



The price of kindness: perceived bribery pervasiveness and coping mechanisms in an emerging market

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Accepted: 8 August 2024

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Abstract

We used a grounded theory approach to examine how business leaders in emerging markets cope with pervasiveness of bribery both psychologically and behaviorally. We conducted in-depth interviews with business leaders from various industries in Thailand through an emic approach to focus on how local cultural meaning system shapes the psychological processes underlying bribery conducts. We identified indicators of perceived bribery pervasiveness such as implicit forms of bribery and the temporal dimension of cultural transmission, indicating persistence of bribery pervasiveness. Moreover, contrary to conventional wisdom, we found that lay beliefs in Buddhist teachings *reduce* moral awareness and moral judgments of bribery while providing opportunities to wash away bad karma for engagement in bribery. These behavioral strategies and psychological coping mechanisms lead to a self-sustaining system for continuously engaging in bribery. We further developed a theoretical model of perceived bribery pervasiveness and provide implications for both local and multinational firms as well as policy makers in dealing with bribery in emerging markets.

Keywords Bribery · Non-market strategy · Pervasiveness · Religion

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Introduction

Over the past decades, worldwide anti-corruption efforts have reduced the level of bribery in established markets (e.g., Stevens & Newenham-Kahindi, 2021). However, bribery remains commonly accepted and widely practiced in emerging markets (Lu et al., 2023; Luo, 2011; Transparency International, 2022). This raises the question: Why does bribery persist in emerging markets? The moral failure perspective, a widely used approach to examining corporate corruption (Castro et al., 2020), views bribery as unethical and negative (Castro et al., 2020, p.950), adopting a Kantian perspective on universal moral philosophy. Although corruption has long been illegal and morally condemned in many countries, bribery could facilitate business transactions and official approvals, especially in the context with institutional voids frequently found in emerging markets (Doh et al., 2017). In such situations, engagement in bribery can be seen as a rational action for firms, and can be morally justified according to the utilitarian principle.

Moreover, differences in cultural norms further complicate the meaning of bribery, leading to practices that substitute for bribery to avoid legal risk and moral pressure. In particular, religious belief, as one cultural element, also shapes bribery (Salama & Chikudate, 2021; Vu, 2021). For instance, Salama and Chikudate (2021) examine Islamic influences on corporate bribery practices in Indonesia and identify “pseudo-religious bribes”, such as providing spiritual training for clients to disguise bribery. Clients are also invited to religious trips (e.g., shorten the waiting line to Mecca) and such gesture is not perceived as immoral by Indonesians. Therefore, bribery in Indonesia not only facilitates business transactions but also fulfills religious needs. In a similar vein, Vu (2021) examines how Buddhist organizational leaders perceive and engage in bribery with a “Buddhist-enacted utilitarian approach”. Since cultural factors are often multi-faceted and deeply rooted in local contexts, a more thorough examination of the local context that fosters bribery is necessary. And understanding how managers cope with bribery help us better understand ways to prevent it (e.g., Murphy & Dacin, 2011). Thus, we follow the emic approach (Vu, 2021; Salama & Chikudate, 2021) and focus on how managers perceive and cope with bribery psychologically and behaviorally.

This research explores the cultural roots of bribery in emerging markets by asking the following question: How does belief in Buddhist teachings influence business leaders’ psychological coping mechanism and behavioral strategies towards bribery? To address this contextually rooted issue, we followed the grounded theory approach to conduct in-depth semi-structured interviews with business leaders from various industries in Thailand. Thailand is an ideal setting for our study for several reasons. First, Thailand is considered an emerging market (MSCI, 2020), with a high level of corruption (scoring 36 out of 100 in the 2022 Corruption Perceptions Index, Transparency International, 2022). Second, anti-corruption laws and other measures have been found ineffective in Thailand (Prateepornnarong & Young, 2019; Wu, 2009). Thus, business leaders may feel open to discussing bribery involvements. Third, Thailand’s cultural context is deeply influenced by Buddhism (Ariyabuddhiphongs & Hongladarom, 2011; Ariyabuddhiphongs & Li, 2016) and uniquely blends with capitalist methods (Niffenegger et al., 2006). By using Thailand as our setting, we comply

with suggestions that theory is best built by examining extreme contexts where issues of interest are highly visible (Eisenhardt, 1989; Pratt et al., 2006).

Following our grounded theory approach, we found that perceived pervasiveness of bribery is influenced by institutional uncertainty and unavoidable bribery. We also discovered unique psychological coping mechanisms and behavioral strategies, which are heavily influenced by Thai people's lay belief in the Buddhist teachings. Contrary to conventional postulation, we found that the combination of religious beliefs in karma and the importance to show 'kindness' in Thailand *reduces* moral awareness and moral judgments of bribery while providing opportunities to wash away bad karma for engagement in bribery. Finally, we also found that since bribery is deeply rooted in Thailand's context, it has become a self-sustaining system in which policy and technological interventions have failed in curbing bribery.

Our theoretical contributions are three-fold. First, we address the call for a better understanding of how managerial awareness shapes decisions to engage in bribery (Mellahi et al., 2016) by revealing the micro-foundations and behavioral strategies for coping with bribery. To fill in this gap, we integrate cultural norm and moral failure perspectives to examine how local cultural contexts, especially religious belief, influence individuals' moral failure in decision-making and behaviors regarding bribery (Castro et al., 2020). Second, we follow an emic approach and examine how Thai people's lay belief in Buddhism shape their interpretation and responses to bribery. We find that individuals justify bribery practices through a Buddhist belief in karma and conform with the local norm of giving to exhibit kindness. These findings extend previous research (Vu, 2021) by indicating that the lay belief of Buddhism rather than the original Buddhist doctrines shape individuals' interpretation and responses regarding bribery. Third, we contribute to the anti-corruption literature (Fan et al., 2021) by revealing that technological interventions such as e-bidding systems fail to curb corruption, given the fact that business leaders are resistant to change due to cultural influences, leaving institutional loopholes unresolved.

Theoretical background

Bribery practices and the cultural influences

Bribery is defined as the misuse of formal power by a corporate representative for private or organizational gain. Bribes may involve explicit monetary exchanges, often called "grease money" (Cuervo-Cazurra, 2006; Krammer, 2019) or implicit gifts and preferential treatment such as access to overseas training or no-bid contracts (Liu et al., 2017a; Martin et al., 2007; Mauss, 1990; Sanyal, 2005). Previous literature has examined bribery practices at the macro level by considering socio-political, cultural, institutional, and economic antecedents (Martin et al., 2007; O'Connor & Fischer, 2011; Sanyal, 2005; Serra, 2006; Treisman, 2000; Vu, 2021; Mazar & Aggarwal, 2011), at the meso level utilizing "bad barrel" theory, and at the micro level applying the "bad apple" theory (Ashforth et al., 2008). Research along these lines often examines the independent effect or intersectional impact between national cultural values, institutional context, and firm-level factors on firms' bribery activities.

