OFFICE DESIGN PARTNERS (THAILAND) LTD.

Tom Gleave prepared this case under the supervision of Professor Joseph DiStefano solely to provide material for class discussion. The authors do not intend to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The authors may have disguised certain names and other identifying information to protect confidentiality

In August 1996, Alex Chen and Robert Chang, the two most senior managers at Office Design (Thailand) Partners Ltd., needed to develop a strategy to ensure that the Thai joint venture company could proceed despite the recent defection of a principal participant. One month earlier, U.S.-based Executive Design Ltd., announced it was withdrawing from the joint venture, claiming that the relationship was impeding its progress in capturing market share in the rapidly emerging economies of Southeast Asia.

Chen and Chang recognized that there were several problems underlying the poor performance of the joint venture. At the top of the list of contributing factors were conflicts among the various people in the partnership. As Chang professed, “we were unsuccessful at localization because our management team was not united.” Given the significant cultural differences among the Thai, Taiwanese and North American managers and non-management employees, Chen and Chang needed to determine how they could best leverage the skills and capabilities of all the firm’s people in a manner which would ensure greater harmony in the workplace.

COMPANY BEGINNINGS

Office Design Partners (Thailand) Ltd., (ODP) was an office furniture manufacturing, sales and distribution company that was established in Bangkok, Thailand in 1992. The partnership's roots could be traced to 1991 when three originating firms teamed up to build an office furniture manufacturing facility. These firms were Office Systems of Taiwan, and Metropolitan Finance and Thai Enterprise Group, both based in Thailand. Later in the year, Executive Design Limited, which had previously partnered with Office Systems in establishing joint sales offices in Hong Kong and Singapore, approached the three partners in an effort to secure participation in the manufacturing operation. Executive Design was accepted into the partnership in 1992 resulting in the following ownership arrangement:

Company Name	Home Base	Share %
Office Systems Ltd.	Taiwan	29.0
Executive Design Ltd.	USA	20.0
Metropolitan Finance	Thailand	25.5
Thai Enterprise Group	Thailand	25.5

Office Systems Ltd.

Office Systems Ltd., *(OS)* was a subsidiary of the Phoenix Group, a large, privately held, Taiwan-based multinational organization involved in several different lines of business including construction, trading, and the manufacture, sales and distribution of office furniture. The primary product lines offered by OS included steel office furniture, panel-based systems and office automation equipment. The company focused on manufacturing high quality products and prided itself on its ability to offer a wide range of products, while delivering superior customer service. All three of OS's Taiwanese manufacturing facilities were either ISO 9001 or 9002 certified. As well, comprehensive total quality management (TQM) programs were in place in virtually all of the company's programs and processes.

OS originally marketed office copier machines in Taiwan during the mid-1960s. However, in the mid-1970s, the company expanded its operations to include the manufacturing of steel office furniture by entering into a licensing agreement with the Japanese firm, Kyo-A Company Ltd. After firmly establishing itself in the Taiwanese market, a process which took 15 years, OS terminated its licensing arrangement with Kyo-A. OS was able to eventually develop into the largest office furniture manufacturer in Taiwan. By 1995, the company achieved more than 80 per cent market share of the high end office furniture market, believed to be valued at approximately US$140 million.

Executive Design Ltd.

Executive Design Ltd. (ED), based out of Ann Arbor, Mich., was one of the world's largest manufacturers of office and institutional furniture. Founded in 1940s, the company had evolved into a full line manufacturer of office furniture with sales breaking the US$1.0 billion level in 1994. ED had over 7,000 employees worldwide involved in manufacturing operations, sales and distribution. The company specialized in manufacturing various office furniture systems, many of which were granted patent and trademark protection, as well as steel and wood desks, credenzas and filing cabinets. It also enjoyed a very good reputation for producing high quality products. It was the first major office furniture manufacturer to become ISO 9001 certified and was also the first recipient of the Michigan Quality Leadership Award. In 1993, ED was included in the "100 Best Managed Companies" list published by Fortune Magazine.

