



# Cross-Cultural Business Negotiations in Developing Markets: Comprehending the Impact of Institutional and Cultural Elements

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## ABSTRACT

The article investigates cross-cultural business negotiations in Laos, paying particular attention to the complex interplay of institutional and cultural factors and their impact on negotiations in a developing South-East Asian market. Comparisons are drawn with the business cultures of Western and Central Europe, and the results of qualitative research conducted among Laotian and European businesspeople highlight the importance of cross-cultural knowledge and training. This article also provides insight into the business life of a country about which little has previously been written in the literature. Although both Western and Laotian businesspeople need to study each other's business cultures, the openness of the Laotian people tends to guarantee long-term success.

**Keywords:** Laos, Western Europe, Cross-Cultural Business Negotiations

**JEL Classifications:** F23, M14, M16

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Cross-cultural negotiating dynamics have received more attention in the recent literature, most notably in globalised economic situations. In the specific case of Laos, Hurn's (2007) investigation of how negotiations are conducted there provides valuable insights into how cultural and institutional factors affect negotiation outcomes. More recently, the analytical study by Lawrence et al. (2021) focused on Laos's intricate cultural landscape and its significant implications for commercial negotiations. The authors highlighted that both cultural knowledge and sensitivity are required to effectively overcome negotiation obstacles in Laos. Furthermore, it emphasised the importance of acknowledging cultural differences to the establishment of mutually beneficial relationships between local and international trade organisations.

Cultural and institutional variables heavily influence negotiation results in Laos, as shown by Fam et al. (2009) and Lawrence

et al.'s (2021). Cultural values, such as collectivism and hierarchical social structures influence negotiating tactics and decision-making processes. Furthermore, institutional frameworks that include government, legislation, and commercial practices impact negotiation dynamics. Together, these studies demonstrate how the complex interaction of cultural norms and institutional circumstances affect how negotiations play out in Laos.

Theoretical frameworks and analytical techniques, such as Hall's (1976) high-context and low-context communication model and Kittler et al.'s (2011) framework for cultural dimensions, provide useful insights for understanding and managing cultural subtleties in negotiations. Lawrence et al.'s (2021) recently published paradigm for cultural intelligence (CQ) now offers a complete strategy for handling cultural variety in negotiations, allowing negotiators to tailor their techniques to their opponents' cultural expectations. These theoretical frameworks and analytical

tools provide practical direction for negotiators conducting cross-cultural discussions in Laos and elsewhere, promoting effective economic contacts across cultural boundaries.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Western and Central European Business Culture

Western and Central European countries exhibit distinct business culture traits that shape negotiation practices and business interactions significantly. Grosse (2011) highlighted the key characteristics prevalent in American business culture, such as result orientation and competitiveness, emphasising efficiency and assertiveness in negotiations. In contrast, Lubowiecki-Vikuk (2021) analyses of Central and Eastern European countries emphasised cultural similarities, including the importance of greetings, respect for ranks, and hierarchical structures in business interactions. Although punctuality is valued across these regions, its interpretation varies, reflecting cultural nuances in time management. Negotiation styles are often described as moderately ceremonial and monochronic, emphasising structured communication patterns. Several studies, including Bateman (1997) and Glinkowska-Krauze et al. (2020), have explored the diverse business culture characteristics of Western and Central European countries. These studies collectively underscore the diversity within these business cultures, encompassing variations in formality, efficiency, and management styles.

### 2.2. Comparison between Southeast Asian and European Cultural Dynamics

Southeast Asian cultural dynamics, especially in Laos, contrast sharply with Western and Central European corporate culture. Barkema and Vermeulen (1997) and Barkema et al. (2015) found cultural variations in individualism-collectivism and the power gap between Western and Southeast Asian nations. The centrality of networks and familial relationships in Laos reflects collectivism, which influences negotiating tactics that stress relationship building and trust construction. Power distance is manifested in hierarchical management systems and high-context communication styles that emphasise respect for authority and indirect communication tactics. Furthermore, social-cultural capital plays an important role in young entrepreneurship in both Malaysia and Laos, with parallels and variances in entrepreneurial ecosystems (Pillai and Ahamat, 2018). However, the collectivist culture and traditional beliefs of Theravada Buddhism in Laos may serve as barriers to business (Bhasin and Ng, 2019). This challenge is further exacerbated by the necessity to account for the cultural characteristics of power distance and uncertainty avoidance when comparing business operations in Southeast and East Asia with company's own customary practices (Harada, 2017).