For instance, the quality of corporate governance can reduce the level of corruption, with this effect being moderated by national cultural values, especially power distance, individualism and indulgence (Boateng et al., 2021). Moreover, under environments with pervasive corruption, the negative effect of the bribery relationship on firm growth will be strengthened, whereas weakened under high-quality governance (Jung & Lee, 2023).

Previous research has suggested that bribery may have deep cultural roots that may challenge the effectiveness of anti-corruption policies and efforts (Husted, 1999). Cultural factors can often be multi-faceted and deeply rooted in local contexts, which may play a role in shaping bribery behaviors differently across cultures. Previous research on the cultural impacts on bribery can be divided into two streams. One research stream on the cross-cultural comparisons of corruption has proposed a two-dimensional framework of pervasiveness and arbitrariness (Rodriguez et al., 2005). Using the World Business Environment Survey data, it has been found that both internal environment (e.g., growth rate, corporate governance) and external environment (e.g., high taxes, corrupt court systems) influence firms in Asia to engage in bribery (Wu, 2009). In addition, institutional context and firms' nonmarket positions jointly influence the firms' incentive for bribery (Lu et al., 2023). Specifically, lower quality market-supporting institutions and firms' weaker positions make firms more vulnerable to bribery requests and subsequent involvement in bribery. Although these studies extend the bribery demand side (e.g., governments) to examine the joint effect between both demand and supply sides, the supply side (e.g., firms) remains to be less examined (Lee & Oh, 2007; Wu, 2009).

The other research stream, mainly rooted in cross-cultural psychology, has taken either a static view of culture by studying cultural values (i.e., individualism vs. collectivism, Li et al., 2015; power distance and long-term orientation, Changwatchai & Dheera-aumpon, 2023) or a dynamic constructivist view of culture (Hong, 2009; Liu et al., 2017b) by examining bribery as a behavioral strategy to cope with socio-ecological factors (i.e., residential mobility, Chen et al., 2022). These studies mostly focus on cross-cultural comparisons, for instance between the U.S. and China (Li et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2017b). In fact, other cultural contexts in the emerging markets have received less attention, except for a few recent studies (i.e., Vietnam, Vu, 2021; the Philippines, dela Rama, 2012). The question of how cultural factors shape the bribery givers' perception, psychological coping mechanisms and subsequent behavioral strategies remains to be further explored. We will further discuss the religious elements of cultural factors and its impact on bribery, considering its impact on people's everyday life and anchoring role in guiding decision-making and judgment.

Bribery and religion

Religion strongly influences both personal and organizational conducts (La Porta et al., 1997). Religious belief not only promotes moral awareness and judgment, but also condemns all illegal and immoral behavior. Given that bribery has moral connotations and invokes moral judgment, as well as being illegal, strong religious beliefs should lead to lower acceptance of bribery practices (Treisman, 2000). Previous research has suggested that strong belief in religion leads to higher trust and a stron-

ger work ethic (Uslander 2002) as well as greater risk aversion (Miller, 2000), which in turn leads to a lower likelihood of engaging in bribery. First, having higher mutual trust and work ethics leads to mutual monitoring and punishing of any act of bribery (Gokcekus & Ekici, 2020; Chintakananda et al., 2023). Second, risk aversion leads to avoidance of risky behavior, including bribery. In addition, religious beliefs should also inhibit bribery; for example, those who hold religious beliefs in God should be less likely to engage in bribery due to moral conformity (Corcoran et al., 2012).

Despite several theoretical reasons of why religion should deter bribery, empirical evidence has been inconclusive. Some have found that there is a positive correlation between strong religious faith and high levels of bribery (La Porta et al., 1997; Husted, 1999), some have found no relation (Shadabi, 2013; Flavin & Ledet, 2013), while some have shown a negative relationship (Treisman, 2000). Part of the reason for this inconclusiveness is that these studies examine overall religion affiliation at the country-level rather than at the individual level. Individuals with the same religious belief may have varying degrees of faith or commitment to religion (Gokcekus & Ekici, 2020). Additionally, these studies mostly rely on secondary data about bribery, which primarily consists of perceptions of country-level bribery (e.g., Mensah, 2014), rather than actual bribery conduct. As such, an emic approach (e.g., Salama & Chikudate, 2021) is crucial to understanding how do individuals perceive, interpret and respond to bribery from the lens of their religious beliefs. Finally, these empirical efforts have mainly focused on countries that are predominantly Christian or Muslim. There has been little research on the impact of Buddhism on bribery, except for a few recent endeavors (e.g., Vu, 2021).

Based on interviews with Buddhist business leaders in Vietnam, Vu (2021) identifies three mechanisms leaders use to respond to bribery: karmic consequences, community and social well-being, total detachment. These mechanisms are drawn from Buddhist principles to morally justify bribery. Buddhist practitioners experienced tensions, such as balancing short-term versus long-term karmic consequences, community well-being versus personal sacrifices, and ethical relativism, along with personal struggles and guilt (Vu, 2021, p.532). As a result, Buddhism provides a utilitarian approach for Buddhist leaders to adapt to the pervasiveness of bribery in Vietnam (Vu, 2021). This research underscores the importance of contextual influences on leaders' interpretation and reactions to bribery, exemplifying ethically controversial issues. However, what remains underexplored is how the general public interprets and reacts to the pervasiveness of bribery when religion is an informal institution. This influence extends beyond formal religious belief and practice, and permeates daily life, shaping moral judgments and behaviors in subtle but profound ways (Saraglu & Cohen, 2011).

Additionally, even those who are not Buddhists could be deeply influenced by these religious undercurrents. Understanding how these factors affect the general public's stance on bribery can provide deeper insights into the question of why does bribery persist in emerging markets.

The socio-cultural background in Thailand

Historians attribute Thailand's widespread bribery to its historical context, deep-rooted patronage culture, and its Buddhist religion. These practices trace to the early Thai feudalism system of the 1800s when town supervisors kept portions of taxes they collected and charged excessive fees for their services (Ariyabuddhiphongs & Hongladarom, 2011; Phongpaichit & Phiriyarangsarn, 1996). This practice has evolved to the present day bribery where government officials ask for bribes, and business leaders comply to gain favorable treatment (Charoensukmongkol, 2016; Mutebi, 2008).

