Ordering the World: Chat of Central Thailand

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Introduction

The rituals of evening in Central Thai villages are easily visible in the open teak houses closely clustered together. Side by side, substantial well-kept houses and flimsy run-down shacks fade into darkness. Their occupants, fresh from bathing, light small oil lamps and chat quietly or spread out their bedding. Beneath the house, chickens and pigs scuffle, snort and settle down for the night. Suddenly, the peace is shattered by drum rolls and the twang of an electric guitar amplified for the whole village to hear. The dance troupe and their “shadow” band combo is rehearsing for their next performance at a nearby temple fair. Six girls in their mid-teens are training a younger sister to gyrate seductively and toss her short skirt just high enough to attract cash. Her older sisters contribute substantially to the household income by encouraging their dancing partners to visit late at night. As the combo rehearses between the houses, Chat and her neighbours watch with sceptical tolerance, remembering their own courting dances of many years past, but aware that the musicians and dancers practising in the glare of a kerosene lantern are actors in a very different social drama.

Chat’s life in a large, central Thai village stretches from the last decade of the absolute monarchy in Thailand, when peasant communities conformed to current myths about Thai society, to the eighties, when the cash economy was transforming work and relations to the requirements of a “post-peasant” society. We can understand something of her life through an examination of her relations with family and neighbours, after first placing it in the context of Thailand in the seventies, her community and the Theravada Buddhist milieu.

Thailand in the Seventies

Like other developing countries, Thai society can be divided into the privileged elite and the common person. Each live in totally different worlds linked by patron-client relations and common allegiances. The differences between the privileged elite and ordinary people are even more apparent in Bangkok, the capital city, over 30 times larger than the next largest city, Chiang Mai. Bangkok is the symbolic, economic and political centre of the country; it is the source of political and economic changes affecting rural populations throughout the country. All information, transportation

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and material goods move from Bangkok to the hinterland. Rural migrants enter Bangkok expecting a qualitative difference in their lives, as they become part of the symbolic centre of the nation.

As a result of the rapid population expansion and growth of the capital, Bangkok in the seventies displays problems of other large Asian cities — pollution, overcrowding, traffic congestion, crime, prostitution and unemployment. During the seventies, rising gas and food prices (particularly pork) and fluctuating world market prices increased subsistence problems for both urban elite and rural poor. Frustrations flamed the political upheavals in the country which had an effect on rural communities. The decade began with the attempts to form a constitutional democracy crushed by a military coup in 1971 which abolished parliament. By 1973, the public outrage against corruption, repression and bureaucratic ineptitude precipitated the overthrow of the dictatorship, heralding a period of democratic rule (1973–1976). Students and workers combined forces to bring about a number of experiments with democracy which were to have a significant, if short-lived, impact on the country. The reaction to these reforming trends began almost immediately, as students preaching democracy to rural farmers faced right-wing opposition groups formed to repress and discredit radical ideals. By 1976, the struggling experiments with democracy stopped with the overthrow of the government, the abolition of the constitution and the return to a more repressive regime (1976–1977). The decade ended with a stable military government facing substantial problems both within the country and on her borders. In spite of these difficulties, Thailand has maintained a substantial annual growth rate (7 per cent) and enthusiastic programmes of economic and rural development.

Although Thailand has never been a colony of the West, its emulation of things Western encourages a pattern of accommodation to outside influences. This accommodating style has been interpreted as part of a process of indirect colonialism or neocolonialism. Upcountry, the distinction is meaningless, since even the most blatantly American products — Florida State T-shirts, for example — are treated as Thai inventions.

Uthong District in the Seventies

The rice-growing village of Uthong district, west-central Thailand, was affected by both the political and economic changes emanating from Bangkok. The large landowners in the district diversified their crops and used their profits from sugar cane, for example, to buy cattle which grazed on nearby hills and on the distant slopes of the Kanchanaburi hills. Less fortunate men and women worked for daily wages or moved to Bangkok for seasonal employment. But generally, there is less landlessness in Suphanburi province than in other parts of Central Thailand. The few tractor owners in the village suffered under the increased cost of gasoline, but raised their prices and continued renting their equipment to most households who were almost totally dependent on mechanization.

The political upheavals in Bangkok had ramifications in the village political systems. The spirit of the times required the central government to address the needs of the rural poor. But the villagers, both rich and poor, viewed the central government with suspicion and only rarely initiated contacts with administrative officials. On one