The remaining partners of the ODP joint venture were the *Metropolitan Finance* and the *Thai Enterprise Group*, two of the most influential business empires in Thailand. These groups were family-dominated businesses of Overseas Chinese origin and were being run by second generation family members.[1] Each Group had extensive business interests both inside and outside of Thailand. Chatachai Suppapai was the head of the Metropolitan Finance and was considered by many to be Thailand's preeminent business tycoon. The family's 25 per cent interest in Metropolitan Finance, Thailand's largest financial institution, was worth an estimated US$1.5 billion. The *Thai Enterprise Group* was involved primarily in shoe and textile production, as well as food-processing. The company held the distinction of being Thailand's No. 1 distributor of consumer goods based upon sales volume.

The inclusion of the Thai business groups served two purposes. Firstly, given Thailand's strong preference for majority local ownership of businesses, the Thai partners' 51 per cent interest facilitated foreign investment into the country. Secondly, the broad influence of the two Thai families provided the joint venture company with immediate access to numerous business opportunities within the country. This was viewed as a particularly important factor for ODP since relationship building was an imperative for developing successful businesses in Thailand. Overall, however, there was very little daily involvement by the two Thai partners in the management of the joint venture.

Office Design Partners (Thailand) Ltd.

Office Design Partners (Thailand) Ltd. (ODP) was established in 1992 by the four partners. With an original capitalization valued at 400 million baht (US$16

[1] *See Appendix 1 for a discussion of the Overseas Chinese in Thailand.*

million), the joint venture was able to direct significant resources towards the development of a 900,000-square foot state-of-the-art manufacturing facility, located in Chonburi province, about 150 kilometres east of the Thai capital. The plant focused on the production of both steel and wood office furniture systems and was expected to service the growing demand for these products in Thailand and its neighboring Southeast Asia nations. The facility became operational in 1992 and was followed by the opening of the company's showroom in May 1993. The 20,000-square foot showroom was the largest of its kind in Thailand and was located in one of the prime commercial districts in Bangkok. Upon its announcement to withdraw its involvement from the joint venture, ED was expected to sell its 20 per cent stake to OS, thus raising the Taiwanese interest to 49 per cent.

Prior to entering into their partnering relationship in Thailand, OS and ED had teamed up to open sales offices and furniture showrooms in both Hong Kong and Singapore. In 1990, ODP (Hong Kong) opened an office and a 1,100-square metre showroom in the heart of one of the territory's premiere shopping districts, Causeway Bay. The services offered by this office included furniture sales, computer-aided design of office layouts, project management and furniture installations for both the Hong Kong and mainland China markets. Also in 1990, ODP (Singapore) was established through the opening an office and 450 square metre showroom in the Central Business District of Singapore. Both of these offices were intended to pool the design and service strengths of the individual firms as well as provide customers with a wide range of high quality Taiwanese and American made office furniture products. Given ED's impending withdrawal from the joint venture, it was understood that ED would be discontinuing its activities in both the Hong Kong and Singapore sales offices.

COMPANY MANAGEMENT IN THAILAND

The Managing Director of ODP was Alex Chen, the son of the Phoenix Group's founding Chairman, Ching Hua Chen. Like his father, the younger Chen was born and raised in Taiwan. While growing up he was able to gradually develop an understanding of his father's various businesses. He was educated in Taiwan, where he received his degree in economics, and over several years developed a functional fluency in both spoken and written English. As the son of the chairman, Chen felt significant pressure to ensure that ODP was successful or else risk a loss of face for the family. The second in charge at ODP was Robert Chang, who had also been born and raised in Taiwan. After completing high school in Taiwan, Chang completed his undergraduate business education in California. Chen and Chang, both in their mid-30s, had several years of experience working for OS in Taiwan before being transferred to Thailand in 1991 as part of the original start-up team.

The vast majority of the remaining staff of more than 130 employees at the Bangkok office were Thai. There were only two non-Asian “farang” (foreigners) working in the office. Ken Smith, a unilingual American, was a sales representative responsible for developing corporate accounts, particularly with offices of large multinationals which had recently moved to Thailand. Smith was perceived as being “a cultural bull in a china shop” by his fellow foreigner, Chris Phillips, a Canadian who was fluent in Thai and had lived in Bangkok for more than four years. Given Phillips’ understanding of both the language and the culture, he was able to provide sales support to both local and multinational companies.

