

MERIT AND THE MARKET: THAI SYMBOLIZATIONS OF SELF-INTEREST

When a coup hits Bangkok the explanation is always easy. Any fool knows the coup promotes its leaders' interests. When ruling generals make merit (*tham bun*), they do it to enhance this life, not the next one. Buddhism, it seems, legitimates their power. Thai politics revolves around self-interest. Demonstrations? They're orchestrated. Votes? They're bought. If you're clever you know who's behind what and how they do it, but any dunce knows why they do it. Call it money or power or whatever, but it comes down to self-interest.

That, anyway, is what most popular and much scholarly writing on Thai politics says—self-interest explains events. Does it? Well such a 'theory' cannot fail, Self-interest in its widest sense means that in their dealings people maximize something or other, and that, as Cancian (1968:230) observes, "is one of the standard restatements of the *a priori* truth that all human behavior is patterned; that all human behavior has a reason." Yet this troubles few. Indeed, when so many think self-interest says so much, it suggests a fundamental human 'truth.' Of course this gets us nowhere. True as it may be, so broad a notion cannot fail to find consensus. To narrow this we must specify the social and cultural conditions that favor the recognition of this 'truth.'

What, then, allows peoples as different as Thai and Westerners to agree on seeing self-interest? Here religion offers a clue. While Buddhism and Christianity differ markedly, both are what Bellah (1964) calls historic religions that radically devalue *this* world. This is a precondition for any thorough reductionism, whether or not it ends in self-interest. Unless one devalues the immediate fabric of life, one cannot see something clear and simple beneath its everyday complexities. If this makes self-interest conceivable for both, here the similarities end. Western and Thai traditions reach self-interest by very different philosophical routes.

For the traditional Thai, Buddhism presumes a craving (*taṇhā*) that can

thirst for money or power. If this is less human nature than the nature of human illusion, everyone knows few penetrate the illusions. After all, how few are monks and how few monks are pure? For a Westerner, however, this *is* human nature, and cynics say the best are only better at disguising their interests. A Hobbesian man haunts popular thought. Of course some hold a more favorable view of man, but optimists and pessimists alike see society as predicated on the individual (Dumont 1970), and this popular solipsism sets them a world away from Buddhists for whom self and thus self-interest is finally an illusion.

Social science builds upon these Western notions and so it readily sees self-interest as fundamental. Where would economics and political science be without self-interest? Without exploring the naive Cartesian dualism that makes radical material self-interest imaginable, we can follow Sahlins (1976:vii) and say that some think culture comes down to “the rational activity to individuals pursuing their own best interests.” Others reject this reductionism, but if they separate the individual from society as many modern social theories do (Dumont 1970:4-8), then they must posit self-interest or some such drive to animate the whole and activate individuals. So a universal, free-floating self-interest props up social theories as surely as it serves any elite.

This paper seeks to root self-interest in ordinary Thai life. In consequence it does not delve into Buddhist philosophy, although undoubtedly this has historically molded the everyday meanings of self-interest. Instead, it explores the ongoing *social* origins and *cultural* meanings of Thai self-interest. I stress that it is social and cultural to avoid the implication that it is just human nature; and I stress the plural to avoid the single, seemingly uniform meaning of self-interest often equated with the market. Seen as human and singular, self-interest makes the market monolithic and politics straightforward, and so the two become the easy explanations for all changes in Thai society and the simple way to debunk merit-making or any ideology. In contrast I shall argue that self-interest is contextual. In contexts where the Thai expect it, it marks no change and debunks nothing to show self-interest. Where do they expect it? Their expectations depend on the type of social exchange, and here overtly self-interested market exchange is but one of three. The other two are a benevolence-respect exchange common to the whole of society and a modernized discipline-respect exchange idealized by all but realized by few, mostly in temples and the bureaucracy. To explore self-interest in these three models of exchange I shall focus on a Bangkok temple (*wat*) where a conflict crystalized their differences.

