

Essay from Expatriate in Thailand

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1. Introduction

I was an expatriate in Thailand for five years and 10 months from April 2017 through February 2023.

In Thailand, I worked at a production site of KYB Steering (Thailand) (hereinafter "KST") that manufactures power steering pumps and CVT pumps.

Since I originally learnt design only, my life as an expatriate began with expectation and anxiety about the work at the production site. I definitely experienced various things during the stationing. The following introduces some of them.



Photo 1 Members of supporting departments (at the KST lobby)



Photo 2 Management members (at the KST lobby)

2. Meals

Before the expatriation, the first thing that came to mind from the words "Thai cuisine" was only the typical spicy dishes like gapao rice and tom yum kung.

Fortunately, I liked spicy food, so I was not so nervous.

At the welcome party, the local staff took care of me and prepared non-spicy dishes at first. I thought Thailand had some non-spicy dishes as well, but soon the spicy dishes started to gradually appear.

I managed to eat up all the dishes while drinking beer with ice in it, which is specific to Southeast Asia, to cool my mouth. Then, I asked a question about the dishes. They said the dishes that appeared in the latter half of the party were so spicy that even some Thai cannot eat them. They tested me in the trial (welcome party) to see that I am OK with a little bit spicier dishes than those acceptable to ordinary Thai. I was eventually judged as a person who can eat any Thai food.

As an aside, I was surprised to find that there were some Thai who could not eat spicy food at all although most Thai dishes are basically spicy.

Thanks to the results of the test, everyone recommended a variety of foods to me, including spicy dishes, at dinner parties, which kept me satisfied with delicious things to eat.

Among their recommendations, one was a fruit at which I was very surprised. That was *noina* in Thai, about the same size as an apple. The surface is like crocodile skin, looking a little scary. In spite of the appearance, ripe ones are soft and fluffy enough to be broken open by hand and eaten. They are very sweet and delicious. When I heard its English name (custard apple), I was convinced that this tells exactly what it is.

Since I was expatriated alone, I usually ate out or bought food at supermarkets during the first year. After around the second year, I started to cook for myself a little, starting with a simple breakfast (scrambled eggs) on weekends. I gradually expanded my repertoire to include stir-fries, baked goods, and Thai food (gapao rice, moo grob, or fried pork). I finally became able to cook simple dishes for myself, although I could not make complicated ones.

The cooking experience helped me a lot during the long days off caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. I easily killed time when I was locked in my house.



Photo 3 Cuisine



Photo 4 Noina

3. Events

Thailand is a tropical country with an annual average temperature of nearly 30°C. It is particularly hot in April when the world-famous water festival is held. I used to participate in the festival before the COVID-19 pandemic. When I dropped by a water spot, numerous street vendors selling water pistols and buckets full of ice water were lined up in rows on the roadside. The city was fully prepared for visitors to be able to splash water on each other even if they came to the festival with nothing.

There were such water spots here and there. Some were moderate spots for families and some others were popular among foreigners (tourists?) who liked vigorous water splashing. I also found a spot where people were painting flour dissolved in water on each other in addition to water splashing. I enjoyed hopping between such unique water spots.

To prevent trouble, some water spots were guarded by police officers standing alongside, which made me a little bit nervous. When I was taking pictures of the festival from the roadside, a police officer standing nearby came and told me "I can take pictures for you", probably because he thought I was a tourist. That gave me the

impression that police officers in Thailand were working not only for security but also to help people enjoy the festival. I thought "That's how the land of smiles does it!"

During the water festival, while such public events are held on the street, private companies may hold their own unique events, such as calling monks to have a Buddhist ceremony or distributing sweets to employees before the holidays. KST holds an interesting event on the last day before the holidays at which the management, including the President, are asked to sit down in front of the entrance of the company building and be splashed with water by all staff members.

At my first year, I was told to come over to the entrance having first left my smartphone and wallet in my locker. When I was sitting on the ground puzzling why I had to do things like this, the event was started. Somebody splashed some water over my hands at first and the splashing gradually escalated to my legs, body, and head. Finally, a bucket of water was poured over my entire body, making me feel like I had become scrubbed of sin.

Leveraging the experience in the first year, I brought water pistols to the second year's festival. That was my turn to let them become scrubbed of their sin. However, they were a cut above me: They brought a big water hose to scrub me of sin even more carefully than the first year, since I got along with them very well and it was my second year. Anyway, that experience brought me peace of mind in part and made me recognize that we had established a relationship in which we could be in close contact with each other without hesitation.

KST also held a Sports Day and Futsal Competition. There were two kinds of Futsal Competition: One was a competition among three teams inside KST and the other a competition among three Thai teams (KYB Thailand, KYB Asian Pacific, and KST). The winner of the three Thai teams would get the chance to participate in a sport competition in Japan in addition to monetary rewards. Everybody in the teams was playing like mad.

