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Far Eastern Survey

AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF PACIFIC RELATIONS

Peasants and Politics in Thailand

Remote from Washington, the village of Bang Chan still has a bearing on our policy toward Asia. Knowing its needs can make that policy more effective.

BY LAURISTON SHARP

FOR THE FIRST TIME in our history southern Asia has become a major focus of American political interest. We must now formulate new policies toward this region, seeking to avoid mistakes made in China. American ignorance of the countries of southern Asia is abysmal; yet out of this ignorance, action programs are being formulated.

For the sake of security, it is said, arms and other military aid should be given to anti-Communist governments in southern Asia; and such aid is being given. Again, it is argued that what is most needed is material and technological aid for economic development, on the theory that economic improvement will help close the door to Communism among Asia's masses. Plans for such aid are being forwarded both by the American government and by the United Nations. Finally, we are told that the masses of Asia suffer from a malaise that will not be allayed by weapons or by material goods alone; that they need above all hope, and the faith that they themselves can participate in a social system which holds some promise of giving them a better life.

Whether our problem is one of choosing among these alternatives, or of implementing one or another or a combination of these programs, we have but meager information at hand to help us to a solution. In particular, we know little of what is happening among the masses. Some of our foreign correspondents have done excellent work under severe handicaps; but they know, as do editors, that reader interest is caught by the scoop

Professor Sharp, of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Cornell University, was in charge of the community study in Thailand described in this article, which is based on a paper read at the April 1950 meeting of the Far Eastern Association.

interview, the assassination, the civil war, the drought, flood, or other disaster. When the good correspondent does get through to us an occasional glimpse of what the common man is thinking or doing, it is usually the common man in the street, not the man in the field.

Is the Asian peasant important? Can he really be a force in shaping future events? The recent history of India, Burma, Indonesia, Indochina, and especially China would indicate that he can. André Malraux suggested years ago that the masses beyond our Far Eastern horizons appeared to be silent only because the distance was too great to permit us to hear their cries. Today, though the distance is less, there may still be significant voices that we do not hear. Is there no way in which we can tap this vital source of information, and establish politically useful lines of communication with rural Asia?

The community study is a technique that can help in solving this problem. Developed by cultural anthropologists, it often enlists the aid of other social scientists and of technicians in various fields. By intensive study of small but representative groups, it

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seeks to understand the entire compass of life which bounds the ordinary person. The mass of data which comes out of a community study has the advantage of being detailed and concrete. Such data permit a realistic definition of the actual problems of John Doe, Mohammed Ali, or Nai Boon—what they need, and what they think they need.

Rumanian peasants are reported to have said of well-meaning foreigners who were trying to help them, "They scratch us where we don't itch." The community study tries to locate the spots that do itch, the problems that trouble the minds of real men.

In 1948-49 Cornell University sponsored a rural community study in the rice-producing area of central Thailand.¹ The methods and findings will be fully described in a volume now in preparation. The present brief report on some of the major findings illustrates the kind of material provided by community studies. It also throws light on conditions in Thailand, and suggests some considerations, important for policy-makers, which may apply in other areas as well.

The Village Background

The community of Bang Chan, some twenty miles northeast of Bangkok, is accessible to the capital city not only by canal but also by road, an unusual feature in central Thailand. Hence it is open to influences from the metropolis, a condition which will become increasingly common as more roads are opened up. The population of about 1,600 is fairly concentrated geographically. Almost all are rice farmers, and a majority are landowners rather than tenants or laborers. The people produce a large surplus of rice, which is sold to nearby millers for export. They patronize an active religious institution or *wat*, and a government primary school, both centrally located. The population includes a small number—7 percent—of Moslem Thai, an important minority group in Buddhist Thailand. There was in 1948-49 only one Chinese resident, though the people were dependent upon Chinese itinerant vendors, or nearby traders and millers. Some of the people in the community had never seen a foreigner; others were familiar with the metropolitan life of Bangkok or other cities.

The community of Bang Chan is not troubled by the rapid growth of population which is a bugbear in many parts of rural Asia. Births are apparently declining, and although pressure on the land is mildly felt, it has been eased by migration to Bangkok. Bang Chan women in general are ambivalent about having large families. Overtly the culture values a good sup-

ply of children to provide sons for the priesthood and sons and daughters for field work. Covert cultural values, however, are indicated by an average of only two children under 14 years of age in all households (which average 5.5 members in all). The situation is controlled by women through the customary practice of abortion, the only recognized technique for limiting the size of families.

