Political Interaction in Northern Thailand

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One of the purposes of social science research is to make the real world more rational and comprehensible, and to do this, social scientists have fashioned elaborate frameworks that attempt to "make sense" of otherwise unique and disparate events. Research presented within such a framework is deemed "analytical", rather than "descriptive", the latter being a pejorative term in this context implying disinterest in finding patterns of behavior.

Although scholars of Thailand have long attempted to deal analytically with Thai politics, few generalizations have been discovered that allow systematic explanation of Thai political behavior. Because the findings of scholars who use a particular framework are different from and often contradict findings of scholars who use a different framework, and because the data are manipulated to fit the framework, skepticism must accompany every conceptual approach which purports to provide the explanation of Thai politics. Thus far, such explanation remains elusive and is, perhaps, unattainable.

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Notwithstanding the difficulties, we wish to analyze the interactions of the residents of three villages in Northern Thailand. We presumed no overarching theory of politics to "explain" Thai politics, although a set of assumptions was posited, and confirmed by the field research, as a context for analyzing interpersonal ties. We found a society, characterized by flux and diversity of behavior, with behavior more situational than patterned. At the same time we found a loose pattern of interaction among Thais, who act rationally and pragmatically with each other as they seek to have their needs met.

A primary purpose was to examine the importance of personal exchange relationships in Thai society and more specifically, to evaluate the role of
patron-client (clientelist) ties. Even more specifically, we wanted to assess how people in three Northern Thai villages meet their changing needs and gain material rewards: information, status, public goods.

Thai and Western social science literature has argued that Thai society is characterized by patterns of interaction, exemplified by exchange processes that are at the heart of power and authority relationships. This literature has focused on exchange relationships as the basis of sociopolitical organization in Thailand, arguing that the sociopolitical system can best be understood by analyzing the way Thais interact to meet their needs. The principal proposition is that, in Thailand, the primary pattern of interaction is superior-subordinate relationships, characterized by dyadic, hierarchical, personal, voluntary, multifunctional, reciprocal ties. These relationships, often referred to as patron-client ties, are thought to form the basis of the political and social structure, and to exist because they are perceived to maximize rewards and minimize undesirable ends.

Clientelism is a special kind of superior-subordinate relationship that includes a personalism and multifunctionality not found in nonclientelist ties. Clientelism requires a sense of obligation (bunkhun) among those in the relationship so that one comes to the aid of the other in all spheres of life. Clearly, the degree of obligation and reciprocity varies, but a sense of gratitude and moral obligation must always be present. Without these affective aspects, clientelism cannot be differentiated from the more common landlord-tenant, father-son, employer-employee, or friendship ties.

The literature suggests that patron-client dyads do not exist autonomously; rather, they are linked with other dyads into a network that pervades the society at all levels. Theoretically, it is possible to graph a hierarchical chain of patron-client bonds, from the farmer to the highest power elite in the capital city. Information flows through this network of overlapping and interrelated groups, from patron A to client B and from patron B (the same person as client B) to his client, C; and so forth.

The extensive literature on patron-client relations indicates that such bonds are formed in societies that have only a few institutionalized and differentiated structures to carry out specified functions and to act as linkages between the state and the citizenry. In many societies where new institutions such as bureaucracies, political parties, pressure groups, and legislatures are not available or are highly restricted, patron-client bonds become the primary intermediaries between officials and citizens; and they are the most important organizational unit for resource (reward and cost) allocation. In undifferentiated societies, personal alliances do what impersonal structures are supposed to do in more institutionalized societies.

Patron-client bonds are found in societies where there are marked inequalities in wealth, status, and control. Historically in Thailand, when resources were traditionally insufficient, those with limited access to resources