

Dear Bangkok Students:

Since it is clear that many of you are wondering about local customs, norms, and comfort related to clothing in Thailand, we thought we would provide some guidelines.

The first point that we want to emphasize is also a point made by Aacaan Sumalee: Expectations and consequences related to clothing choices are *context-dependent*. Accordingly, in this message we will distinguish between professional context, which includes going to work and whenever you are on the Chulalongkorn University campus, and private/personal context, which is everything else: your travel around Bangkok after work and your weekend activities in Bangkok and elsewhere.

### **PROFESSIONAL CONTEXT**

As Aacaan Sumalee pointed out, your personal appearance will affect how seriously you are taken by your project sponsors and people from whom you are seeking information. The minimal standard for professional dress in Thailand is **modesty**, which specifically refers to skin coverage. Beyond that, people in higher positions and with higher levels of education usually dress accordingly. Following are some guidelines:

- a) Shorts are not appropriate for either women or men in any professional situation, including walks across the Chula campus.
- b) Women do not wear sleeveless blouses (never mind spaghetti straps) in professional situations, in spite of the hot climate. You can get about the same comfort level and much more credibility wearing blouses with short capped sleeves. Full coverage of the abdomen and lower back is expected. Skin-tight or low-cut garments will very much lower your credibility. If you dislike skirts, lightweight long slacks are fine. If you do wear skirts, they should be at the knee or below-the-knee: no mini skirts! Professional Thai women tend not to wear cropped pants or capris to work but they may be acceptable in some situations.
- c) Typical professional wear for men in your position would include Dockers or other lightweight khaki-type pants and a collared shirt, such as a polo-style (golf) shirt or other collared sport or dress shirts. Cotton t-shirts and muscle shirts would not be acceptable.
- d) Flip-flops, shower shoes, and casual sandals (Birkenstocks, Texas, etc.) are also not appropriate in professional contexts. Neither are sneakers. Men always wear leather close-toed shoes. Women may wear dress sandals or close-toed shoes, but low or otherwise sturdy heels are highly recommended. Sidewalks are treacherous!
- e) Baseball caps should not be worn in any professional context. Certainly, using a hat to avoid the strong sun is very Thai; Thais generally associate a suntan with lower class activities such as manual labor, and can't imagine why Farangs (Thai term for westerners) seek to get a tan. But no hat should be worn indoors.

As a point of reference, Chula students are required to wear uniforms on campus: blue pants and white collared shirt for men, below-the-knee blue skirts and white short-sleeve button-down blouses for women, and close-toed shoes for all.

Some project teams may do fieldwork in rural areas. Despite the absence of an office or university context, rural customs are such that long pants rather than shorts, and blouses with sleeves for women, will be necessary to show respect. Jeans should be avoided for any professional situations and are awfully hot for recreation.

### **A NOTE ON DRESS CLOTHES**

You will definitely want some dress clothes to wear for final presentations and unexpected receptions. You might consider purchasing these once you've arrived. Bangkok is one of the best places in the world to have dress clothes custom-tailored. Aacaan Rick will be happy to introduce any interested men to his tailor, or you can easily find your own. Typically, WPI students go home with at least one suit (great for those job interviews next year), a bunch of dress shirts, etc. There are tailors who will make you an OK suit for about \$100, or you can get a great one (designer fabrics, expert tailoring) for about \$250. Unfortunately, we don't have the same type of relationship with any seamstress for women's clothing, but past women students have had suits made at places recommended by Thai students and have been very happy with the outcome. If you don't plan to buy any dress clothes when you're there, then you should bring at least one reasonably dressy outfit. This means jacket and tie for men and longish skirt and professional blouse, dress, or suit for women.

### **PERSONAL/ RECREATIONAL CONTEXT**

Outside of the professional context you will see the full range of westernized clothing and displays of the human body, worn and/or shown by the younger generation of Thais and by tourists. Disapproval is rarely or never shown outwardly, but the western influence is disturbing to much of Thai society. In these situations you certainly have more of a choice, but

we encourage you to make those choices with some careful thought and deliberation about the type of cross-cultural experience you would like to have and about stereotypes of Americans that you may wish to debunk. Traditional Thai culture is *collective rather than individualistic* in nature. One consequence of this, among many, is that Thais value **not** standing out. You may have a more Thai experience if you aspire to that same philosophy while in Thailand.

Certainly in non-professional situations you may choose to wear shorts, for example (except when you are visiting wats (temples) where you will not be allowed to enter if you are wearing shorts.) You will find, however, that shorts are most often found on laborers and tourists. If you want to blend in and experience traditional Thai culture, consider limiting your wearing shorts and mini-skirts even in your free time. If you choose to wear shorts, especially when we're traveling around as a large group, please make sure they are the most modest ones you have. To be explicit, "modest" shorts are on the long side, are not skin-tight, and do not have words written on the butt.

Point of reference: Thai students usually go along with us on our arrival trip to Kanchanaburi. Along the way we typically stop at a waterfall and many go swimming, and then there is a great pool at the place we stay. *Even in this recreational context the majority of Thai students remain clothed in shorts and t-shirts, not bathing suits, when they go swimming because of the tradition of modesty.*

Clothes for weekend excursions: The first weekend after everyone has arrived, we will be taking a group trip, most likely to a resort in Kanchanaburi that has a pool, kayaking, and all sorts of sanuk (fun). We're also likely to continue the tradition of having a trip up north in the middle of the term, which is likely to involve some moderate hiking and cool evenings. So you'll want some sturdy footwear and a warm layer for that trip. We'll provide more info about these two trips as details become available.

One final note: **Pack light!** Leave room in your luggage for all of the bargains you are likely to bring home. One week's worth of clothes should be sufficient since laundry service is so convenient and relatively inexpensive. In addition, if you find that you are short on particular types of clothing, it will be easy to buy whatever clothes you need at reasonable prices at the nearby MBK mall. The only exception might be people who wear large sizes; Thais are generally petite! We've had a bit of difficulty finding size 8 ½ - 9 shoes (women), and men's XL shirts are often smaller than those you'll find in the US.

Let us know if you have any questions. There will also be orientation sessions in B-term that provide good opportunities for travel Q&A.

Sawatdii kha/khrap,  
Aacaans Chrys and Rick

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