

THE INDIVIDUAL AND HIS ENVIRONMENT: A CENTRAL THAI OUTLOOK

by
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This paper is, in part, a response to certain assertions made by Phillips in *Thai Peasant Personality*. I begin, therefore, by quoting the relevant passages. "When the child (of the Central Thai village of Bang Chan) enters the world of human beings, he is already a partially formed and psychologically independent individual, with his own *upanidsaj* (ingrained character) and *khwaan* (soul-stuff), not to mention his stock of accumulated merit and demerit from countless previous lives which predetermines his character. The effect of these definitions is ... to award to the child a sense of psychic individuality that is partially independent of any social environment to which he is exposed ..." (p. 83). Phillips cites Buddhist doctrine as a source of Thai personality and social relationships: "The whole complex cosmology relating to the accumulation of merit and demerit is phrased in terms of the individual's lonely journey through cycles of interminable existences working out his own moral destiny. Who his progenitors were, what kind of environment he was born and reared in, what social advantages or disadvantages he was exposed to, are considered all secondary, and in some cases even insignificant, in influencing what he is and what he does" (pp. 88-89).

Phillips does moderate his argument in a footnote, which I quote in part: "But few Bang Chaners ever think of a person's character as due solely to the uncontrolled emergence of these pre-natal forces. Rather, they represent the basic psychological raw material with which parents and other socializing agents must work, and set the limits of these agents' enculturating efforts. What is important is that the limits—the 'degrees of freedom' permitted the parents—tend to be narrowly defined" (p. 83). Phillips is clearly suggesting that, in Thai eyes, inborn traits are more important than environment in shaping character.

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In what follows, I will suggest that Phillips may be wrong on this point. More generally, I will discuss the way central Thai villagers relate to and conceive of their environment.

During my second week in Ban Khao Mao, a village in the central Thai province of Ayutthaya, a villager suggested to me that I should carry cigarettes about with me, even though I did not smoke them. I could offer them to others, which would be a *sing wae:d lq:m* for me. I was mystified by his use of the phrase *sing wae:d lq:m* (hereafter *s.w.l.*), and the dictionary confirmed that there was cause for mystification. *Wae:d lq:m* is defined "to surround; to be encompassed". *Sing* is "thing", and *s.w.l.* is glossed as "environment". This was obviously not the sense in which the villager used the phrase. The remainder of this paper is based on my investigation of the meaning of *s.w.l.* as used by the villagers of Ban Khao Mao, and the speculations and conclusions to which that investigation led.

The phrase *s.w.l.* is used in two senses in Ban Khao Mao, neither of which coincides exactly with the dictionary usage. In one sense (which I will label *s.w.l.*₁) it refers to those things which aid and protect an individual. This is apparently a local usage. Several Bangkok Thais to whom I mentioned it said they had never heard the phrase used in this sense. This is the sense in which the villager used it when he advised me to carry cigarettes. The offering of cigarettes would be a *s.w.l.*₁ for me because it would help me to set up good relations with the people living in the village. Strictly speaking—although the villagers would probably consider this splitting hairs—it is the good feeling between persons resulting from the offering of cigarettes which is the *s.w.l.*₁, since these interpersonal bonds aid and protect. This as well as some of the following examples of interpersonal behavior as *s.w.l.*₁ reveals the manipulative element in what Phillips refers to as Thai "social cosmetics".

This first meaning of *s.w.l.* is the one denoted in the expression *sa:ng* ("to build; to create") *sing wae:d lq:m*. This expression indicates that *s.w.l.*₁ can be created or set up by the individual—in fact, this is usually the case. The offering of cigarettes is a clear example of *sa:ng s.w.l.* The sacred images which most villagers wear around

their necks, especially when travelling, are *s.w.l.*₁. These tablets are thought to protect the wearer from physical harm caused by violence or by accident. A letter of introduction (or, to be more precise, the relationship which it sets up between the bearer and the reader) is also a *s.w.l.*₁. "Social" relations with the spirit world are also important, although perhaps less so than formerly. When one goes to sleep in a strange house, for example, one first asks permission and protection from the house spirits, the dead persons who in life had lived in the house.