PLANTS, TAXIS AND THE TEMPLE

In the last century Wat Lek (a pseudonym) lay a bit beyond the city's northern walls, but today it is near the heart of Bangkok. By the Fifth Reign (1868-1910) the neighborhood had the trappings of urban life when most of what is now Bangkok was still rice paddy fields and jungle. Just over a hundred years ago a wealthy Chinese nobleman restored the local temple. He made it, literally, a gift fit for a king, who received it into royal patronage. Yet after its noble patron died the temple languished, and despite later patrons it stayed in the shadow of wealthier and more prestigious temples. Today, few people have heard of Wat Lek even though many have passed by it. Far more people know about the thriving local market, the nearby government offices, the main road that cuts across the temple's land, and the canal that runs along its edge. Of course like most temples in the old part of the city, Wat Lek is hidden by a wall of shophomes. But even without the wall, Wat Lek would be lost amid the capital's hundreds of temples. Most natives know only their neighborhood temples and a few famous ones.

Wat Lek is obscure, but it is not ordinary. Indeed, it is a royal temple (*wat luang*) and within the Sangha its abbot has a high position (*tamnaeng*), its Pali school is well regarded, and its Pali scholars (*parian*) are many and distinguished. It has powerful formal and personal connections to the Northeast that cement its important place in the prestigious Thammayut Order. Yet these distinctions define its dilemma. It cannot just 'get by' as ordinary Bangkok temples can; it must flourish. It is in the big league and yet it plays with handicaps. It is just too small (about 2½ acres housing 60 or so monks and novices in Lent) to be as prominent as major royal temples several times its size. Its Northeastern regionalism is frowned upon by the Bangkok elite. And its neighborhood has also declined. Once perhaps a dozen palaces were within a short walk, but today the wealthy have moved to better neighborhoods. Of course Wat Lek still attracts elite patrons from all over the city, but it is caught between its elite aspirations and the practicalities of living amid ordinary Thai and petty Chinese merchants. The temple needs both elite favor and local popularity and yet the two can clash as they did when some young monks tried to clean up backyards and a potted plant market that had spilled over into their temple.

The backyards were eyesores—tangles of drying laundry, rotting debris and knee-high weeds that had grown up in the most sacred part of the temple (the *phutthawat*), in the very shadow of the stupa (*chedi*) and the preaching hall (*wihan*).

One backyard was even a taxi repair shop where power tools whined as the monks chanted nearby. Evening breezes bore the fragrance incense--and the odor of gas--while gutted hulks stood rusting next to the preaching hall. Fortunately potted plants hid this mess. Less fortunately the plants were there not to decorate the temple but to display to buyers. Some neighborhood plant merchants made merit in the temple and, not waiting for the next life, took their rewards there too. They turned the temple into a market.

This troubled the young monks. They wanted a temple known for its disciplined monks and learned abbot, not its enterprising merchants and skilled mechanics. When a customer mistook a monk for a plant merchant, it was the last straw. Taxi repairs and plant peddling had to go. The young monks resolved to act—but how? Conflict was unseemly and monks were supposed to be generous. So the monks suggested taxis and plants leave. No one took the hint. Some were even angered. “Was this the thanks they got for making merit at the temple?” “What stingy monks! The temple wasn’t using the land anyway.” Some cursed the young monks and threatened their leader’s life.

Why were they so angry? They felt betrayed. In their eyes it cost the temple nothing to be generous and honor their ‘rights’ to use its land. They had made merit at the temple and thus shown respect. How could the monks now deny them benevolence? These attitudes and their interpretation of the monks’ motives came out of benevolence-respect exchange.

BENEVOLENCE-RESPECT EXCHANGE

The benevolence-respect exchange is not uniquely monastic, but simply Thai and deeply Buddhist.¹ Its archetype is the family where a parent’s benevolent care earns his child’s enduring respect. To express this the Thai turn to Buddhism wherein benevolence earns merit (*bun*) and creates a *bunkhun* or debt of gratitude that the child should grow to honor. Within this exchange the spiritual and material mix. Benevolence means everything from a simple blessing (*hai phon*) to daily

1. No one Thai word designates this exchange although it is implicit in clearly marked superior-inferior relations (*phuyai-phunoi* [big person-little person], *phi-nong* [elder-junior]). The inferior depends on (*phung*, *asai*) the superior to care for (*liang*) and assist him. In return he should respect (*naphu*, *Khaorop*) and obey (*chyafang*) the superior. While the gestures, words and offerings of respect are clearly defined, the particulars of benevolence are left open to the superior’s wishes. He should of course be kind (*karuna*) and generous (*chaikwang*), but benevolence is best described by the *metta* or loving-kindness shown by a pure monk, Akin (1969) and Hanks (1975) provide a more complete discussion of what this exchange entails.

meals; respect can be a gesture of deference (e.g. *wai*) or a lifetime of labor. As an economic mode we can say that respect funnels resources to the parent who distributes them among his children.