### 2.3. Economic Collaborations in Laos

Economic cooperation in Laos has resulted in considerable changes in the bargaining processes, as has been shown by a range of studies. Kongmanila and Takahashi (2009) found that collaboration with multiple stakeholders has a positive influence on company performance in the garment sector, underlining the necessity of collaborative efforts. Arndt's (1992) study of Laos's transition to free-market policies, which was affected

by external funders such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), emphasises the importance of external economic factors in altering negotiation dynamics. Furthermore, Uitto (2011) emphasises international cooperation for sustainable development, demonstrating the larger ramifications of economic partnerships beyond regular corporate discussions.

Moreover, Tan's (2015) assessment of China's rising presence in Laos and Devonshire-Ellis' (2022) analysis of Chinese investment both highlight the transformational impact of such collaborations, particularly through programmes such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This cooperation has brought numerous parties and cultural influences on the negotiating process, requiring adaptation and cultural competency. Moreover, Laos's involvement in significant trade accords, such as the EU-ASEAN Cooperation Agreement, demonstrates its regional economic importance. The expansion of commercial connections between Laos and the European Union (EU), aided by programmes such as the Everything but Arms (EBA) scheme, underline the importance of economic partnerships in altering negotiation tactics. Overall, these collaborations promote intercultural conversations and collaboration, emphasising the importance of cultural competency in cross-cultural negotiations in a changing economic world.

### 2.4. Cultural Characteristic of Laos

Laos's cultural environment is rich in ethnic variety and traditions, formed by its distinct historical and geographical surroundings. With more than 49 ethnic groups, including the Lao ethnic group who comprise an overall majority, the nation has a rich tapestry of traditions and customs (King and Walle, 2012). Traditional customs, from the complex Baci ceremony signifying unification and spiritual benefits to daily almsgiving rituals reflecting the Buddhist principles of generosity and compassion, play an important role in moulding the fabric of Laotian society (Pholsena, 2017). The architectural combination of French colonial, Buddhist, and indigenous Laotian forms also emphasises the country's multicultural background and historical influences (Goudineau, 2003). Despite the impact of both modernity and globalisation, essential values such as familial connectivity, respect for the elderly, and communal peace are still strongly embedded in Lao culture, affecting social interactions and economic operations.

Cultural competency is an important element of success in cross-cultural business contact. Understanding the subtleties of Laotian culture, such as communication methods, social hierarchies, and etiquette, is critical for establishing trust and long-term partnerships with local partners and stakeholders (Howe, 2014). Cultural competency allows people and organisations effectively to bridge cultural gaps, reduce misconceptions, and modify their behaviour in a variety of cultural situations (Edwards, 2016). Furthermore, the notion of cultural intelligence emphasises the relevance of individual skills in negotiating cultural differences and prosperity in multicultural settings (Ang and Van Dyne, 2015). Organisations may improve their capacity to function and prosper in the globalised marketplace by fostering intercultural skills, such as cultural intelligence and multicultural personality (Sousa et al., 2015). These qualities enable professionals to accept cultural diversity, use cultural differences as strengths, and create inclusive

and collaborative work cultures that promote organisational growth and success.

## 2.5. Research Model (Based on Grosz et al., 2023)

Cross-cultural negotiation dynamics in Laos are influenced by a myriad of factors rooted in the cultural and institutional aspects of the country. This recent new model explores the influencing factors based on results obtained from interviews, shedding light on the challenges and distinctions faced by international business participants engaging with Burmese employees and managers.

## 2.6. The Aims of the Research

The purpose of this study is to investigate and compare negotiation strategies in Western culture with those in Laos. It considers cultural differences in relation to individualism, collectivism, and power distance. By examining these cultural characteristics, studies have attempted to understand how they influence negotiation strategies and outcomes in both contexts. This comparative analysis aims to provide insights into effective cross-cultural negotiation practices determining the key factors for successful business interactions across cultural boundaries.