In the manufacturing facility, most of the managers were Taiwanese. However the majority of the supervisors, technicians and line employees were Thai. ODP went to considerable length to provide all 36 Thai manufacturing technicians with extensive training. This included six months of training on-site at OS production facilities in Taiwan. This way the Thai technicians were able to learn first hand the intricacies of OS’s quality management programs and in turn disseminate these techniques to the line employees. ED’s role during the start-up phase of the project in Thailand was advisory in nature. As such, ED sent several site coordinators and project managers to Thailand on a temporary basis to provide initial assistance. No permanent ED personnel were assigned to the factory after the start-up phase was complete. Total employment at the factory eventually exceeded 300 people.

WHY THAILAND?

Thailand was an excellent location for a joint venture because of its strategic central position within Southeast Asia. It provided a natural supply point to Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore and Brunei, all of which had been experiencing impressive economic growth rates over the past several years. Furthermore, the domestic economy had experienced such strong growth in recent years that the World Bank concluded that Thailand had been the fastest growing economy in the world over the previous decade.

The presence of high import tariffs in the region was an additional reason why both OS and ED decided to enter into a joint venture production facility in Thailand. In 1991, tariffs on imported office furniture were approximately 60 per cent of the value of the goods, although this was expected to be reduced to 20 per cent by 1996. While ODP recognized that these tariffs were to gradually decrease, the company felt that it could not afford to miss the growing opportunities that were currently available in the Thai marketplace, particularly since competition was only marginal in 1991. However, the longer the company waited, the less it would be able to take advantage of being a first mover in the market, especially with respect to the development of important business relationships.

A further incentive for participating directly in the Thai market was related to the high level of influence that local office designers exerted over their corporate customers. Most local office designers, who were commissioned to design layouts for both Thai and multinational firms, preferred to deal only with local office furniture manufacturers. The designers felt that only local producers could be truly responsive to the needs of the Thai market. Consistent with this view, ED's motivation for entering into the Thai joint venture stemmed from its commitment to providing localized service on a global basis. For its part, OS was motivated by the access and organizational learning it would gain from partnering with one of the world's dominant office furniture manufacturers. Therefore, the joint venture would allow for the sale and distribution of high quality goods currently being produced by both manufacturing firms, as well as new furniture models considered suitable to the Thai market.

ODP'S STRATEGY

The cornerstone of ODP's strategy for developing the Thai market was to place a great deal of focus and energy on offering high quality products coupled with superior customer service. It was ODP's intention to market and service all products that it manufactured using a direct selling approach, something that was relatively new to Thailand. The company expected that up to 70 per cent of its sales efforts would be devoted to planning and advisory consultations with prospective clients. The aim was to ensure that clients were provided with solutions to their office operational requirements in the most cost-effective manner. The following extract from a recent ODP promotional package summarized the company's approach:

> New concepts in design and integrated planning will lead the Office Design Partners drive into the Thai market. Requirements for raw material and product quality, as well as new concepts of "service," are a unique benchmark in the Office Design Partners way of doing business. The promotion and elevation of product and service standards beyond the previously accepted Thai standards to higher, generally accepted international standards are considered to be very important by the company.

The company also demonstrated particular emphasis on the need for developing lasting relationships with both customers and business partners, as was evidenced by Chairman Chen's comments:

Office Design Partners strongly believes that to be successful we must constantly build and maintain trust with our customers and our partners. We believe that such trust is attained through communication, mutual respect and cooperation, and that this relationship is the key to our ongoing success.

THE COMPETITION

The Thai office furniture market was highly concentrated, having only three main players. ODP was the newest entry into the market, which was previously being serviced by Rockworth Ltd. and Modern Form. Rockworth was a locally listed public company which had been in business for more than 15 years. It currently enjoyed an estimated 25 per cent share of the market. The company's marketing strategy focused on the production and sales of paneling systems priced at a 30 per cent discount relative to ODP. It dedicated modest sums to the promotion of its products by advertising occasionally in newspapers. It had a reputation in the industry as being a "copycat" company and was also known for having poor customer service and unreliable product availability. ODP suspected that Rockworth was suffering from attempts at producing too many different paneling systems simultaneously. This translated into manufacturing inefficiencies and, in turn, caused inventory stock-outs. Rockworth was believed to be targeting the same customer segments as ODP, using price as a key purchase decision criterion.