Second, Thailand's power-distance and collectivist society foster a patronage system where superiors provide benefits to subordinates who reciprocate with loyalty and support (Andrews & Chompusri, 2013; Komin, 1990; Scott, 1972). The concept of *bunkhun* (indebted goodness) further reinforces this system, creating strong reciprocal ties (Ermongkonchai, 2008; Holmes & Tangtongtavy, 1995; Komin, 1990).

Finally, Buddhist beliefs held by 93% of the Thai population legitimize the exchange of gifts and favors (Ariyabuddhiphongs & Hongladarom, 2011; National Statistical Office, 2021; Phongpaichit & Phiriyarangsarn, 1996). Buddhism teaches that individuals benefit from being grateful for and repaying acts of kindness and that good deeds generate spiritual merits (Ariyabuddhiphongs & Li, 2016), in which many Thai firms capitalize on to foster social values (Constable & Kuasirikun, 2018).

In sum, bribery in Thailand has complex and intertwined socio-cultural roots that challenge anti-corruption interventions. While surveys and archival data have been used to examine firm strategies for navigating bribery practices in emerging markets at the country level (e.g., White et al., 2018; Tangdenchai et al., 2023), few studies have examined the socio-cultural impacts and the psychological mechanisms underlying bribery at the individual level.

Methods

We used a grounded theory approach for examining bribery in an emerging market. This qualitative approach is optimal for revealing behavioral patterns that provide a basis for developing theory (Gioia et al., 2013; Walsh et al., 2015). Previous research on corporation corruption or bribery often relies on secondary data (e.g., Lee et al., 2023; Gauthier et al., 2021; Jiang & Min, 2023; Fan et al., 2023) except for few recent endeavors exploring first-hand reflection on engagement in bribery (Dimitriadis, 2024; Jung & Lee, 2023). Given that bribery is often highly secretive and typically occurs under the table, secondary data and self-report surveys typically measured by hypothetical scenarios (e.g., Sharma & Bagozzi, 2022) may not fully capture the underlying psychological processes of those who engage in bribery. Therefore, our use of qualitative method provides an opportunity to collect more in-depth data to capture these processes.

Sampling

Considering the sensitivity of our research topic, we used a purposeful snowball sampling technique (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990). First, members of the academic community in Thailand introduced us to business leaders and officials who were willing to talk about their experiences with bribery. Those interviewees recommended additional business leaders and officials who were willing to participate in our interviews. In identifying participants, we tried to cover a wide range of industries, firm sizes, and regions in Thailand. Interviewees included Thai nationals (who were Buddhists) and one non-Thai (who was Christian). All interviewees had worked in their industry for more than 10 years and had frontline experiences with bribery interactions. As themes emerged, we shifted our focus from purposive sampling to theoretical sampling to gain more insight for our theoretical framework.

We interviewed 26 high ranking executives from a range of private sector industries (e.g., construction, manufacturing, real estate, wholesale and retail distribution, healthcare, agriculture, and educational services) and 3 high ranking government officials at the municipal and national level (Table 1). The number of interviewees meets or exceeds the recommended number for grounded theory research: 15–20 (Creswell, 2007), 13–15 (Francis et al., 2010; Marshall, 1996), or 4–12 (Saunders, 2012). We interviewed professional executives at high levels where discussions regarding bribery occur or are approved (White et al., 2018). Although our theoretical development focus is on the business side, we used data from government officials on the bribery demand side for triangulation.

Data collection

After receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board and gaining informed consent from all interviewees, the first author conducted the interviews from February 2019 to February 2020 in Thailand. Interviewees were assured of anonymity, confidentiality, freedom to refuse to answer questions, and liberty to quit at any time. All interviewees willingly cooperated throughout the entire process.

We developed a semi-structured interview protocol allowing us to develop rapport with interviewees before we asked sensitive questions. Our interviews involved open-ended questions covering general experiences in giving or receiving bribes, thoughts about stakeholders, and ethical attitudes. First, to determine whether their firm might have used bribery, we asked, “How has your company dealt with the government sector?” Second, we probed the extent of their personal experiences in giving and/or receiving bribery by asking, “How did you know that bribery would be involved? Can you explain the process? What would happen if you refused to get involved?” The third probe involved their thoughts about stakeholders: “What is your relationship with the person involved in the bribery payment or receipt? What do you know about your competitor’s involvement in bribery? How effective are government policies in curbing bribery?” The fourth probe explored ethical attitudes: “Do you think bribery is morally wrong? If so, why? Do you feel uneasy about being involved in bribery exchanges? Does your religion play a part in your decision to bribe or not?”

Table 1 Interviewee background

| No. | Industry | Firm type | Position | Participant / Company profile |
|-----|-----------------------|--|----------------|---|
| 1 | Construction | Public company with operations in Thailand and overseas | Executive VP | Male. Buddhist. Son of founder. Company works with both government and private firms. Learned the bribery process from observation within the family. |
| 2 | Construction | Small-medium family business. | Executive VP | Male. Buddhist. Son of founder. Company specializes in government projects (i.e., hospitals, roads, factories) directly and through subcontracting from other firms. Previously worked in a multinational construction company. |
| 3 | Wholesale trade | Distributor of electronic equipment. Small-medium family business. | MD / Owner | Female. Buddhist. Daughter of founder. Company provides electronic equipment to the government and private firms. |
| 4 | Construction | Small-medium family business. | MD / Owner | Male. Buddhist. Company used to focus on government projects (e.g., basic infrastructure, roads). Currently focuses on construction for private companies. |
| 5 | Public Administration | Government organization. | Official | Male. Buddhist. Oversees licenses and permits that are granted to private companies for construction approval. |
| 6 | Oil and gas | Private company with focus on distribution of natural gas. | Vice President | Male. Buddhist. The company has a distribution network all over the country and deals with both the government and private firms. |
| 7 | Wholesale trade | Distributor of electronic equipment. Small-medium family business. | Vice President | Female. Buddhist. Daughter of founder. Company provides electronic equipment to the government and private firms. |
| 8 | Manufacturing | Manufacturer of furniture. Small-medium family business. | President | Female. Buddhist. Daughter of founder. Company provides built-in and customized furniture to government organizations and private firms. |
| 9 | Real estate | Real estate development. Small-medium enterprise. | Vice President | Male. Buddhist. Son of company founder. Also an executive in other affiliated companies. Company works with both the government and private firms. |
| 10 | Educational services | Public education institution (elementary level). | Principal | Female. Buddhist. Has been principal for 10 years. School is one of the largest elementary school in the district with over 700 students. |
| 11 | Educational services | Public education institution (university level). | Associate Dean | Male. Buddhist. Has been associate dean for 3 years. University is one of the largest in the region with over 30,000 students. |
| 12 | Construction | Small-medium family business. | MD | Male. Buddhist. Has some work with private firms, but majority of work is for the government (e.g., basic infrastructure, roads, sewage system). |