The level of health in Bang Chan is relatively good, particularly in comparison with urban levels in Asia. The level of nutrition is also relatively good, except for a deficiency in fats. The people have never known famine, and are not conscious of unsatisfied food wants or of a lack of variety; nor, except for arthritis or other crippling diseases that interfere with work, are they particularly aware of being threatened by specific illnesses, although malaria, tuberculosis, and other diseases are of course present. Nevertheless, the vague dangers of ill health and of an inadequate food supply are the major insecurity of their culture. These anxieties are counteracted by a constant and willing recourse to preventatives and cures, without discrimination among Thai, Chinese, and European types; and by a frequent ritual display of excessive quantities of edibles, with regular expression of traditional ideals of behavior supposed to insure maximum food production. There is much room for improvement as regards both health and nutrition, and these insecurities, together with a certain lack of rigidity in traditions concerning these fields, could provide a potential foundation for changes in behavior stimulated from the outside.

Income and Wants

In comparison with other Asians, the people of Bang Chan are fairly prosperous. While rice production per unit of area is notoriously low throughout Thailand, in Bang Chan the amount of land per capita devoted to rice production is high, averaging about two acres per person. Eighty-four percent of all the households operate farms, which range in size from 2 to 44 acres, with an average of 11.6 acres. These central Thailand farmers in 1948-49 could net as much as \$24.00 per acre on the rice they sold, counting all costs except family labor, and including depreciation. Extra income can also be obtained by selling fish, fruit, eggs, or, more rarely, pigs. Handicrafts, however, are thoroughly moribund; textiles, building materials, many tools, and other equipment are purchased from outside.

In spite of a relatively good income level in Bang Chan, felt economic wants are not satisfied, particularly for luxury goods and services which have recently been introduced. A well-to-do headman, having purchased three Mitsubishi sewing machines for his daughters, and two gasoline pumping engines for himself, now wants

¹ This study was supported by grants from Cornell University, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Social Science Research Council, and the Viking Fund.

to buy an electric generator so that fiestas may be as brightly illuminated as those in Bangkok. At a different level, a man with a new flashlight wants a gasoline or kerosene pressure lamp such as most of his neighbors own. A girl with a new dress of American material is unhappy if she cannot get a permanent wave before leaving by truck on a religious pilgrimage. Thus actual purchases and expressed wants, as well as the subjects of children's drawings, all suggest a wide range of wanted goods or services which would have to come from outside the village, and many of which would hardly have been known to the villagers ten years ago.

It is true that the intensity of such wants is not equally spread throughout the community. Indeed, the people themselves distinguish two classes into which most of the population fits. The majority are "chickens" or progressive farmers who actively seek to improve their economic status; the others are "ducks" or laggards satisfied with traditional or "poor" standards. It is clear that the former group, which includes local leaders and persons with high prestige, is on the increase, and that this new dynamism of ever-increasing economic demand can no longer be easily controlled.

There exists among the people of Bang Chan a willingness to change not only consumption standards but also production techniques when the value of such changes in terms of a larger economic product is recognized. There are few irrational cultural obstacles to technological change. Some measures could thus be taken locally to increase production, although they would have to be properly stimulated from outside. Other measures to improve income, however, would depend upon action on a wide scale by the central government, which would have to provide capital and technical supervision for such projects as irrigation development, seed improvement and distribution, provision of commercial fertilizers, disease and pest control, rationalization of credit and marketing facilities, support for diversified agriculture, and improvement of health.

Intelligent Discontent Among Leaders

It is too frequently assumed, particularly by government planners, that economic well-being supports political apathy and a sense of satisfaction with things as they are; and conversely, that political discontents arise chiefly under conditions of economic want. But in this Thai village it is perfectly clear that those few who most nearly approach a middle-class status, who are accorded prestige for their relative wealth and learning, and who are in a position to lead—the storekeeper, the educated and better-off farmers, the school teachers, the head priest, the petty district functionary—these people, despite their relative prosperity, are the most vocal in expressing intelligent discontent

with their political status. And they have much with which to be discontented.

In Bang Chan there is no adequate structure of local community government, and this lack of formal social mechanisms for group action is a very serious cause of frustration and unrest among people who now think they know what they want but don't know how to get it. The fact that the natural community is artificially split between two administrative districts is partly responsible for the difficulty. More important, however, is the ineffectiveness of the headman system as it has been reorganized since 1932. These local functionaries, of whom there are seven for the Bang Chan population, constitute the lowest level of the official hierarchy. Instead of being supported from below by their constituencies, they are suspended from the governmental pyramid above, being responsible to and largely controlled by district officials appointed by the central government. Because this system is ineffectual in Bang Chan, the local Buddhist priesthood has become the only organized agency capable of initiating, sanctioning, or carrying through any consistent community action. Fortunately the Bang Chan priesthood is under an enlightened and active leadership, which gives considerable strength not only to the temple organization but also to the community.