Modern Form was Thailand's oldest office furniture manufacturing and sales company, having been in operation for 25 years. It was a locally managed public company which had garnered 50 per cent market share by 1996. The company focused on the production and sales of executive desks which were usually priced at a 10 to 15 per cent discount below ODP's similar offerings. Modern Form was the heaviest promoter of the three major players and advertised extensively in both newspapers and trade magazines. The company had a strong local reputation for manufacturing good quality products. It was well known in the industry that it was also attempting to broaden its offerings to include products that met international standards. This was the primary reason for the company entering into a licensing agreement with Steelcase Office Systems in early 1996. Steelcase was an American-based office furniture manufacturing and marketing firm which enjoyed a globally recognized brand name as well as a reputation for state-of-the-art quality. The new licensing arrangement would allow Modern Form to leverage the Steelcase name and thus be able to target the high-end office furniture market with greater confidence.

PERFORMANCE ISSUES

By 1996, ODP had made considerable progress in terms of developing its revenue base. The size of the Thai office furniture market was estimated to be valued at about two billion baht (US$80 million) of which 25 per cent was captured by ODP. Export sales for the company amounted to about 10 per cent of total company sales with the primary destinations being Hong Kong, Singapore, Indonesia (via Singapore), Taiwan and the Philippines. Profitability was still elusive for the company, however. This was attributed to a variety of operational and managerial issues, most of which were rooted in the employee's inability to understand each other, which resulted in a failure to execute plans and procedures as they were intended.

Over the course of the company's evolution there were varying levels of participation by the partners in managing daily operations. For example, ED originally fielded several project managers during the start-up phase of the joint venture so as to provide advice and expertise. ED attempted to involve people in all areas of manufacturing operations, while the Taiwanese took an uncharacteristically passive stance. This was because the Taiwanese did not want to be seen as dominating the process. Furthermore, given ED's size and expertise, the Taiwanese felt that they had more to learn than they had to offer during the start-up. While ED viewed its role as one of adviser, in contrast, the Taiwanese felt that the Americans were not hands-on enough. As for the two Thai partners, both Metropolitan Finance and Thai Enterprise Group offered little guidance to the joint venture over the years. However, when the Thai partners did offer occasional advice, such as in the area of personnel management, the Taiwanese managers were careful not to offend their counterparts, even if their instructions or suggestions were thought to be unrealistic.

According to Robert Chang, one of the main issues confronting the company was the inefficiency of simple daily communication and conversation between employees at all levels of the organization, particularly in the Bangkok office. English was often used as the common language but remained a highly imperfect vehicle for communication, particularly between the Thais and the Taiwanese. The Taiwanese believed that they were not as gifted in English or Thai as they would have liked and this had led to some serious communication problems over the years.

Another area concerning Chang was the inadequate development of the upper management team of Thai directors, particularly with respect to their competence for managing daily issues. He attributed this issue to the differences in working styles exhibited by the Thais and Taiwanese. For example, Chang claimed that the Taiwanese viewed their management style as hard working, flexible and adaptable. They were often apt to change their minds quickly in order to mitigate problems that had arisen or were predicted to surface. They believed strongly in the tenet that "if you make a mistake in the morning, you change things in the afternoon." On the other hand, Thais seemed to prefer seeing managerial directives written down. It was the Thai view that if something went wrong, it was the boss's fault because the Thai employees were not adequately informed. The Taiwanese view of Thais was that they were trained in obedience, preferred to listen and remained passive in the face of managerial problems or challenges. This was perceived as being indecisive as well as lacking in initiative.

The company was also quite concerned with the high turnover rate that it experienced in virtually all areas of its operations. For example, over the four-year period that the manufacturing facility had been operational, the retention rate for line employees was about 20 per cent, and of the 36 technicians originally trained in Taiwan, only two remained. Similarly, turnover at the office in Bangkok was seen as "rampant." This was especially so in the finance and information systems departments, where personnel were typically turning over every six months to one year. Chang cited two major causes to explain the situation:

> It is very difficult to find people who possess both the technical and communication skills that we require. These type of people are in very high demand in Thailand and therefore job jumping has become a common practice due to the many opportunities that are available to them. The Japanese are especially good at luring workers away by offering higher wages. What people seem to forget is that there will be communication and cultural differences in the Japanese workplace as well.
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> ODP has also been in the habit of trusting people during the interview stage. This is a source of concern because we have had instances where we were possibly not as rigorous in the recruitment process as we should have been. For example, when we were experiencing high turnover in the finance department we hired a new director of finance without thoroughly checking his background. As it turned out, he failed to close the company books for our fiscal year-end despite the fact that our annual audit was impending. When the auditors came to examine our accounts, they had nothing to audit. Needless to say, we fired the director.