## 2.7. Research Questions

- RQ1: How do cultural factors affect negotiation dynamics in a developing market like Laos?
- RQ2: What are the crucial factors for successful cross-cultural business interactions in Laos?
  - RQ2a: What traditional customs play a significant role in cross-cultural business interactions in Laos?
  - RQ2b: How do social hierarchies affect cross-cultural business interactions in Laos?
  - RQ2c: What are the key elements of communication style that contribute to successful negotiations?
- RQ3: How do Western negotiation strategies differ from those in Laos considering cultural differences in individualism-collectivism and distance from power?

## 3. METHODS

A qualitative research design to explore cross-cultural negotiation dynamics in Laos, considering the impact of cultural and institutional factors, could draw on several key studies.

The stages in the development of research on international business life were defined by Szkudlarek et al. (2020) considering modifications to primary analytical concerns. This research has led to the development of an individualised, cross-cultural, and contextually rich investigation that considers emotional values and well-being. Through one-on-one interviews, creative methods and dynamic intercultural tensions were found, and the environment in which responses may be understood arose from differences in roles, experiences, cultural and economic backgrounds. However, the questions related to inter- and intra-personal interactions at work, that is, respondents' feelings and how they perceived themselves in particular circumstances.

Entrepreneurs and business practitioners in Laos were identified using two criteria: (1) Individuals of Laotian descent with exposure

to the European/Western business environment (5 participants), and (2) European/Western business professionals actively engaged in Laos (1 participant). Using the study team's contacts, a series of thorough in-depth interviews with six participants was launched details of Interviewees can be found in Table 1. The major goal of the interviews was to uncover insights about the cultural differences between the two groups, their distinct roles in the business sphere, and the interviewees' personal experiences with conflict. The interview questions were based on the Grosz et al. model (2023), as previously explained in the theoretical background section.

The interviews took place in an online meeting and were done in Laotian and English languages. In addition, adoption of the Lao (native) language sought to create a comfortable and informal atmosphere. The participants gave consent for audio recordings, and the interviewer translated the transcripts into English.

The interview guide developed to explore cross-cultural business negotiations in Laos pursues the goal of providing an in-depth and comprehensive explanation of the phenomenon through the participants. The guide's first section describes the interaction between the researcher and respondents within the framework of a laid-back introductory conversation and the interview's importance statement. Then, begin with references to the confidentiality and ethical considerations mentioned in the welcome. Moreover, to facilitate the subject introduction, respondents' demographic data were collected, and information about their experience of talking about cross-cultural meetings was gathered. Then, the cultural context is discussed, including Laotian identity, business behaviours, and how they are like and different from Western representatives.

## 4. RESULTS

After the interviews were analysed, it became clear that many experiences were brought up as issues among foreign business participants. Laotian employees and managers, in particular, frequently do not perceive cross-cultural understanding as a significant area of interest because they are exposed to it daily as part of their job activities. Therefore, they were regarded as regular practices. However, they mentioned conflict scenarios in business negotiations which can be grouped into three categories: (1) Formal elements of negotiations; (2) running the business on a day-to-day basis; and (3) Beyond Business Contact: Gift-Giving legality.

### 4.1. Formal Element of Negotiations

The prevalent communication style of Laotian cultural idiosyncrasies deeply entrenched in Lao commercial customs is formal negotiation. Laotians prefer formal speech and polite communication. Discretion is strongly emphasised, meaning that people try to find a way to be treated gently and with dignity. This manner of communication also allows individuals to transmit their messages more effectively and impactfully in negotiations. The cultural value of maintaining harmony and avoiding confrontations influences language and expression.

**Table 1: Detailing interview participants**

Participant ID	Gender	Role/position	Ethnicity/nationality	Years of experience
P1	Male	Director of Vitafort Agro Asia Co.	Hungarian	40
P2	Female	Director of the Training Department in the Lao Women's Union.	Laotian	15
P3	Male	Financial Manager	Laotian	10
P4	Female	Technical position	Laotian	5
P5	Female	Permanent Secretary of Lao women's rights representative ASEAN commission	Laotian	11
P6	Female	Trainer, Head of training	Laotian	7