Table 1 (continued)

| No. | Industry | Firm type | Position | Participant / Company profile |
|-----|-----------------------|---|-------------------|---|
| 13 | Construction | Small-medium family business. | MD | Male. Buddhist. Has some work with private firms, but majority of work is for the government (e.g., basic infrastructure, roads, sewage system). |
| 14 | Wholesale trade | Distributor of electronic equipment. Small-medium family business. | CEO / Founder | Male. Buddhist. Company is a young startup within a family-owned firm. Imports electronic equipment and sells to the government and private organizations. |
| 15 | Real estate | Small-medium family business. | MD | Male. Buddhist. Son of company founder. Also, an executive in other affiliated companies. Company works with both the government and private firms. |
| 16 | Retail service | Small-medium enterprise with focus on printing services and retail sales. | Manager | Male. Buddhist. Most of the customers are individual and companies, with some services provided to the government. |
| 17 | Manufacturing | Manufacturer of furniture. Small-medium family business. | CEO / Founder | Male. Buddhist. Company provides built-in and customized furniture to private firms (e.g., hotels, condominiums, schools, companies). |
| 18 | Real estate | Real estate development. Small-medium enterprise. | CEO | Female. Christian. Company sells and leases land, as well as develop properties into apartments, commercial buildings, and hotels. Originally from the US, and has lived in, and frequently travels to other Asian countries. |
| 19 | Public Administration | Former police officer. | Officer | Male. Buddhist. Previously worked in the police force. Currently working in a non-related government institution. |
| 20 | Public Administration | Former police officer. | Officer | Male. Buddhist. Previously worked in the police force. Currently working in a non-related government institution. |
| 21 | Retail service | Female clothing sold in own-store and over the internet. | CEO / Founder | Female. Buddhist. Designs, manufactures, and distributes own clothing line. |
| 22 | Health care | Large private hospital. | Vice President | Female. Buddhist. Previously worked in a state hospital. Currently, has an administrative position, overseeing strategy of the hospital. |
| 23 | Agriculture | Organic farming and distribution. | Owner / Founder | Male. Buddhist. Owns large fruit and vegetable farm and distributes organic products throughout the country. |
| 24 | Finance | Financial services. | Vice President | Male. Buddhist. Oversees non-performing loans unit of a large commercial bank. |
| 25 | Utilities | Electric power distribution. | Manager | Male. Buddhist. Joined the firm 10 years ago, and oversees regional power distribution. |
| 26 | Services | Small public relations firm | Managing Director | Female. Buddhist. Joined the firm 9 years ago. Oversees media training, public affairs, public relationship, and crisis management. |

Interviews lasted 30 to 90 min and were recorded, except for four participants who asked us to use direct transcriptions instead. Most interviews were conducted face-to-face, which is more appropriate for sensitive content (Polkinghorne, 2005). Four interviews were conducted by telephone at the request of the interviewees. Almost all of the interviews were conducted in Thai. Only one interview was conducted in English.

After completing the interviews, we used professional bilingual translators and conducted a translation to English and back-translation process to ensure construct and functional equivalence (Chidlow et al., 2014). We then proceeded to data coding and analysis.

Data analysis

Following the “Gioia methodology” (Gioia et al., 2013), we read the translated interview transcripts to identify emerging themes and then developed a set of codes based on those themes independently. Next, we shared and discussed the coding scheme until we reached consensus on the appropriate first-order codes. We then consolidated codes that were deemed similar and discussed which codes should be included in the next coding iteration. After several discussions, we reached consensus on the appropriate second-order concept. The process entailed several iterations between coding, analyzing the interview transcripts, comparisons with existing theory, and recoding in accordance with the procedurally-oriented grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Table 2 shows the data structure. The first-order codes with illustrative evidence can be found as supplementary material.

Table 2 Data structure

| Aggregate dimensions | Second order categories | First order codes |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------------|---|
| Institutional uncertainty | Institutional loopholes | Authoritarian control; Bureaucratic procedures |
| | Diversity of bribe receivers | Multiple regulatory stakeholders involved; Different norms across regulatory stakeholders |
| Unavoidable bribery | Utility of bribery | Facilitating business; maintaining relationships |
| | Pressure to bribe | Concerns for not bribing; attributing others’ gain to bribery |
| Perceived bribery pervasiveness | Penetration | Implicit forms of bribery; penetration across levels |
| | Socio-cultural norms | Social norms; tight bribery culture |
| | Perceived bribery persistence | Ineffective institutional control; cultural transmission |
| Psychological coping mechanism | Justification from Buddhist beliefs | Acceptance of imperfect conducts; Bribing as benefiting others to accumulate merit (<i>Tam Boon</i>); Wrongdoings can be reversed |
| | Conformity with the culture of giving | Gift giving as showing kindness; Following the tradition to give |
| Behavioral strategies | Washing away bad karma | Donation to temples; Offering to monks; Releasing animals |
| | Acclimatizing to the environment | Covering bribery conducts; Detouring to bribe; Using agents |

Findings

Perceived pervasiveness of bribery

Previous literature has established that perceived pervasiveness of bribery can create significant challenges for firms as it is deeply ingrained in business practices, especially in emerging markets (Lee & Oh, 2007). We found several indicators of bribery pervasiveness, namely penetration of bribery, socio-cultural norms, and the perceived persistence of bribery itself. Firstly, penetration of bribery can be categorized into implicit forms of bribery and penetration across levels. One interviewee described how implicit forms of bribery has infiltrated business practices:

“I must admit, and as you know, it happens...everywhere. While there are rules forbidding parents from paying money to get their students admitted, there are no rules that forbid parents from donating money to the school after the students have been admitted.” (Interviewee 10).

“A donation in exchange for something in return....it is often quite explicit here [at my workplace]. It could be in a form of making a donation to another party where the benefit that I would get in return is clearly stated...like extra days off. Not really monetary rewards, but there are favors [in return for donation].... if it were a direct request for bribe with something in return, then it would be too obvious. But stating as a donation does make it sound nicer.... and more acceptable.” (Interviewee 19).