This familial archetype and its Buddhist meanings can stretch to fit any superior-inferior relationship. As Thai, monks establish these relationships with the laity. As Thai institutions, temples do the same. Both build a community of followers out of resources that range from sacred power and social connections to money and land. A layman can go to a monk for a cure or an introduction he needs to get a job. He can go to the temple to arrange a cremation or ask for a place to live. When the abbot or any monk helps him, it shows an abiding benevolence. In return the layman owes respect. He shows this through obeisance, small favors or even major contributions—all deeds that make merit.

The exchange creates a social whole, or what Mauss (1967:76) called a total social phenomenon that is "at once legal, economic, religious, aesthetic, morphological..." and more. Whatever we label its content, a social whole is inherently but not simply material. Its materialism is implied and embedded.

Of course we can objectively measure the material exchange at any moment in time. Yet the relationship is not at *any* moment, but at *all* moments. Measuring it is rather like cutting down a tree to count its rings. You can tell how old it was, not how old it would have been. By the same token we can gauge the materialism in the benevolence-respect exchange only at its end, and some relationships last a lifetime—or even longer, if we take karma (*kam*) as seriously as the Thai do. But suppose we waited to measure just one exchange. What would be our scale? How do you compare cash with kindness or tally a *bunkhun* that the Thai say has no price? Of course it's easy if what the Thai say is all false consciousness, but does stripping away Thai meanings do anything more than impose our own? Certainly if we ignore Thai explanations for their actions then we must trace their motives to some fundamental human self-interest. Real as this may be, so general a construct can only obscure the specific self-interest that the Thai do see within the exchange. Consider Wat Lek.

As elsewhere in Thai society, at Wat Lek benevolence-respect exchange created social wholes or, more simply, communities. The local community revolved around use of temple land. The temple compound proper was a place to gossip, play and work. You could sell snacks or park your car. For perhaps a hundred temple boys it was also home. Most had come from the country to study in Bangkok's schools. They lived on the monks' charity. For free rooms, guidance and sometimes

even board, they helped with chores and ran errands. Outside the compound tenants lived on the monastery's estates (*thithoranisong*). Along one edge of the temple stood shophomes, first built shortly after the turn of the century and soon filled with Chinese. Later, in the 1950s, monks let favored laymen build houses on a vacant edge of the temple. Soon Thai houses filled the land and a wall had to be built to separate this burgeoning community from the compound proper. Temple rents were very low, but then the tenants were part of the temple community. Redeveloping the land would have multiplied the temple's income several fold, but the monks did not want to displace their tenant-followers.

All of this is quite common at Bangkok temples. Tenants or other locals who use temple land actively make up the immediate community of many temples. Rents are usually low and redevelopment slow. At one of Wat Lek's neighboring temples developers guaranteed an over twenty-fold increase in rent but the abbot refused to redevelop the land (O'Connor 1978:102). Seven decades before at yet another neighborhood temple the abbot fought a streetcar garage, arguing like a father protecting his children that even ten new people would not replace one old tenant lost to redevelopment.²

Wat Lek's locals expected this kind of benevolence. In return they acknowledged a general obligation to support the temple. From nearby Chinese merchants support was organized and substantial; from the local Thai it was erratic and often small, but it was also personal, and that especially endeared them to the monks. Of course, like respect, benevolence meant more than money. Monks could not deny locals small favors. Indeed, small favors let the plant merchants take over part of the temple. Quite literally they capitalized on the abbot's benevolence. As Bangkok's suburbs grew and ornamental plantings came into fashion, their businesses boomed. But there was no place to expand. Overflowing with plants, they begged permission to set a few plants inside the temple, temporarily of course. From this small favor big businesses grew, and a potted plant jungle soon engulfed the front of the temple. The backyards began the same way. During World War II the shophome tenants had knocked holes in their backwalls so that when bombs fell they could flee to the temple for protection. What abbot could have denied this favor? But from these beginnings backyards grew. Soon laundry was hanging near