A special instance of *sa:ng s.w.l.* is *phu:d* ("to speak") *wae:d lq:m*. One may *phu:d wae:d lq:m* for someone else. I made my initial visit to several households in the company of the village headman's wife. At each house, during the course of the conversation, she would make some ambiguous remark which might be taken to imply that I was in the village on some official or semi-official business. When I brought this up with her later, she explained that she had been attempting to *phu:d wae:d lq:m* for me. If the interviewees had the impression that I was there on official business they would "be afraid and tell the truth". One can also *phu:d wae:d lq:m* for oneself. A local storekeeper provided me with a good example: if a person comes to see you, and you suspect that he is going to ask to borrow money, you can protect yourself (from his request) by working into the conversation some remarks about how short of cash you are. Such remarks act to prevent the potential borrower from making his request, and also as a pretext for refusing should the other person prove insensitive.

Having friends and having a patron(s) are *s.w.l.*₁ of great importance. The villager "deprecate(s) personal performance as reckoned in terms of universalistic achievement standards as a strategic ingredient of success, and look(s) to the benign intervention of influential others in critical situations" (Piker, p. 780). One young man, who was looking for a job outside the village, told me that it was impossible to do anything much without friends. He did not expect to find a worthwhile job because he did not have a properly placed *phagphuag* (group of cronies). Moreover, he explained, if one wants security and advancement in one's job, it is important to have a patron, someone highly placed who can protect one's interests.

The laws, say some villagers, are the *s.w.l.*₁ of the people. But perhaps the most important *s.w.l.*₁ is provided by religion. Most Thais, and everyone in Ban Khao Mao, are Theravada Buddhists. According to their belief, one can protect oneself from harm and ensure well-being by making merit and avoiding demerit. They try to live by the precepts of their religion, supporting the monks, making contributions to the temple, avoiding the taking of life, etc. The majority of men in Ban Khao Mao have been monks for at least one *pansa* period (three-month rainy-season retreat). Becoming a monk is one of the most effective ways of gaining merit for oneself and one's sponsors. *Karma*, which determines the conditions of one's life, is merely the balance between accumulated merit and demerit. Merit is thus the ultimate *s.w.l.*₁.

At this point we must take a moment to try and resolve an apparent contradiction. If *karma* is the ultimate source of the good and the bad experienced by a person, why does he bother with other *s.w.l.*₁ besides merit-making? Indeed, how can there be other *s.w.l.*₁? (Compare Spiro, p. 155: "Under the influence of both indigenous and imported cultural beliefs concerning magical causation, the Burmese have been unable to accept the assumption that karma is the exclusive cause of suffering and pain.") There are several interrelated explanations. First of all, it must be realized that the nature of *karma* is somewhat mysterious. It is a highly abstract concept. There is no way of knowing one's karmic balance or of achieving a specific result at a specific time through merit-making. The karmic effect of any particular action may not manifest itself for a long time, perhaps not until a future incarnation. These uncertainties, I would argue, leave a psychological vacuum, a need for security which causes the villagers to make use of more specific and easily manipulable techniques for furthering their interests.

One rationale for using such techniques has been offered by Ames in the context of Ceylonese Buddhism. He suggests that *karma* may be seen as determining the overall design of a man's life, but that within that design there is much room for short-term maneuvering. (See also Hanks' distinction between power and effectiveness.) Another rationalization was aptly illustrated for me by one of the villagers of Ban Khao Mao: "If you are warm, you can open the window, and if you

have merit the wind will blow in. If you have no merit there will be no wind. But either way, if you do not open the window you will get no breeze." The meaning is clear—even if one's *karma* is favorable, one must take the appropriate steps, and one can use one's merit to achieve specific results by taking these steps. (Again, compare Spiro, p. 157: "When the monk Nagasena is challenged by King Milinda to explain how a *paritta* can cure a sick patient if, according to his *karma*, he is fated to die, the venerable monk replies that indeed it cannot save the life of such a person. The *paritta* is efficacious only in the case of those who (even when suffering from karmically caused illness) are not destined by their *karma* to die. It is only in such cases, in which death is a possible rather than an inevitable consequence of *karma*, that this spell can be effective." This explanation "is applied in Burma, not only for the restricted case of the *paritta*, but for all other apotropaic rituals as well.")