I sometimes played futsal with staff members after work partly because I used to be a futsal player in Japan. So, I knew how they were normally playing. In the competition, however, they were playing with new aggression. When I found them moving in a totally different way from usual, I felt keenly that people's passion really affects their performance.

Although KST's hope of winning the competition did not materialize during my expatriation, I realized that moving forward together with colleagues toward one thing fosters a sense of esprit de corps not only for hobbies but also for work, leading to higher work efficiency. I hope that the competitions in Thailand will be resumed this year as we have recovered from the COVID-19 pandemic.



Photo 5 KST Competition



Photo 6 Competition of the three Thai companies

4. Languages (English and Thai)

I was originally not good at English. Before expatriation, I took a language training course and was a little relieved to be able to have a little English conversation. But, I was devastated from the start as soon as I was transferred to Thailand.

First of all, I had a hard time understanding what Thai were saying in English with their unique pronunciation and accent (Thaiglish). For example, a word sounded like "kover". I did not get the meaning and asked them to say it again and again... then, I finally understood they had said "cover". I gradually learnt that they basically pronounce English according to Roman letters. I felt somewhat guilty when I asked them to say it again many times, but the experience deepened my understanding of Thaiglish while the local staff deepened their understanding of my Japanglish. This interaction enhanced the communication level and we eventually became able to communicate with each other.

Soon after that, I became able to say what I wanted to in English. When I finally had some confidence in my English capability, I got involved in a job working with

an American. At a meeting where I was excited about using my "fluent" English in discussion, I could not understand what he was saying at all because both my tongue and ears had already been tuned to Thaiglish. I ended up being devastated again. Still, I managed to get through the situation by employing the strategy of asking him to repeat the words over and over again and fortunately he spoke very slowly. Based on that experience, I can always deal with similar difficult situations by employing the same strategy, which is now patterned, although it may not be good depending on the other party or topic. Anyway, this can still be used as a good countermeasure.

There was one thing that I thought was interesting with English. When Thai people were talking about work, they mixed in 10% to 20% English, not 100% Thai. According to a book, Thailand has had to rapidly accept many different cultures from the outside world and cultural advance has outpaced language advance. As a result, words that did not exist in Thai came into existence. They seem to speak in English under some specific circumstances including business. I realized that Thailand was that kind of country. As a Japanese, I felt intimacy with Thai people because I noticed that we also have many Japanized English words whose corresponding Japanese could not come to mind.

Totally apart from English, I memorized only a minimum of Thai words including numbers and food. Of course, I heard daily conversation in Thai during work, but I did not learn Thai in the classroom. However, as I had heard Thai over six years, I became able to roughly understand what Thai people were speaking about on the topic of work. Ears may learn the language themselves.

When I understood the direction of their discussion or whether they were saying a good thing or a bad thing, although I did not understand the details 100%, I abruptly joined them at some midpoint of the conversation in some cases, which dramatically surprised them. This was a very effective and helpful skill that could be applied to cases where staff members had difficulty in a scene I did not notice or when they could not promote an activity well.

5. Work

KST is a small factory with about 250 employees, but there are various departments, including factory sales, pump parts procurement, cost management, accounting, and human resources. I had only experience in design work, so I was very anxious about what I could do at the factory and whether I would be able to communicate with the staff.

In the first year, I managed a transfer project from Japan and worked on quality issues, some of whose elements were similar to those of design work. I ran this

way and that in an unfamiliar place and business, but partly because it was a product transfer from Japan, I was able to complete the transfer with the support of various people including the members of the related departments of KANAYAMA Plant in Japan.

After that, I was assigned to cost management in the second year, factory sales in the third year, and work responsible for procurement of pump parts in the fourth year.

In cost management, I was given base data for setting targets for cost reduction activities and actual projects from cost planning and procurement of Gifu North Plant, and manufacturing and production engineering of Kanayama Plant, which were very useful in deciding how to manage and promote KST activities.

In terms of factory sales and pump parts procurement, the related sales and procurement personnel in Japan gave us information about the situation in Japan, past

activities, and procurement policy. The provision of this information enabled us to add one-step more advanced operations to KST's factory sales and pump parts procurement, thereby strengthening the functions of the departments.

6 . In Closing

Looking back, I realize anew that I was able to make various improvements at KST thanks to the support of so many people during my six years of expatriation in Thailand.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all those concerned in Japan, all the expatriates at each office, and the local staff at KST who helped me during my stay in Thailand.

I would also like to acknowledge the opportunities I had to experience so many other things that could not be reported in this article.

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