Attitude Toward Central Government

There exists in Bang Chan a very strong dissatisfaction with the character and services of the central government, with its bureaucratic and judicial substructure reaching down to the district level but barely touching the village. The government is better than in the days of the absolute monarchy, people say, but it is still "not good enough" in its apparent unconcern for the farmer. Parliamentary candidates pay attention to the rural areas only during elections, it is claimed, with the result that there is general disillusionment with the parliamentary system. The farmers explicitly and frequently express dissatisfaction with the ineffectiveness of their own national political role. "The intention of democracy is good," one of the leaders said, "but not its performance."

These attitudes are found in a context of rather unrealistic demands for agricultural, transportation, health, and other services which the government obviously cannot meet out of the very meager taxes levied on the farmer, chiefly a land tax of less than five cents an acre. The increasing strength of these demands, hardly recognized in the purview of government and the diplomatic missions of Bangkok, now leads many of the villagers to be interested in, and knowledgeable about, the central government, the cabinet, and parliamentary politics. These are one of the more frequent

topics for discussion at the combined village store and "men's club," where one of the half dozen radios of the community is located.

When rival factions resorted to military action in the coup of February 1949, villagers were quick to read between the lines of official pronouncements and to define the positions of various national political figures who they thought were operating behind the scenes. After three days of dependence on government radio broadcasts, a number of villagers expressed the desire for "true information" as to what was occurring in the capital. Two men then spent a day in Bangkok, returning with a detailed, perceptive, and very accurate account of the situation, obtained in spite of heavy government censorship. The whole affair was viewed with extreme distaste, and both sides were roundly berated for "fighting like dogs."

Bang Chan favors the incumbent Pibul regime over other possible contenders, while at the same time earnestly condemning (and often exaggerating) the inflation-bred graft, the widespread bureaucratic inefficiency and cynicism, and the arbitrary police actions of this government. The stock of Pibul's chief rival, Nai Pridi, is at a low ebb, not only for his alleged role in the futile and bloody 1949 coup, but also because of wide acceptance of the regime's allegation that he was somehow involved in the mysterious shooting of King Ananda. While there is dissatisfaction with the government, at the same time nationalist sentiment is strong. There is great respect for the monarchy as a national symbol, and there survives, though in ambivalent form, the old southeast Asian respect for one's betters, including government authorities. The nation, Thailand, is clearly perceived as a whole, both geographically and socially.

Minorities and Foreign Nations

Relations with local minority groups, Chinese and Thai Moslems, are outwardly good and seem little influenced by government propaganda against the Chinese and for the Moslems. The up-country Chinese who visit the community buy all rice, lend money at going interest rates, provide medical cures and drugs, sell imported goods, run errands, and spread gossip. All of these functions are considered by the Thai farmers as highly beneficial services which are not so readily performed by any other group. There can be no doubt, however, that these ethnic relations provide latent or potential bases for stress or conflict. Cultural differences allow stereotypes, such as that Moslems are all avaricious, and many immoral, and that Chinese are sharp dealers.

As regards attitudes toward outside nations, there is no anti-Japanese feeling, and apparently never was;

many of the villagers have never even seen a Japanese. Nor is there any pro-Allied feeling, as such. There is a strong antipathy for France, that is to say for the French in Indochina, which is of long standing and is not affected by the pro-French government policy; and there are less strong anti-British feelings dating from the end of the war, both of these antipathies being supported by rather accurate myths regarding the actions of these powers which affected Thailand. In two foreign nations a keen and friendly interest is expressed: India, viewed as an apolitical Buddhist holy land; and America, viewed as a generous land of technical miracles, whose way of life is so completely different that there is little point, or hope, in emulation, but whose leaders, Roosevelt and Truman, mean only good. China and particularly the USSR are blanks, although there is an awareness of the revolution in the former. "Communism" to all but two or three villagers is a meaningless bad word, heard constantly these days over the government radio. "The United Nations" is a meaningless good word heard less frequently.

A Culture Amenable to Change

The people of Bang Chan continue to rely on their own traditional values. Particularly important are those of their pervasive southern Buddhist religion, which are connected with nationalism and the strong position of the local Buddhist *wat*. These values encourage hard work, thrift, honesty, and benevolence, which are viewed as paying off in this life as well as in future lives. The prevailing values do not seem to be inimical to technological change. The few individuals who introduce useful technical innovations are esteemed highly for these services and rewarded with prestige. The literate or educated person is also valued as such; and the primary school receives strong support from both parents and non-parents. Physical violence is condemned; and the police are disliked more than the Army as a symbol of such violence and for their alleged unwarranted interference with personal freedom.