Source: Authors' own research

**Table 2: Possible sources of conflict situations among Laos, and Western countries**

Area of Conflict	Western countries	Laos
Formal elements of negotiation		
Punctuality and timing	Punctuality highly valued	Tend to be early, approx. 10 min
Greetings	Handshakes is necessary	Handshake is norm
Communication style	Straightforward, and Openness	Formal, polite, indirect, and Saving face is crucial
Running the business on a day-to-day basis		
Business ethic	Trust and reciprocity crucial for successful relationships	Honesty, and keeping promises essential
Dress code	Appropriately	Formal, and unique uniform for women (long silk skirts)
Family connection	Not acceptable	Strong family connections tend to be extremely important
Hierarchy	Simplified, effective	Hierarchy emphasised, social status and trust important.
Business e-mail and phone	Form of communication, important	Tend to responses vary based on the topic
Training	Common	Refusal to attend
Beyond Business contact-Gift-giving legality		
Transparency	Necessary	Needed
Gift giving	There are limitations	Common to build relationship

Source: Authors' own research

Laotian negotiating etiquette places emphasis on the concept of "saving face." It is particularly evident in high-stakes meetings, as stakes are raised, and the probability of conflict becomes relatively higher. However, saving face is not just about being socially polite or making socially acceptable statements; it may be institutionalised, making it possible for individuals to retain self-respect and maintain a calm demeanour. In this respect, Laotians showed a high awareness of their capacity to influence their personal and professional identities. They handled the discussions carefully and ensured that everybody's face was preserved. Finally, Laotian commercial interactions are distinguished by participants' strict adherence to formal and polite communication. Moreover, Laotian culture generally is characterised by a special concept of "saving face," adding an extra layer of tact and subtlety to the established formal components of commercial negotiation.

Laos' business greetings generally represent a combination of formality, respect, and politeness. Thus, since Laotian culture has an ancient practice of putting hands together in a sign of respect as a habit, most people do not feel it necessary to shake hands, but they will return handshakes initiated by others as a form of courtesy. Furthermore, when meeting, you can embrace a hug and kiss or kiss with each other, which embodies Laotian business communication's pleasant and warm/welcoming nature. Accordingly, mutual respect and cultural awareness should always be preserved while establishing Laotian business relationships and enabling communication. Moreover, punctuality appears to be a cornerstone of professional conduct, reflecting a cultural norm. Individuals often arrive early for scheduled meetings, trying to be

there at least 10 min in advance. This dedication to arriving on time not only indicates respect for others' time but also reflects a larger cultural focus on efficiency and orderliness in business relationships.

#### 4.2. Running the Business on a Day-to-day Basis

The communication landscape in Laos is distinguished using formal speech forms and the reluctance to make straightforward statements. Therefore, professionalism and civility serve as the foundation for style in communication and negotiations to the most routine interactions that make up an enterprise's daily operations. This is manifested in the use of formal language manners and respectful or non-confrontational demeanour.

Working with European colleagues indicates a pronounced respect for promises, often expressed through formal agreements for the sake of clarity and accountability. Although cultural issues or language challenges sometimes cause issues, Laotian businesses demonstrate flexibility and adaptiveness, with a wealth of international experience in dealing with different communication styles and negotiation strategies. Additionally, family bonds in Laotian society are strong and significantly influence not only personal relationships but also the dynamics of professional communication. High levels of trust encourage genuine conversations, fair exchange of ideas, and transparency in corporations.

The dress code in the Laotian business environment remains formal, with people dressed professionally in a variety of work contexts. This dedication to formality is especially evident in the case of women who frequently wear distinctive uniforms such as long silk skirts on various occasions. This commitment to a distinct



and formal dress code reflects the cultural importance of looks and presentations in the workplace. The fastidious attention to clothes is not merely a question of personal preference, but also reflects wider cultural norms that emphasise the value of professionalism and a polished external image in day-to-day commercial activities in Laos.

Hierarchy and social standing have a significant impact on the Laotian economy, defining the dynamics of professional connections and exchanges. The focus on social standing emphasises the necessity of trust and rapport in commercial operations, as established hierarchies frequently dictate the tone and conduct of talks.

Responses to business e-mails and phone conversations vary based on the issue at hand, indicating a sophisticated approach that considers contextual elements and communication conventions.