The *s.w.l.*₁ which the villager thinks and speaks of are social, magical, or religious in nature. A gun does not qualify as a "real" *s.w.l.*₁. The informant may at first deny that a gun is a *s.w.l.*₁, then, after further thought, allow that it might perhaps be considered a kind of *s.w.l.*₁, but only with qualifications. A gun, the villagers explain, does not protect you when you sleep or when you are unaware of a threat. Persons who behave badly, the villagers say, have no protection even though they may carry weapons. This last remark is an illustration of the often articulated connection between the moral and the practical aspects of actions. The villager often seems moralistic in his speech, but his morality is quite pragmatic. One should obey one's parents. This is so, it appears, not primarily because of the inherent righteousness of parent-obeying, but because to obey one's parents is a *s.w.l.*₁. "If you walk behind an adult, the dogs won't bite you" (Thai proverb). It is practical to obey your parents because they know more than you do.

It would seem from these explanations that *s.w.l.*₁ form a kind of protective aura. *S.w.l.*₁, once put in place, act on their own to defend the individual from external threats to his well-being. Magic, religion, and social relations are mobilized and manipulated in defense and aid of

the individual. From this perspective we can see that a villager serves, to some extent, the same ends when he gives a gift or wears an amulet as when he makes merit—in each case he is building up his *s.w.l.*₁.

A person's *s.w.l.*₁ are, in a sense, his outer layer, intermediate between him and his environment. His *s.w.l.*₁ are directed outward at the environment, protecting him from external dangers and helping him to deal effectively with other persons. There is a second meaning of *sing wae:d lq:m* (hereafter referred to as *s.w.l.*₂) as those features of the environment which impinge on the individual, having the power to affect his thoughts, his behavior, or his well-being. This definition, taken extensively, seems to include all the items of *s.w.l.*₁, plus many other items, but considers them from a very different perspective. While the items of *s.w.l.*₁ are identified by their distinctive relation to the individual's environment, i.e. by their power to protect him from the environment or promote his interests in relation to it, *s.w.l.*₂ are identified by their relation to the individual himself; for better or worse, they affect him. The influence of *s.w.l.*₁ are directed out from the individual to his environment; the influence of *s.w.l.*₂ are directed inward from the environment to the individual.

The definition of *s.w.l.*₂ leads into a general Thai theory of human nature and an approach to social interaction. There are several legends which might serve as an introduction to and illustration of this theory. I have chosen one, a Buddhist legend, that was told to me by a monk at Ban Khao Mao. (I apologize to him for leaving out the fine details and literary and archaic flourishes which he was at pains to include)

Two young and helpless birds, offspring of the same parents and inhabitants of the same nest, were one day swept up by a powerful storm. One bird fell to earth in the lair of a group of bandits. The bandits raised the bird, teaching it their own manner of speech and bad habits. The other bird fell in a community of religious men, devotees who separated themselves from worldly joys and cares and tried to perfect their knowledge of the *dharmma* and live according to its precepts. They instructed the bird so that it grew to have the manners and knowledge of a learned man.

One day the king of that country was out hunting. After a long, unsuccessful chase, he stopped by a stream near the bandits' hideaway. The bandits were away at the time, and only the bird and the cook were present. When the bird saw the king, it said to the cook, "There is a king sleeping nearby. Let's kill him and take his belongings." The king overheard the bird's speech and climbed into his carriage and left that place. After a while, he came to the place where the religious men lived. The men were away gathering food, but the second bird was there, and it spoke respectfully to the king, inviting him to refresh himself with food and drink. The king was impressed with the good behavior and great learning of the bird, and when the religious men returned he invited them to come and instruct him at his palace, which they did.

"This legend," the monk explained to me, "teaches us that our associations with others are the most important things. If we associate with persons of a certain character, we will become the same as them."

I asked him: "If our *sing wae: d lə:m* are no good is there no way for us to be good?"

He answered: "There is no way. We are completely shaped by our *sing wae: d lə:m*."

Later in our conversation he moderated his views somewhat, admitting that good *s.w.l.*₂ would not necessarily make a person good—he had to be willing to become good. On the other hand, a good person could retain his goodness not by willfully resisting bad *s.w.l.*₂, but by avoiding them.

This extreme 'environmentalist' position is not simply a part of the high and esoteric religious theory, open only to the more learned monks; rather, it is an integral part of the ordinary villager's outlook, and it has great influence on his behavior. The villagers take the view that a person cannot be really moral and excellent in his thought, speech, and behavior until he has spent some time in the monkhood. A person improves himself not primarily by acting upon himself, but by changing his *s.w.l.*₂, and the most beneficial *s.w.l.*₂, from a moral point of view, are to be found in the temple area. There are many stories of men whose characters have been miraculously changed while in the monk-

hood. One of my informants was a monk; he had been one for eight years, and he was a model of everything that a Thai monk should be—calm, intelligent, devoted to learning and religious discipline. I was told that before entering the monkhood he was rather irresponsible, dissolute, and somewhat of a pest. He entered the monkhood for the ordinary three-month Rains Retreat, as do almost all the men of Ban Khao Mao (if their families can afford it) when they come of age, and he simply stayed on, a wholly new person.