Almost all interviewees mentioned donations as a commonly used type of bribe, although donations have been generally overlooked in the bribery research. Donation as a unique form of bribery is cultivated in a context where people appreciate kindness but are embarrassed to blatantly ask for bribes. As such, both bribe seekers and givers reach tacit consensus regarding the meaning of “donation”. Our investigation in the Thai context reveals that regulators often ask for highly needed and relatively inexpensive donations to facilitate business that are under regulatory control. Interviewees said that they tried avoiding bribery in the name of donations but the social norm pressured them to comply:

“Remember, Thailand is a giving society, so when such key donor does something good, the benefactor, whether directly or indirectly, and whoever it is, will return the favor in some form. And in this case, there is a fine line between donating for a good cause, donating where they may be expecting something in return in the future, as well as donating to enhance their own merit. You see, they are all intertwined. And this is very strong in the Thai culture.” (Interview 18).

Other interviewees described how bribery has penetrated across all levels of business and society:

“Oh yes, giving gifts, paying extra money, bribery is part of our society. It happens in business at all levels.” (Interviewee 9).

“People who take special money are not afraid. If they were afraid, they wouldn't be involved in these kinds of dealings at all. And this process is pretty much known throughout the industry....” (Interviewee 8).

Secondly, socio-cultural norms of bribery can be categorized into social norms and tight bribery culture. Interviewees described how bribery is a social norm that everyone engages in or feels compelled to engage in, even though it may not be openly discussed. This normalization of bribery as part of the social fabric creates an environment where such practices are not only tolerated but expected, contributing to the pervasiveness of bribery in the society:

“I think these extra payments is part of a custom of our society, it has become a tradition of our country. It has to be done, otherwise it would be very difficult to work or rather impossible....to get things done....smoothly and achieve our goals.” (Interviewee 1).

Interviewees also described the deeply ingrained nature of bribery in the society. Specifically, bribery is not just a practice but an integral part of the culture that is supported and expected. There is an unwritten rule that demands compliance with bribery requests and reciprocation of bribery gestures. Failure to comply is seen as a breach of tradition and may result in repercussions, such as being left behind or unable to progress.

“Bribery is engrained on our culture, and our culture supports it. If someone demands it you must pay, or else you will be left behind. If someone gives, you must take it. If not, it would be considered a rude response towards a friendly gesture. So everyone does it.” (Interviewee 9).

Thirdly, perceived bribery persistence can be categorized into ineffective institutional control and cultural transmission. Interviewees detailed how the inefficacy of institutional controls is part of the bribery persistence. For example, although there are frequent rotations of officials to reduce the likelihood of bribery, it is still necessary to pay whoever is currently in charge. As such, practices of bribing persist despite changes in officials:

“But senior officers...those at the executive level position... they rotate positions among different departments or agencies, and come and go. So it's not like paying the particular person, but paying the one who is in charge at that moment. Whoever is in charge gets the extra money.” (Interviewee 3).

Interviewees also mentioned that cultural transmission, extending pervasiveness of bribery to the temporal dimension. For instance:

“I don’t think any kind of change will happen ...unless this current generation of people are gone. However, the new generation that will take over this old generation will have been trained by them [the previous generation].” (Interviewee 1).

As such, we extend the country-level pervasiveness of corruption to perceived pervasiveness at the individual level. By analyzing our qualitative data from business leaders’ perspective, we identify new indicators of bribery pervasiveness, including penetration across all levels and in implicit forms (e.g., donation), pressure to conform to the socio-cultural norms to bribe and expected persistence of pervasiveness.

Antecedents of perceived bribery pervasiveness: institutional uncertainty

Previous literature has established that institutional uncertainty is an antecedent for bribery pervasiveness (Doh et al., 2003; Lee & Oh, 2007). We found that institutional loopholes and diversity of bribery receivers are indicators of institutional uncertainty that increase perceived bribery pervasiveness.

First, institutional loopholes such as authoritarian control and bureaucratic procedures lead to more leeway to bribe (Lu et al., 2023; White et al., 2023). For instance, one interviewee described how officials use their authority to coerce people into providing bribes:

“Now the law does place us at a disadvantage – if we get the job, it [the law] will allow them to request for several documents, which is cumbersome. It allows them to change the specifications at their will and to fine us at any time for whatever reason.” (Interviewee 2).

Other interviewees highlighted how bureaucratic red tape creates systemic loopholes that increases institutional uncertainty:

“The rules and regulations leave loopholes for people to take advantage in our country. If you don’t [pay bribes] you will be forced to do so. You won’t get ahead with all the bureaucracy and red tape that had been deliberately set up to support this system.” (Interviewee 11).

Second, diversity of bribery receivers also increases perceived bribery pervasiveness. This mainly occurs when a project involves multiple regulatory stakeholders, in which there will be multiple sources to bribe with various norms across these agents. For instance:

“During some periods we have many projects so we have to pay to a lot [of different agencies]. It also depends on how concentrated are our projects located, if they are scattered [over different locations], we have to pay more [agencies].” (Interviewee 1).

It also occurs when there are different norms across regulatory stakeholders. For instance:

“Each office may have different practices, so you need to learn about the practice from people who have been there. You cannot find out about this from a public source. It is a grey area, not quite right to do so, but you need to do it to survive.” (Interviewee 12).

Antecedents of perceived bribery pervasiveness: unavoidable bribery

We found that perceived bribery pervasiveness is influenced by individual’s perception of bribery as unavoidable, which encompasses both utility of bribery and pressure to bribe. First, business leaders in Thailand indicate the utility of bribery as facilitating business and maintaining relationships. For instance, one interviewee states that:

“Typically, bribery is unethical but sometimes it’s necessary. So, if we must pay a little amount of extra money for obtaining a license as well as for speeding the process...and everybody does it.” (Interviewee 18).

“In my opinion, bribery occurs....my boss continued to entertain them (officials). My boss would take them to dinner, there were also rumors that my boss would take them to massage parlors as well. And we always got the job.” (Interviewee 2).

Second, our interviewees also indicate pressure to bribe, reflected as concerns for not bribing and attributing others’ gain to constant bribery. For instance, several interviewees mentioned concerns that if they don’t bribe, their business will suffer from delayed administrative progress and tremendous troubles from diverse regulators:

“It does deter from doing other things as we have to focus on this [bribery management], but if we don’t go along [don’t pay], we won’t survive.” (Interviewee 1).

“If we don’t pay them accordingly, they will cause trouble for us. We’ve had that experience before.” (Interviewee 12).