Meanwhile, Laotian businesspeople are open to improving their skills. While cross-cultural training – when presented as such – may appear unappealing, Laotian business professionals prefer experiential learning, drawing insights from everyday situations to increase their grasp of cultural subtleties and improve their intercultural abilities.

#### 4.3. Beyond Business Contact: Gift-Giving legality

The perspective of business operations, ethical considerations are one of the most critical aspects of Laos' commercial operations culture, which prizes honesty, openness, and promise-keeping. On the other hand, compliance with ethical standards is interpreted as reflecting a cultural embellishment in which the notion of business operations is rooted in honesty and accountability. Individual gift-giving represents a major activity, signifying gratitude. The exchange of gifts receives an overlay of importance and reinforces existing personal and professional ties. Gifts are often bestowed as a sign of gratitude and utilised as symbols in an enterprise context.

Overall, Laos has a lively and active business climate distinguished by passion, vast foreign experience, and a balanced combination of traditional formality and emerging cultural norms. This unusual combination of cultural legacy and global participation demonstrates Laotian firms' resilience and adaptability to a wide range of international problems and possibilities.

## 5. DISCUSSION

During the interviews, it was examined the differences and affinities between Laotian and Western cultures. This research accomplished this by speaking with individuals who were connected to both cultures, came from two nations with different continents, and had varying degrees of education and work experience. Through the study, it has been able to obtain a complete understanding of how cultural differences affect business negotiations by including individuals from both cultures. Based on the results, it is possible to identify significant distinctions and parallels between these cultures that have an impact on communication styles, negotiation tactics, and corporate operations. This research was more informative and provided a greater knowledge of how cross-cultural discussions function in Laos because of the broad

set of participants that was chosen. Table 2 begins with a review of the data to highlight potential commercial conflicts between Western and Laotian enterprises. The purpose goes beyond simply contrasting with Western nations. To increase comprehensiveness, the table contains Western European specifics, building on both literature and experience. While Western and Laotian business cultures differ, there are some shared qualities, such as a focus on communication efficiency. However, these issues with communication and business culture underscore the significance of cross-cultural knowledge and regular training activities. Improved understanding and collaboration between Western and Laotian corporate organizations are critical for developing mutually beneficial connections and effectively navigating the global economic landscape.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Western countries mostly belong into the low-context category, something which has many effects on cross-cultural communication. The contribution of this study's research to business negotiation consists in the insight it has provided into the business life of Laos, which is a potential destination for future investment. Based on the literature and qualitative research, not only have the characteristics of Laotian business culture been described, but also a situation that has the potential to arise between business negotiators from both Europe and Laos.

Moreover, even though the findings mention that those who represent Western countries' businesses have obvious differences in terms of their characteristics, they are also closer to Laos than might previously have been thought. Based on similarity, relationships may be established, and it is possible to achieve an improvement in the attitude of Laos' managers and employees.

In addition, it is important to note that not only is there a difference from Western culture that is rooted in Buddhism, but this same aspect also includes a desire to learn. According to Buddhist teachings, one goal of life in Laos is to become a better person each day than the day before. This helps them accept that to promote the business life of their country, they should learn about potential investor countries and their cultural characteristics. Buddhist teachings recommend being patient and showing respect for others. They can adapt to the expectations of the global business world while maintaining their own cultural values.

Moreover, cross-cultural business negotiations with firms in Laos require a significant appreciation of the subtle impact of cultural norms and institutional frameworks. The managerial implications of this research determine that managers need to integrate this knowledge into their professional practices to ensure success. These may include a deeper understanding of Laotian values and their preferred communication style, including the value of ceremony, "saving face" and competence in maintaining ethical standards. Further, relationship enhancement also relies on the promotion of trust and adopting local communication practices.

Such a strategy can truly enhance business performance, but the limitations are also pronounced: problems were apparent in the

sample presentation which was limited in number and economic sector, such as lack of context when faced with language barriers, and subjectivity. Following on from this investigation, the next research will endeavour to track such limitations using more general and diversified sampling methods, while still eagerly monitoring and assessing cultural aspects within the research process. We will also concentrate on the quantitative research, seeking to understand the Laotian approach and the nature of their interest in doing business with foreign, especially European companies. This will help advance cross-cultural negotiations and businesspeople who are active in developing markets such as Laos in Southeast Asia.

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