2. Letter from *Phra Prasitsutthakhun* to *Chaophraya Thewetwongwiwat* [?], 20 Aug 1903 (National Archives, Bangkok [hereafter NA] R5 N49.7/51).

the stupa and cooking pots were stacked beside the preaching hall. The shophomes were hot and crowded, while the backyards offered air and space. How could a kind abbot push them back inside? Besides, granting benevolence was easier than taking it back. Once granted, an indulgence became a 'right', not one within law, but within the exchange. After all, the relationship was cumulative, a bond that could be honored or broken, not renegotiated like a contract. Denying a 'right' denied the relationship.

None of this was new. Laity often established strong informal rights to urban temple land and sometimes even parlayed them into legal ownership. Wat Lek's tenants had used their back entrances so long that now they had a legal right to them, though here there was no question of ownership. But over the last two centuries Wat Lek and its three neighboring temples had lost perhaps as much as a quarter to half of their land to tenants who had become owners. Here it is difficult to be precise because there were no modern title deeds, but nearby Wat Somanat offers a clear example. When King Mongkut built the temple in the mid-nineteenth century he encouraged the monks' lay supporters to settle on temple land. It was then a remote temple and he wanted to ensure there would be people to offer daily alms food and care for the monks' everyday needs. No one paid rent, but then all understood their obligation to support the temple (Reynolds 1979:203). Yet time turned this understanding into a misunderstanding. By the turn of the century a new generation did little to support the temple. They were, however, supporting themselves quite nicely by renting out and selling what had become 'their' land.³ Wherever benevolent monks failed to collect rent the temple's claim lapsed. Without modern title deeds, then the claim rested on memory and respect. Sometimes that wasn't enough. Land was lost and the benevolence-respect exchange broken.

We need not wonder if these laymen were self-interested. They were. But then the benevolence-respect exchange itself presumes self-interest, if only in the Buddhist sense that making merit is in your own best interests. Of course this is not the self-interest of the tenants-turned-owners who to a good Buddhist suffered an illusion of self that set their own against others' interests. Clearly, then, we need to distinguish two sorts of self-interest, one within benevolence-respect and one outside, and we must show how each is plausible in its own right. Here Durkheim

3. Letter from *Čaophraya* Phatsakrawong to Prince Sommot Amraphan, 23 Mar 1900; and Phatsakrawong's memo [?] of 22 Mar 1900 (NA R5 Kh4.5/5).

(1964) suggests a distinction. In his division of labor the essence of organic solidarity is interdependence rooted in complementary differences, economic or otherwise. Consider, then, the organic solidarity in the benevolence-respect exchange. The exchange presumes the status *differences* of the two parties—one superior, the other inferior. Each needs the other, not just for individual wants, but to sustain a social whole that both value, whether that whole is a family, a temple or a community.⁴ Like the organs of a body, they are *interdependent*. Their needs are complementary, and so the self-interest that animates their exchange is organic—it binds them together.

Of course this is within a social whole; self-interest works the other way around on the outside. Wholes do not need each other; each is self-contained. Instead of complementary differences, they are so similar that all want the same things—patrons, resources and followers. This competition turns them against each other. We can call this mechanical self-interest because, like Durkheim's mechanical solidarity, its essence is *independence* based on *similarity*. Let me now turn to Thai expressions of this Durkheimian duality.

How do the Thai interpret incidents such as the plant merchants? Its's easy. Whenever benevolence and respect die, selfishness (*khwamhenkaetua*) kills them. When a relationship goes well they are wary; when it goes sour they 'knew it all along'. Selfishness or what we shall call self-interest is never surprising. It is as if the Thai posit a 'natural' man for whom benevolence and respect are pretense, a cloak to be shed when he has what he wants.⁵ Though not the only interpretation, it is a common, indeed inevitable, one. A person can wear the cloak as though it were his

4. As Phraya Anuman (1972:433-434) says of the past, "Villagers were apt to depend on the temple and the temple had to depend on the villagers." Villagers and monks led inseparable lives. Of course at Wat Lek separation was both more possible and prominent. Locals could go to other temples and the monks had outside patrons and rents to support them. Even so, both monks and locals readily voiced their interdependence, saying that locals needed a temple and monks to make merit, while the monks needed laity to offer alms and monastic requisites. The words that expressed this mutual dependence (*phung*, *asai*) were the same ones used for other benevolence-respect relationships.