In addition, attributing others’ gain to constant bribery can also lead individuals to perceive bribery as pervasive. For instance,

“If you notice, there is a group of construction companies that keeps on getting deals. It is obvious [that bribery is occurring]. (Interviewee 1)

“These new contractors have never worked for the government and came out of nowhere [to win bids]. In addition, the government now appears to have new

budgets for projects that did not exist before....in order to get these kinds of special projects there definitely needs to be bribes. (Interviewee 3)

Finally, we found that institutional uncertainty also influences business leaders' perception of unavoidable bribery. Several interviewees explained how their experience has been shaped by the institutions around them. For instance,

"My opinion... I did not hear this from anyone...my opinion is that it is not up to the individual, but it is the practice of the government department, so everyone learns [about bribery] from within." (Interviewee 3).

Psychological coping mechanism

We found that the socio-cultural roots in Buddhism and the appreciation of kindness in Thailand provide people with a rationale to engage in bribery. Bribers often justify their bribing behavior through their Buddhist beliefs and the tradition of giving, which can loosen moral regulations or lead them to not perceiving this conduct through a moral lens. Firstly, justification from their Buddhist beliefs includes to accept imperfect conduct, to view bribing as a means to benefiting others and accumulate merit (*tam boon* in Thai, making merit/good karma), as well as to believe that bad karma of wrongdoings can be reversed. For instance, an interviewee was asked about their feelings associated with giving bribes:

"I think that religion does teach us to be good people. But at the same time, I see that many of those who are religious, or very religious, are the very same people who engage in special payments. Bribing someone directly is bad and is a sin, but you have to see whether the intent really is to bribe, or are they following the custom, trying to survive, or offering special payments for something that will be better." (Interviewee 10).

Meanwhile, others view bribing as a means to benefit others and accumulate merits, which turns out to be a good conduct:

"Giving bribes from a moral perspective, from a Buddhist perspective, is not right. But then the Buddhist religion also states that giving to someone that will make that person better off is a good thing to do. It is good for the receiver, and if it is good for the receiver, then it is also good for the giver. The receiver is better off, and the giver is better off spiritually...better merits." (Interviewee 18).

Moreover, moral emotions of conscience (*hiri*) and fear (*ottappa*) associated with wrongdoings of bribery entrapment and bad karma of misdeeds can be cleansed according to people's belief in Buddhism. For instance:

"I needed to pay the official a certain amount of special money to get a task done for my organization. So I did. It was a bribe. But from the amount of bribe

to the official, the official did share some amount back with me. And later on, I donated some of that money to the temple...in order to wash away the bad karma from my engagement in bribery.” (Interviewee 11).

Interestingly, regardless of “pure Buddhism teachings”, it is people’s lay belief about Buddhism that plays an important role in releasing bribers from moral regulation by accepting, reframing, and excusing bribery. For instance:

“Now all of this is not really pure Buddhism, but a mixture between Buddhism and Hindu beliefs. Pure Buddhism does not endorse any kind of wrongdoings, no matter what excuse you can say that something good may come out of it. But somehow along the way, our society has mixed Buddhism with some other beliefs to the point that if you rob someone and give what you had robbed to the poor people, many people will think that is actually a good thing to do... We have amulets and statues of Buddha at our houses, not to remind us to do good things which I think what it should be for, but to protect us from evil spirits and allow us to pray and be a good person.” (Interviewee 26).

As such, it is the lay belief about Buddhist teachings rather than the normative Buddhist doctrines that shape people’s decision-making and judgment regarding bribery.

The second psychological coping mechanism identified from our interviews was the motive to conform with the Thai culture of giving. In fact, this culture of giving also stems from a lay belief in Buddhism. Interviewees consider gift-giving as a gesture to show kindness without expectation for reciprocation. Also, following the tradition to give is considered normative and appropriate in the Thai culture. For instance, interviewee 11 reflected that “*our culture is based on giving kindness and receiving kindness in return.*” Similar reflection was echoed by Interviewee 18: “*Then this whole giving as a merit for our own good then extends to the practice of our culture. It becomes a culture of giving.*”

This cultural meaning system is deeply rooted in the Thai context. Even for non-Buddhists, it becomes a tight cultural norm to follow, as reflected by Interviewee 18 (Christian):

“So people interpret the Buddhist principles in their own way. Some of these collective interpretations have become the culture that people follow. Giving is one of them- giving and you then get something in return in the future. But the part of giving is what makes people happy, it is what makes them feel good, and they ignore the fact that what the giving may be really for, whether there is a reciprocation involved or not, in which if there is, they will ignore the fact that it is a bribe...even if you are not Buddhist, you will still follow the tradition of giving, and bribing in the name of giving”.

The abovementioned evidence is consistent with moral disengagement theory (Bandura, 1990), demonstrating that bribe givers use moral justification to disengage from any moral pressure stemming from bribing. The cognitive lens through which bribe givers employ as moral justifications are deeply rooted in the local cultural tradition,

heavily influenced by Buddhism, especially the concerns for showing kindness and accumulating merit.

Behavioral strategies

Interviewees reported using behavioral strategies such as washing away bad karma regarding bribe giving and acclimatizing to the environment. First, since interviewees believe that their bad karma from wrongdoings (i.e., bribing) can be washed away, they actually engage in several means to wash away bad karma on many occasions. For instance:

“Washing away bad karma from what has been committed isn’t an occasion that I have to set out to do, it is part of our lives. And there are so many occasions and so many opportunities to do so, New Years, birthdays, all religious holidays, and so forth. If [the bad karma is] minor, I can wash it away right away, for example, offer food to the monks in front my house in the morning, do something good during the day (when I have done something wrong). If what I did [the bad karma] was large, then I can wash it away during special occasions or rituals like fish releasing ceremony and so forth.” (Interviewee 11).

“All the auspicious holidays in Thailand provide an opportunity for people to ‘Tam Boon’ [make merits]. They can donate to the temple, release fish into the water. If people don’t go to the temple to do so, they can just wait to meet the monks to walk pass by in the morning. Or in the office, there will be a charity that visits to collect money. Every time people Tam Boon, they will wai [pray] and think of the good deed they have done so it will wash away any bad deeds that they have done.” (Interviewee 18).

Second, interviewees also mentioned acclimatizing to their environment as part of their behavioral strategies in responding to their perceived pervasiveness of bribery. Interviewees detailed their strategy for concealing bribery conducts, in ways that would not attract scrutiny, such as avoiding entries that require detailed evidence or names.

“Well, we can’t directly put bribery into our books. So we need to hide it somewhere which takes some thinking to do. If we put it as expenses, then we need to make sure they are not expenses that requires evidence like the names of who we pay to. If we subtract it from our revenue, it will look like we are not doing well. So we need to spread it out a bit.” (Interviewee 9).