A specific example of the consequences of miscommunication involved Ken Smith, the sales representative. Smith was eagerly waiting for supplies that were being imported from the U.S. and were to be passed on for immediate delivery to an important client. In this situation it was imperative for Smith to have a ready payment for the order so it could clear customs quickly and be shipped immediately to the local customer who had been patiently waiting for the order. In anticipation of the goods arrival, Alex Chen signed a cheque which was to cover all relevant importing costs for the order. When the time came to take the cheque to the customs clearing house, Smith could not find it and the accounting department claimed no knowledge of having ever issued the cheque. This caused Smith a great deal of frustration. He began by raising his voice to the point where everyone in the office could hear him. He then approached an accounting clerk and began peppering her with questions she was unable to answer. Smith then stormed into Chang's office demanding "action, action, action" on the issue at hand. This episode helped solidify Smith's reputation as being culturally insensitive.

Another incident involved a furniture installer who failed to show up at a client's office at the appointed time of 9:30 a.m. The installer had left work the previous day with the following morning's order already loaded onto the delivery van. After he did not show up at the customer's office the next day, it was discovered that he had traveled up country to help out his family with the annual harvest.

SIGNS OF LIFE

Despite the various problems that had plagued ODP's operation, there had been some obvious successes, the most notable being the completion of a US$4 million contract with Citibank in 1995. The contract called for ODP to supply and install office furniture and paneling systems for all 11 floors of Citibank's new office in Bangkok's financial district. Citibank was interested in dealing with ODP because of its access to the Race Paneling System developed by ED in the U.S.

In order to ensure that the contract was a success, ED and OS agreed to pool various out-of-country personnel to work in Thailand on the project. Firstly, three ED technicians, including the company's senior quality control manager, were dispatched to the Thai manufacturing facility to oversee employee training and the production of certain Race System components. These components included pads, partitions and beams. (The required components and furniture not produced in Thailand were imported from the U.S.) Although the factory was eventually able to produce components of suitable quality, the U.S. technicians commented that the Thai factory workers were somewhat slow in learning the production techniques, which in turn delayed the project slightly.

After the components were being satisfactorily produced, eight ED technicians and three project managers (two from the Hong Kong sales office, one from the U.S.) were sent to work at the Citibank site, along with one operations manager from ODP. The two project managers from Hong Kong were primarily responsible for training the team of Thai installers. The other project manager came from ED's U.S. operations and supervised the overall installation. The local operations manager was principally responsible for managing the team of Thai installers. The entire process of ordering the proper goods, designing the office layout and installing the furniture and paneling systems lasted five months, with the 12 key players remaining dedicated to the account for the duration of the project. The process progressed in a smooth manner with a few minor setbacks. Ultimately, Citibank was thought to have been impressed with the management of the operation. ODP further developed its goodwill with Citibank by offering extensive after-sales service support, including office layout adjustments and guarantees of spare parts inventories in Thailand.

DECISION

The withdrawal of ED from the joint-venture came at a time when the company was already experiencing difficulties on several fronts, particularly in the area of managing the cultural diversity of the people in the organization. However, Phoenix Group chairman Chen remained steadfast in his firm's efforts to penetrate the Thai market. He proclaimed that OS would redouble its efforts in order to ensure that the joint venture would be a success. To this end, he mandated that his son Alex remain totally committed and focused on the Thai operations, as this was a matter of family pride. Alex Chen and Robert Chang knew that they had a great deal of work ahead of them. The big questions were where should they begin to improve the company's operations and how should they go about doing it?

