skill, beauty, intellect, performance, success, and influence—things that have little to do with the person's character. It connotes an *appearance* of honor. It is the most superficial layer, the veneer of Thai face, but it is dreadfully important. To "lose face, lose eyes" (*sia na sia ta*) can be at least uncomfortable and at most completely devastating to one's life and psyche.

What is the essence of losing face? It is a sense of shame that one's inherent worth has been devalued. This is not a mere feeling of slipping up, of being less than perfect, of being embarrassed. It has strong *moral* connotations. By verbalizing that a given person has lost face, others are saying more than, "He did poorly." They are saying: "He is not good. He is *morally defective*." If the person's *saksi* has been shaken by an incident that triggered a loss, he himself is saying, "*I am bad. I am morally defective.*" The acceptance of others—the "nectar" that belongs to a person with *nata*—appears to have vaporized. He feels rejected. This apparent withdrawal of affection represents a break in relationships with his primary supportive in-groups. This long fall from lofty heights elicits excruciatingly painful emotions. One begins to ask, "If I am now unacceptable to others, am I of any value at all?"

Nata is a flashpoint for the maintenance of the other abstract notions. This outer layer of appearance is innately tethered to a Thai person's most cherished abstract treasures. For many Thai there seems to

be an invisible lightning rod that plunges from the external to the internal, instantly sending the “bolt” of a loss of face down to the depths of *saksi*, traveling with the speed of light from the superficial to the deep chasms of one’s very self-acceptance.

Summary

Thai face is a highly complex phenomenon comprised of five polysemic, conjoined social constructs. They are distinct from one another. Nevertheless, they form a whole, and it is normative for them to be treated as a whole in all judgments of honor. It is for the true student of honor to separate them in his or her thinking and living.

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