

## A NOTE ON PATRONS AND PAU LIANG\*

by

Gehan Wijeyewardene

In a recent paper on the **miang** industry of North Thailand Edward Van Roy ('An interpretation of Northern Thai peasant economy', **Journal of Asian Studies**, vol. xxvi no. 3, 1967: 421-432) identifies the **pau liang** as describing a crucial element in Northern Thai social structure. He argues that peasant social structure of this region is hierarchical and built up of numerous patron-client relations—one man's patron being another man's client. He calls the set formed by any patron and his clients an "entourage" (a notion applied to Thai society by Lucien M. Hanks). The integration of the society is achieved by the vertical overlapping of these "entourages", the horizontal linking of clients under single patrons (though it is also suggested that the entourage is a set of independent dyadic relations involving the patron and each client rather than a 'group', in the sociological sense) and the occasional linking of patrons through clients being involved in more than one entourage. The **pau liang** (glossed by Van Roy as 'father protector') is a patron, but not all patrons are **pau liang**. Van Roy writes:

'It is among the wealthiest and highest status members of the peasantry that are found the **pau liang** . . . The self-sustaining valley household, as it continues to accumulate "surplus" income, can multiply and diversify its holdings in a number of remunerative directions. As it does so it builds a network of stable economic relationships between itself and satellite, or client, households. At some indeterminate point of well-being and prestige the householder earns the honorific title, **pau liang** designating him as the focal personality in a constellation of economic relationships, which may be called the "entourage"' (p. 429).

It is not entirely clear whether Van Roy wishes to reserve the notion of 'entourage' for the following of those whom he designates **pau liang**, or whether any set of clients is an 'entourage'. If a patron is himself the client of some other patron, it logically follows that the patron of a **pau**

---

\* The Mary R. Haas orthography is used for Thai words with phonetic symbols being replaced by combinations of ordinary letters. Tonal markers are omitted.

**liang** must be a **pau liang** (unless some higher rank exists). This is not invalidated by the fact that 'Status as **pau liang** is not a static position once attained, for there is a constant jockeying for improved standing as fortunes and reputations emerge and fade' (p. 429). If a **pau liang** loses wealth and status completely, presumably he ceases to be one. If the loss is not complete, again presumably, the result is a diminution of his entourage. I do not quarrel with Van Roy's account as a description, of a very general kind, of Northern Thai peasant social structure. It is my conviction however, that the term **pau liang** has a much wider connotation than that given it by Van Roy and that it is therefore inaccurate to suggest that it is the Northern Thai equivalent of the sociological concept 'patron'. In itself it is a minor point, but underlying it are some fairly interesting issues so that I would welcome the comments of others with greater knowledge of the subject.

It is quite possible that dialectal differences, or differences in socio-economic conditions, may account for varying usages of the phrase (**pau liang**), but it seems that the areas in which Van Roy worked were not too distant from those with which I am familiar (Amphur Mae Taeng). There is an important ecological difference in that the people I know do not engage in the cultivation of **miang**. But the economic and social relationships described by Van Roy sound so familiar, that I must agree with the implication that they are widely distributed throughout North Thailand—and feel reasonably certain that dialectal differences will not account for our varying interpretations of **pau liang**.

The literal meaning of the phrase most certainly suggests a patron—so that this was a question which was specifically investigated in conversation with informants. The overwhelming response was that it did not **mean** a man who employed, fed or controlled others, though such a man may be addressed as **pau liang**. It was a term of respect for a rich man, for one, who, in Central Thai, may be described as **seedthii**—'a rich person, person of wealth, millionaire' (Mary Haas **Thai-English Student's Dictionary** Stanford University Press 1964 p. 515). It is also of some importance that, unlike **seedthii**, **pau liang** is most often used as a term of address, rather than of reference. The most puzzling aspect of informants' testimony, was the statement that in the past it was a term used for

travelling, traditional medical practitioners (**mau**) (see below). The feminine form **mae liang** exists, and today, is almost obligatory in address to women running or owning shops, eating-houses and other businesses.

It is worth considering the lexicographical evidence. Sanguan Chotisukharat's vocabulary (**Uu kham Myang** Bangkok, Odeon Store 1962 p. 118) gives **khahabodii**, **thanabodii** (wealthy man) **mau** (doctor, specialist) **phaed** (doctor), **bidaa liang** (step or foster father). Mate Ratanaprasit's dictionary (**Phocanaanukrom Thai Yuan—Thai—Angkrit** Bangkok, privately published 1965 p. 152) gives

1. see **khon pen dii mii haang**
2. see **naaj hauj**
3. **thanabodii** (see above)
4. **phaed, mau** (see above)

For 1. above he gives a number of synonyms including **khahabodii** and **seedthii** and the English gloss 'opulent, rich or wealthy person' (p. 52). He also gives **kradumphii kudumphii** which McFarland (**Thai-English Dictionary** Stanford University Press 1944, p. 26) glosses as 'an householder; a squire; the head of a family; a man of property; a wealthy person; the man of a house or home; an overseer of a village or plantation; a citizen'. For good measure he (i.e. Mate) includes **cesua, cawsua** which (i.e. **cesua**, he does not give the latter variant) McFarland translates as 'a rich Chinese man; a Chinese millionaire'. (Haas does not include any of the four words immediately above.)