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Appendix 1

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE OVERSEAS CHINESE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Over the past several centuries, emigration from southern China into the neighboring countries of Asia has played a key role in the development of trade in the region. It is estimated that about 26 million overseas Chinese live in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macao, while another 17.7 million live in the Southeast Asian nations of Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore, with a further 8.3 million dispersed throughout the rest of the world. The economic influence of the overseas Chinese remains as a very significant force when one considers their overall numbers and their relative level of wealth. It is estimated that the cumulative economic wealth of the 52 million overseas Chinese rivals the total GNP of China, whose population of more than one billion generates an economy valued at about $450 billion. Further evidence of this wealth can be seen with the economic impact that these groups have in both Indonesia and Thailand. For instance, while comprising only three to four per cent of the Indonesian population, the overseas Chinese are believed to control approximately about 75 per cent of all privately held domestic assets within the country. Similarly, the overseas Chinese in Thailand constitute about 10 per cent of the population while controlling an estimated 60 to 70 per cent of the private wealth of the nation.

In should be noted that the use of the blanket term "Overseas Chinese," coupled with the tendency to view these peoples as a homogenous group, is inaccurate. The points of origin for the migrations to Southeast Asia came from several distinct regions within southern China, representing at least five separate social groupings, namely the Hakka, Hokkien, Chiu Chow, Hainanese and Cantonese. Each group has its own language and identity by clan and the sense of lineage remains very strong. Furthermore, the notion of the family within these groups remains especially strong. Therefore, the sense of loyalties within the overseas Chinese groups can be listed, in order of degree, as follows: family, lineage, village, company and nation. The concept of "networks" is also an important theme when discussing the overseas Chinese. The close ties forged by language, family, clan and village persist very strongly even though most emigration occurred several generations ago, and is reinforced by the fact that many of the émigrés were survivors of whatever crisis caused them to flee China. The result is that networks of those who could be trusted by reason of common descent become valuable assets to survivors.

The Chinese assimilation into Thailand was particularly effective, unlike in other countries in Southeast Asia where government policy was less receptive or where religious barriers made assimilation more difficult. As the Thai economy has prospered, most ethnic Chinese now consider themselves very much "Thai." They speak perfect Thai, eat Thai food, attend the best Thai universities. Therefore, in large part they tend to subscribe to many mainstream Thai values. However, whereas the Thai tradition tends to be strongly hierarchical, the Chinese tradition appears less so. The ethnic Chinese, much like their forebears, tend to place a high value on entrepreneurialism, flexibility, hard work and a respect for education and training with the males often demonstrating a strong desire to eventually be their own boss.

Source: Sea Change: Pacific Asia as the New World Industrial Center, James C. Abegglen. The Free Press, 1994.

Appendix 2

THAI CONCEPTS OF RELATIONSHIPS IN THE WORKPLACE

Sam Ruam or "to travel the middle path" is a behavior where people exercise restraint and maintain composure during stressful situations. Thais strongly believe that it is necessary to avoid extreme displays of emotion, either positive or negative, while at work. If a senior manager were to lose control, Thais would lose respect for the manager. It is especially important to remember that exclamations directed at "the system" may be taken personally by Thai employees.

Kraeng jai is concerned with the restraint of one's own self-interest or desires in situations where there is a potential for discomfort or conflict. Examples of *kraeng jai* include the following:

- reluctance to disturb or interrupt others
- avoidance of asserting one's opinion or needs
- avoidance of demands for one's rights
- reluctance to pass on orders to a superior or peers of greater age and experience
- reluctance to ask questions when one does not understand certain situations

Hai Kiad means "to give respect" or "to show honor." This concept can be used as a means to motivate subordinates. This is often done by a senior person in charge who asks for a subordinate's advice on a particular problem or issue. The senior may also introduce the subordinate to others or he/she might praise the underling in front of others. It can also be demonstrated when a senior gently and respectfully corrects a subordinate employee for a faulty opinion or deed, thus demonstrating tact for a misdeed.

Nam Jai or "water from the heart" values genuine acts of kindness and is incorporated in the workplace by simply helping one's peers. This requires that the individual take the initiative in demonstrating a consideration for others. A very common form of *nam jai* is when someone brings some food into the office and offers it to everyone. The food is often brought back from a vacation or business trip to show one's colleagues that they were being remembered while the employee was away. Another form would be to reward employees with a night out on the town after they have been particularly busy and have worked overtime.

Source: Working With The Thais By Henry Holmes and Suchada Tangtongtavy.
White Lotus Company Ltd., May 1996.