Interviewees also described how they used creative tactics to obscure the true nature of their bribery transactions, employing methods designed to ensure their actions remained undetected:

“We would sell the dirt from the client site, and use that money that we received from selling the dirt to pay for the bribe.” (Interviewee 1).

In addition, interviewees discussed their strategies in employing agents to distance themselves from the bribery process, thus minimizing the risk of detection and maintaining a semblance of integrity in their dealings.

“And those that are smart won’t get involved [with paying bribes] themselves, but they can let others do it for them in a way that is not considered ‘wrong’.”
(Interviewee 11).

The aforementioned evidence demonstrates that, in addition to employing psychological coping mechanisms to justify from moral pressures stemming from bribery, bribe givers also utilize various behavioral strategies to acclimatize to their perceived bribery pervasiveness and alleviate any negative repercussions. Again, bribe giver’s strategies to alleviate any negative repercussions are deeply rooted in the local cultural context, manifested in their lay belief in Buddhism.

Theoretical model

We developed a theoretical model by identifying relationships between the aggregate dimensions in the data structure (Fig. 1). Our model reveals that those who engage in bribery respond to perceived bribery pervasiveness by developing several psychological coping mechanisms and behavioral strategies, which are deeply rooted in and derived from Thailand’s Buddhist culture. The concept of “tam boon” or making merit through good deeds, inherent in Buddhist teachings, has been used to justify bribery as a means of accumulating merit. Similarly, the culture of giving, emphasizing kindness through gift-giving, has been exploited to rationalize bribery as a mutually beneficial exchange. These cultural norms create an environment where bribery is not only tolerated but sometimes even encouraged as a way to gain favor or maintain relationships, perpetuating its existence and complicating eradication efforts without addressing underlying cultural beliefs. These psychological coping mechanisms and behavioral strategies further shape the self-sustaining feature of bribery.

While the Thai government has implemented measures such as electronic bidding systems, CCTV cameras for transparency, and anti-corruption campaigns to curb bribery, our interviewees expressed doubt about the effectiveness of these efforts. Several interviewees highlighted loopholes in the system, suggesting that anti-bribery measures can be avoided. For example, one interviewee stated that the e-bidding

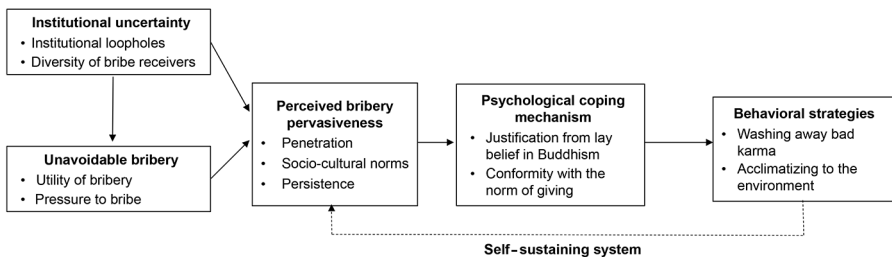


Fig. 1 Theoretical Model

system “looks better from the outside” (Interviewee 1), but is “not transparent.” (Interviewee 3). Another interviewee described how predetermined selections and sideline conversations regarding bribes occur during the bidding:

“They have a list of who they think will come and make the bid. Then they will call these people in to provide details of the work. Then the sideline conversations [regarding the bribe amount] will happen.” (Interviewee 1).

Interviewees also emphasized that bribery has become deeply ingrained as a social norm. Those who refuse to comply with these practices face increased transaction costs and risk being marginalized. This entrenched nature of bribery underscores the challenges in eradicating it, as it is deeply rooted in the cultural context. Thus, our model highlights the self-sustaining feature of bribery in Thailand, where cultural norms perpetuate its existence.

Discussion

Bribery and corruption generally undermine operational efficiency, institutional transparency, and public welfare. Despite governance efforts to control corruption and research devoted to finding solutions (e.g., Stevens & Newenham-Kahindi, 2021), bribery still prevails in many emerging markets. In this study, we integrated the moral failure and cultural norm perspectives on corruption (Castro et al., 2020), and the literature on religion and bribery as theoretical frameworks to examine how business leaders perceive and cope with bribery pervasiveness psychologically and behaviorally in Thailand.

Consistent with previous research (Lee & Oh, 2007), we found that bribery is highly pervasive in Thailand. In particular, we found that penetration of bribery, socio-cultural norms, and perceived persistence of bribery as indicators of perceived pervasiveness of bribery. In addition, we found several psychological coping mechanisms and behavioral strategies deeply rooted in the Thai context that bribe givers use in dealing with their perceived pervasiveness of bribery. More importantly, we extend previous research by identifying unique psychological coping mechanisms (e.g., justification from lay belief in Buddhism and conformity with the norm of giving) and behavioral strategies (e.g., washing away bad karma), which are rooted in the Buddhist teachings encouraging merit accumulation. Since giving and helping others could accumulate good karma whereas bad karma from wrongdoings can be washed away, these beliefs and the corresponding practices lead to rationalization of bribery, and further enable a self-sustaining system of bribery that becomes difficult to disrupt. This departs from conventional wisdom that religion promotes moral awareness and moral judgment, and thus strong religious beliefs should lead to lower acceptance of bribery practices (Treisman, 2000) or tensions and struggles (Vu, 2021).

The results of our interviews with Thai Buddhist executives were consistent with those of our interviews with government officials and a non-Thai Christian. Government officials described institutional uncertainty, unavoidable bribery, and acknowl-

edged the psychological coping mechanisms and behavioral strategies reported by the executives. The non-Thai Christian, who has worked in Thailand for over twenty years, described conforming to the Thai business culture by paying bribes in a manner consistent with the executives we interviewed (reflected by quotes from Interviewee 18).