I asked the same question of ten villagers: is it more important to teach a child to respect and obey his elders, or to teach him to think for himself? They all answered without hesitation that respect and obedience to elders were more important. To the villager, a person is shaped—he does not shape himself—and, therefore, relating properly to one's environment is of the first importance. You cannot think or will yourself into being a particular kind of person; you can only select and relate wisely to the influences impinging upon you. This implies a sort of limited free will; one can choose among available alternatives, but cannot create new alternatives. It is possible that certain of these influences are internal. People may be conceived to have a natural tendency toward self-indulgent and irresponsible behavior. But a person cannot normally transcend his environment in making himself better. I asked a villager how one could improve oneself, and the response was to associate with "people who know", learned or experienced persons.

This generally passive view in regard to self-improvement may help to account for the Thais' "easy acceptance of themselves" (Phillips, p. 108). A man is theoretically responsible for what he is, and yet, from a slightly different perspective, his present responsibility is very limited. Merit and demerit accumulated from his past lives as well as his present one have determined his social and economic position, and his character has been shaped by his environment. Of course, he himself is responsible for his *karma*, but that is history. At any given moment, he is what he is, and the possibilities of becoming something else are limited by the constraints which things past have placed on him. Knowing this, it is easier for him to understand his failure to improve himself, or to justify his not trying.

The villager typically deals with others in an indirect manner, attempting to use intermediate agencies and to manipulate the forces impinging on the other person rather than to strike directly at his object. Serious arguments are rarely heard in the village, and many observers have noted that Thais avoid open conflict. If a villager does not like someone, he does not express himself directly to that person, but he may gossip. Or, if he wants to say something unpleasant to the person, he may employ a device known as *wa. krathob*. He may in the person's presence deliver a generally phrased message to a third person, such as "people who behave in such-and-such a manner are no good". Or he may, again in the person's presence, curse at a dog or chicken. When a Thai villager wants something from someone else, particularly a favor or the fulfillment of an obligation from a superior, rather than asking directly he tries to get his friends and patrons to exert influence and drop hints on his behalf.

It was pointed out earlier that avoidance is considered the best way to deal with unfavorable formative influences. Avoidance is also a major and preferred strategy in dealing with anything in the environment which is unpleasant. The ideal way to handle objectionable persons and situations is simply to avoid them. Again, open conflict is not acceptable.

For the villagers, the world is a complexly determined place. One must take this complexity into consideration in trying to obtain one's objectives, particularly interpersonal objectives. The attempt to influence others is often best made obliquely rather than directly, through the manipulation of one's own *s.w.l.*₁ and the other's *s.w.l.*₂. And just as direct attacks are not favored, neither is overt resistance. Rather than dealing with unpleasant situations, one is best advised to prevent, modify, or avoid them. Although the literature abounds with references to Thai "personal autonomy", this characterization must be interpreted with some caution. Ultimately, a person is a product of his history and environment. He is autonomous in the sense that he may not be subject to direct control, but his actions can be influenced by manipulating his

environment. He, in turn, can prevent such influence by strategic use of his *s.w.I.*₁ and by staying out of undesirable environments.

Although much of the material presented in this paper is quite consonant with Phillips' view of Thai peasant personality, I have chosen, by my selection of quotations at the beginning of this paper, to stress a point on which we differ. Phillips found that the villagers whom he studied believed that a person's character is primarily innate. My findings indicate that the villagers of Ban Khao Mao assign greater weight to environmental influences. The disagreement could be due to the fact that Phillips' fieldwork and my own took place in different villages and at different times. But I do not believe that this explains our different conclusions. The relevant differences were not in the villagers, I think, but in ourselves, in the questions that we asked and in our way of hearing the answers. Is it possible, after all, that what we have each said is equally correct (or incorrect), that each of us has arrived not at facts about the Thai but rather at a way of seeing them? If so, we should be very cautious in drawing conclusions about "what Thais are like" on the basis of essays of this sort. The insight offered—and hopefully there is such insight—is of a more equivocal and limited sort.

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