For **naaj hauj** Mate gives

1. **naaj caang**—employer
2. **naaj thaaj**—helmsman, steersman (p. 137)

These last two cases may seem to lend credence to the view that the word may mean 'patron'. But if we remember that it is **pau liang** we are discussing, and not **kradumphii**, it is the wideness of application that is striking—and the recurring theme of wealth.

Literally, **pau liang** means 'father (who) feeds'—there is little doubt that **liang** has 'to feed' as its primary meaning. Because of its closely connected and very common secondary meaning of 'to rear' and 'domesticated', the 'obvious' meaning of **pau liang** is 'step—or foster father'.

We saw that Sanguan considers this an acceptable meaning and in Central Thai 'step-father' is given, by Haas, as the only meaning of the cognate, **phau liang** (p. 366). In Northern Thai 'step-father' is usually **pau naa** (**naa** as in 'younger uncle'), and I have not heard it used for 'foster-father', though **liang**—to foster' is extremely common. This does not mean that its use for 'foster-father' is necessarily uncommon. The only case of true fostering of which I have first-hand knowledge was rather complicated—the foster-father was dead and his wife had married again. She was referred to as 'mother' (**mae**) and her new husband either as 'father' (**pau**) or as 'step-father' (**pau-naa**). Most other cases of fostering involve relatives taking over parental functions which does not change the terminology, or step relationships. In the latter case the child is referred to as 'the child of husband (or wife)'—**luug phua (mia)** or **luug tid phua (mia)**.

The evidence is strong that if we were to assign a primary literal meaning to the phrase **pau liang** it would be 'foster father'. The idiomatic, and much commoner, usage is far more difficult to translate. It is a term of respect, usually for a man of wealth. It does not, I believe, imply a politico-economic role in an institution which we may identify as 'patron plus entourage', though, were such a grouping sociologically validated, the patron might well be **addressed** as **pau liang**. Just as, if we were talking about an English-speaking environment, he might well be addressed as 'sir'. The question as to why the term was (is) used for traditional medicine men remains to be answered. I have elsewhere ('Address, Abuse and Animal Categories in Northern Thailand' **Man** n.s. vol. 3, pp. 76-93, 1968) discussed certain aspects of North Thai address systems and I look forward to the time when someone, with more competence than I have in this field, can give us a complete analysis of such systems. In the meantime I suggest that Northern Thai address terminologies fall into a limited number of categories, at least partly controlled by a few major determinants of social status. These are for the most part consciously held, and in the context of South and Southeast Asian civilizations, they have been subject to a great deal of ideological elaboration, for instance, in Thailand, the historical **sakdi naa** system. Five of the major status determiners are birth, wealth, learning, what we may call religiosity, and

age. These are not always kept separate—as for instance, whatever else **pau liang** may be about, it makes a statement about the value placed on age. For our immediate purposes the emphasis is on wealth. When we consider the equivalence made in practice between **mau** and **pau liang**, the obvious question is, why is the association made with wealth rather than with learning? In the South and Southeast Asian tradition, though the possibility of secular learning has perhaps always existed, learning has had religious connotations. Even today, while the term **acaan** is generally used for ‘professor’ or secular ‘teacher’, it is likely that the scholarship referred to when a man is addressed as **acaan** will be religious. There is an other-worldliness associated with learning and this is the basis of the peculiar respect it engenders. Scholars are not doers. Practitioners of traditional medicine, though they have learning, are eminently concerned with this world, with the practical. Looking at the lexicographical evidence above, this is the dominant impression that emerges—the term shows respect for wealth and worldly success. If we are to take this evidence at face value, any householder may be shown respect by being addressed as **pau liang**—not because he feeds his family, but because of his success in the worldly sphere. It is informative to compare **pau liang** with the Chinese term common throughout Southeast Asia, **towkay**. Maurice Freedman writes “literally the two elements in the compound mean ‘head’ and ‘family’, but in fact the term has no kinship significance. It is applied as a term of respect to shopkeepers and businessmen. In a technical sense it is used for the managers of a temple” (**Chinese Family and Marriage in Singapore** London, Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1957, p. 109). Not only is there a striking parallel with the usage of **pau liang**, the difference highlights a very relevant distinction between Thai and Chinese notions of religion. The **towkay** in most parts of Southeast Asia often headed both ‘entourages’ and corporations (e.g. G.W. Skinner **Leadership and Power in the Chinese Community of Thailand** Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1958) and played patron to many clients—it would however be wrong to characterize **towkay** as a specific institutional role in a social, political or economic grouping.