Theoretical contributions

Our study makes several contributions to the literature. First, we contribute to the non-market strategy literature and address the call for a better understanding of how managerial perceptions shape decisions to engage in bribery (Mellahi et al., 2016) by illuminating the underpinnings that encourage different bribery approaches. Our findings also uncover how informal institutions intertwine with socio-cultural factors to justify and even encourage bribery. We find that the tradition of giving and showing kindness influenced by Buddhism in Thailand encourages conformity with such a social norm. Donations to governmental officials and regulatory agencies, an implicit form of bribery, are then considered as culturally appropriate in Thailand. This finding contrasts with the moral failure perspective, which assumes a Kantian view of universal moral philosophy and considers corruption as unethical and negative (Castro et al., 2020, p.950). Research on the decision frame related to unethical behavior suggests that economic and relational frames can be used to disengage actors from moral pressure (Liu et al., 2017a). Although corruption has long been illegal and morally condemned in many countries, decision-makers may use an instrumental or economic frame to describe bribes as part of the “business transactions”. In our research, bribery in the form of a donation is culturally framed and even morally encouraged to show kindness and accumulate merit. By combining the cultural norm and moral failure perspectives (Castro et al., 2020), our study not only extends research on corruption by revealing a new frame of bribery but also brings attention to the significance of meaning from the actors’ perspective in these morally controversial issues. Our findings point to the importance of investigating local contexts using an emic approach to uncover the deeply rooted meaning system of non-market strategies.

Second, our study extends research on the impact of religion on bribery, especially through the lens of Buddhism or lay beliefs about Buddhist doctrines. Although previous research (Ko & Moon, 2014) suggests that religions with strong hierarchies (e.g., Islam, Catholicism, and Orthodox Christianity) could impede the development of trust and thus have higher corruption levels, whereas Buddhist societies would be less tolerant of corruption due to the lack of strong hierarchies (Zakaria, 2018). However, our findings indicate that this postulation may not hold as each religion has its own way of resolving moral conflicts. Recent research on bribery acts in Vietnam documented the use of a Buddhism-enacted utilitarian approach built on Buddhist doctrines of karmic consequences, community and social well-being, and total detachment, to impose moral tension and struggle on leaders who engage in organizational bribery (Vu, 2021). In contrast, our findings indicate that Buddhist belief in karma and repentance can release the moral pressure of engaging in bribery. Even though bribers may feel morally wrong, they can always wash away their bad karma

by donation to temples, offering to monks, or releasing animals. In addition, bribery in the name of a donation imposes moral pressure to conform and give to government officials. Different from using euphemistic language for moral disengagement or normalize bribery (Anand et al., 2004), we find that people use religiously encouraged methods to bond relationships with officials to give gifts and donation to show kindness. Furthermore, what guides actors' judgment and decision-making regarding bribery is their lay belief about the cultural norm deeply rooted in Buddhism rather than the actual Buddhist teachings. Future research on religion and bribery should take a lay belief approach to understand an actor's interpretation and application of religious beliefs.

Finally, although the Thai government uses e-procurement technology to improve transparency and to curb corruption, we find that Thailand's tight culture featuring the Buddhist beliefs in karma and the norm of giving has thwarted their efforts. This finding contrasts with other studies that have seen technology work to mitigate corruption by preventing government officials from withholding information or favoring certain bidders (Fan et al., 2021; Ishak & Said, 2015; Mackey & Cuomo, 2020). Instead, we show that Thailand's highly pervasive and deeply rooted bribery cultivates a self-sustaining system that challenges anti-corruption interventions.

Practical implications

Our findings have several practical implications. Managers of local and foreign firms must be wary if they are working in emerging markets where a cultural tradition of giving is associated with explicit or implicit reciprocal promises. By establishing "no gift" policies and strictly enforcing it, managers might better comply with international standards and enhance transparency regarding charity donations and sponsorships in both official and unofficial business transactions. Firms, especially MNCs, should then use formal and informal communication to increase awareness among employees of the meaning of various local customs in developing and maintaining relationships with governmental officials and regulatory agencies.

Finally, given that the cultural roots of bribery stems from religious beliefs, regulatory agencies that are engaged in anti-corruption efforts may want to cooperate with those engaged in religious teachings in order to provide people with a better understanding of moral awareness and moral judgment, rather than using lay belief in religion to loosen moral regulations and as an excuse for misconducts. This may also include a better understanding of 'washing away bad karma' for knowing and repeated offenses. A better understanding of what it truly means to be kind and what are the associated grey areas of showing kindness remain to be clarified and promoted among lay people. Meanwhile, policymakers need to be aware of the ineffective anti-corruption measure of e-bidding system. Without rewiring the cultural meaning of bribery (e.g., donation to regulatory agencies) and the karma-washing tactics regarding bribery, it might be hard to reduce bribery pervasiveness only with technical control.

Limitations and future research

This study has limitations that we hope future research will address. First, we focus on the Buddhist influence and the norm of giving in Thailand. Although the interviewer is familiar with the Thai culture, we may have overlooked within-country variations regarding institutional uncertainty and local cultural norms across Thailand, especially firm leaders with different religious beliefs. Also, by focusing on only one country, our study may be limited regarding variances in corruption in other emerging markets and Asian countries (Lee & Oh, 2007). Therefore, future studies should use a larger sample to explore potential within-country variation and to compare other emerging markets and countries.

Second, cohort effects may occur. In particular, members of the younger generation are often educated abroad and lack exposure to implicit cultural norms. When they reach a managerial level, they may refuse to tolerate explicit forms of bribery but still conform with the norm to give implicit forms of bribery such as gift giving or donations. Future studies could examine changing attitudes about bribery across generations, educational backgrounds, and foreign experiences.

Third, although our sample included individuals from a wide range of industries, most worked at established firms. Hence, sample selection bias is possible because we lacked participants from new firms that are at the nascent stage where corruption may have a different impact (Tian et al., 2021). Future studies could compare nascent entrepreneurs with established firms to further examine the cultural roots of bribery.

Conclusion

Firms in emerging markets often face challenges in dealing with bribery. How business leaders perceive, interpret and respond to bribery should be perceived and understood through an emic approach through the lens of a socio-cultural and religious context. We identified that lay belief about Buddhist teachings of karma give rise to unique psychological coping mechanisms for business leaders to justify and even moralize their engagement in bribery. Behavioral strategies of washing away bad karma further create a self-sustaining system that have to date foiled many attempts to use technology to fight bribery. To examine unethical and ethically controversial issues, an indigenous approach to understand the local cultural meaning system should be considered in future research.

Supplementary Information The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10490-024-09980-2>.

Acknowledgements We would like to thank Senior Editor Seung-Hyun Lee and the two anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments and suggestions in improving this article. We also extend our gratitude to the Asia Academy of Management/Asia Pacific Journal of Management Paper Development Workshop hosted by The University of International Business and Economics (UIBE) in May 2022 and to Ziliang Deng for the valuable feedback. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Academy of International Business Conference and Academy of Management Conference in 2022. We appreciate the feedback from reviewers and audiences at the conferences, as well as from Brian Roy Tan. All errors remain our own.

Funding This work was supported by the Thailand Research Fund [Grant no. RSA6180086].

Declarations

Ethical approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Conflict of interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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