

Status in Thailand is a very complex issue, not easily defined, described, or determined. Within the Thai language itself there is a diverse mix of words describing the idea of status and hierarchy, each with its own connotation, such as ฐานะ, วรรณะ, การมีหน้ามีตา, ผู้มีเกียรติ, เคารพ, หน้านับถือ and การแบ่งชนชั้น. Each of these words or phrases carries with it a vast undergirding of situations, descriptions, and subjective interpretations not easily explained by Thais or understood by foreigners. This brief summary is in no way meant to cover all areas of class distinction and hierarchy present in Thai society but is merely a broad overview or general description of some of the basic principles at work within Thai communities at large.

To begin, it is necessary to make a distinction between two foundational concepts which seem to be present in Thai society. For the purposes of this paper we will name them “status” and “virtue”. In basic terms, think of status as external qualities which a person or family might *possess*; and think of virtue as internal qualities or characteristics which a person might *exhibit*. It is also important to note that some of the things discussed directly affect societal class and placement within the hierarchy, while others, seemingly considered more valuable, only affect someone’s placement within the heart of others.

We will start with status. As we previously stated, status is primarily based on what we might call external qualities. Some of the Thai words typically used to denote status are ฐานะ, วรรณะ, การมีหน้ามีตา, and การแบ่งชนชั้น. Things such as wealth, particularly showcased as expensive cars, a nice home, new clothes, and fancy jewelry, along with where your kids go to school are signs of status. Owning a home rather than renting a home might increase status for some, as well. Another factor affecting status is employment, such as where you work and your position? Low status jobs would be things like selling food in the market, owning a small restaurant, farming, and contract labor. Positions of higher status would be things like government jobs, working at a bank, or administrative positions at a school. Government jobs are almost always viewed as higher status and sometimes desired over a better paying non-government job. Sometimes a specific job or employment can be both a position of high status and low status depending on how successful you are. For example, there is a family in Phayao who was mentioned by name in multiple interviews as being a family of very high status. Interestingly, the business they own is a noodle shop. What makes them different from someone else selling noodles is that their family has been in Phayao for a very long time and their restaurant is very famous. They actually own two noodle shops and a restaurant supply warehouse, which makes them not only successful but also visible. This is another factor affecting status--*recognition* within the community based on wealth and position, sometimes called “face eyes” (การมีหน้ามีตา). Recognition and visibility go hand in hand with status. For example, a person may have a well-paying, high position, government job but may not “flaunt” or exhibit their wealth and position; thus, they may not have as much status as someone with less money and lower position who makes their wealth known by “showing off” their possessions and perhaps using their high position to get what they want.

It is also important to recognize that much of the honor and respect shown to people with high status is done out of obligation. While conducting interviews, respondents repeatedly expressed the idea of "playing the game", that is, giving insincere respect to those of high status. Because of societal norms, it is many times, if not most of the time, "lip service" given because people of lower status or class feel they must.

At the same time, respondents seemed to *want* to tell about another "type" of person whom they give sincere honor and respect. We heard stories and examples of people who are virtuous and how those around them enjoy honoring them. These descriptions brought about the second concept, which we have named virtue.

The idea of virtue is based on things such as compassion, generosity, humility, concern for others' well-being, and self-sacrifice. It seems to have nothing to do with wealth, possessions, job, or position.

To be clear, this does not mean that only poor, virtuous people can be given sincere honor and respect. What it does mean, though, is that whether you are rich or poor, high status or low status, sincere heartfelt respect and honor is primarily ascribed to those of virtue.

So, when people of high status abuse or flaunt their status and authority, people's respect for them decreases. They may never know it or recognize it because it is something taking place in the hearts of people around them. People will still lift their hands and wai them, they will still serve them and let them have their way, but it will all be done out of obligation and without joy.

On the other hand, people who don't flaunt their status, who act normal, humble themselves and are down to earth receive an increased or heightened level of respect and honor. And, what these virtuous people may not know or recognize is how deep, strong, and sincere is the love and honor given to them.

It's similar to the way a seesaw works. What you do on your side inversely affects the amount of respect you have on the other side. If you raise yourself, your respect goes down; if you lower yourself, your respect goes up.

So, there is at work within Thai society a desire and actual affinity towards honoring and raising up those people who are truly deserving and a joy expressed in doing such. Thai people enjoy giving sincere, heartfelt honor and respect to people of virtue regardless of whether or not they have money, status, position, or authority.

For example, many respondents described close friendships or intimate relationships where the younger still calls the older Pii. So, even in what we might call "level" relationships, there is a preference and desire to use those terms which show respect.

To sum up, we see that status (ฐานะ) is very desirable for many Thai people and is praised because of what it means: wealth, fancy clothes, big nice home and high

position. Status is typically something people don't sincerely appreciate in others but most always desire for themselves. To be a person of virtue (หน้านับถือ) is also desirable and is praised because it means you are a good person, compassionate, generous, caring, and humble. Virtue, on the other hand, is sincerely appreciated when seen in others and deserving of sincere, heartfelt honor and respect.

Please remember, these are generalized statements and ideas only meant to describe a broad stroke of Thai society and culture. We understand and recognize that there will be exceptions to these descriptions and sometimes even wide deviations among certain groups within Thailand.