Within limits there is a real interest in the world outside the village, a spatial interest which is being increasingly expanded through formal education, through communication media such as the radio and, for some persons, cheap books, and through pilgrimages and visits which may take people all over central Thailand or even farther afield. This interest in what lies over the horizon inhibits provincialism and helps to provide a base for cultural change. On the other hand, temporal interests seem to be fairly narrow, concern being expressed chiefly for the immediate past and the immediate future. This lack of traditionalism which would bind present cultural forms to past behavior at least permits cultural change. It pertains particularly

to secular life, but even Buddhism as it is experienced by the peasant is amazingly ahistorical.

In summary, it can be said that in spite of a sufficient (at least to them) economic return in essentials, the Bang Chan farmers are discontented with things as they are. They envision as possible and they desire technical and social changes which they themselves are unable to initiate, and they exhibit potentially dangerous feelings of malaise and restlessness.

These rural Thai, who represent the future as well as the present, have started upon a new and irreversible way, having been stirred particularly during the past decade by the varied and often intangible influences of modernization. Yet they have not been reached by international, national, or any other agencies with an effective program of economic or political development. They have been stimulated, but are in the frustrating situation of being unable to respond. They have de-

veloped a head of steam, and are ready to go, but lack channels for action and are unable to create them without help. A sense of being released to take some active part in an advance into the modern world, which they know exists outside the village, a sense of participation in a local and larger political structure would be more likely to satisfy them than would the material luxuries—the gasoline pumping engines, the electric generator, the bicycles—which they say they want. As we parted company last summer, one of the villagers spoke of my return. “Things will be no different, no better,” he said. “We farmers speak, but our words cannot reach the government.” He expressed an attitude which had appeared time and again during the preceding year. A government which hears and acts, whatever that government’s constitution, will have the support of these Thai farmers, and of all others like them in Thailand for years to come.

Political Reform in Japan: SCAP Report

Who wrote Japan's new constitution? SCAP's Government Section now reveals its own role and General MacArthur's decisions on basic issues of reform.

BY THEODORE McNELLY

THE VOLUMINOUS report on *Political Reorientation of Japan*,¹ prepared by Government Section of SCAP, provides a mine of information on postwar political reforms and an official interpretation by those chiefly responsible for their administration. Of greatest interest is the chapter on the new constitution,² which reveals officially for the first time the role of General MacArthur's headquarters in drafting that document.

The draft constitution was first made public on March 6, 1946 by the Japanese cabinet. On the same day General MacArthur issued a statement giving the document his “full approval” and stating that it had been drafted “after painstaking investigation and frequent conference between members of the Japanese Government and this Headquarters.” At the time, it was commonly believed in informed circles in Japan that the constitution had originally been drafted in Eng-

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1 *Political Reorientation of Japan: September 1945 to September 1948*. Report of Government Section, Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers. 2 vols., quarto. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1950. xxxvi, 1300 pp. \$7.50.

2 For an analysis of the 1946 constitution see David Nelson Rowe, “The New Japanese Constitution,” *Far Eastern Survey*, January 29 and February 12, 1947.

lish by Government Section and had been accepted by the Japanese cabinet after strong moral suasion from SCAP.³ The Japanese press described the document as “far more democratic and progressive than had been expected from the Shidehara Cabinet,” and attributed its democratic character “in part to timely advice from SCAP and to the pressure of public opinion.”⁴

The story as now made public by Government Section is briefly as follows. In the fall of 1945 Prince Fumimaro Konoye, then a member of Prince Higashi-Kuni's “surrender” cabinet, had a conference with General MacArthur in which he sought advice on the subject of governmental reform. Shortly afterward, Prince Konoye had an informal talk with the late George Atcheson, Jr., Political Adviser to the Supreme Commander. At this conference Mr. Atcheson outlined for the Japanese twelve specific points which SCAP considered basic in the reform of the constitution.⁵

3 The first report to this effect to appear in print was a dispatch by Gordon Walker to the *Christian Science Monitor* of July 3, 1946.

4 GHQ, SCAP, *Summation of Non-Military Activities in Japan*, March 1946, p. 30.

5 *Political Reorientation*, p. 91. This important conference was not made public in Japan nor was it mentioned in any of SCAP's monthly *Summations*. Prince Konoye's public allegations to the effect that General MacArthur had commissioned him to engage in constitutional revision were later expressly repudiated by SCAP.