5. My observations on benevolence-respect exchange follow Phillips' (1965:ch.2) analysis of Thai peasant interaction where he emphasizes the importance of reciprocity and the almost contractual character of even parent-child relationships. In discussing what I would call this 'natural man' attitude, he cites leMay's (1930:10) observation that for the Siamese "This is a very wicked world, and everyone is trying to get the better of you in some way or other."

skin, yet he is less a traditional man than a natural man who subordinates himself to tradition. It is precisely this *sacrifice* that makes him so admirable.

Now if we agree with Thomas Hobbes about human nature, we can credit the Thai with a fundamental insight and stop here. But even if this is true, it does not explain the social origins of this 'insight'. True, within the relationship self-interest is muted, perhaps forgotten. Generosity reigns. But outside self-interest runs rampant. One owes strangers nothing. Thus the natural man is expected, even approved, on the outside. But he does not stop there. He lurks on the inside too. Now if he is only a socially constructed being, how can he haunt the inside where society says he has no place? The answer lies in choice. In Thai society a person can choose his affiliations. Thai groups are fluid and overlapping, and this is not incidental but integral to the organization of society.⁶ Thus society does less to dictate one's group than force one to choose—or at least be conscious of choice. Now because the Thai see the outside as hostile and exploitative, the choice to offer benevolence or respect can never be disinterested. It always seeks the advantage of the inside, a refuge from the harsh outside. This then is the self-interest that Mauss (1967) saw in the gift--the stake that two parties have in an alliance when the choice is that or nothing. Thus a consciousness of self-interest imbues even the inside where it is presumed yet never proclaimed lest the benevolence-respect bond be broken.

Yet the bond was broken at Wat Lek, and so each side saw the other as openly and viciously self-interested. Some merchants felt that the monks had abandoned them to seek the respect of others who offered more. Certainly it was no secret that the temple's elite patrons frowned on the mess and merchandizing. Of course the monks saw it differently. For them it was a matter of discipline. A disciplined monk would command respect and he stood far above self-interest.

DISCIPLINE-RESPECT EXCHANGE

In contrast to benevolence-respect, discipline-respect exchange is seen as supremely disinterested. How is this plausible when an awareness of self-interest pervades society? Again the answer lies in choice, or rather the lack of it. Within discipline (*rabiap*, *winai*) there is no choice. Self and hence self-interest are

6. Thai society is organized in a center-periphery pattern (see Tambiah 1976) wherein small and local groups are subsumed in larger ones that revolve around the capital and its ruler or ruling elite. This sets the context for the patron-client relations and entourages (Hanks 1975; Akin 1969) that underlie and crosscut the formal structure of the society.

subordinated to the rules of a larger order. Unlike the subtle bargaining for benevolence and respect, what discipline offers is fixed. A personal relationship is always negotiable, but subordination to a principle admits no give-and-take (Simmel 1950:250). The only choice is to obey or violate the rules, to be disinterested or self-interested.

While benevolence-respect is common to the whole of Thai society, discipline creates and rules its core. Whether through fixed institutions such as the military, the bureaucracy or the Sangha, or open idioms such as merit-making, official ceremonies or just wearing a school uniform, Thai subordinate themselves to discipline and thereby participate in a larger moral order that commands respect. Within this larger cultural meaning of discipline, Wat Lek participated first in nonastic discipline (*phrawinai*), then in the rules (*rabiap*) of the Thammayut Order (*Thammayuttikanikai*), the Supreme Council of Elders (*Mahatherasamakhom*), the government's Department of Religious Affairs (*Krom Kansatsana*), and finally the temple itself. Although at most temple the age-old Buddhist exchange of monastic discipline for lay respect was well adapted to Thai benevolence, at Wat Lek discipline had taken a stricter course best explained by its Thammayut traditions.

King Mongkut codified the Thammayut discipline in the mid-19th century. As a young monk Mongkut tried to strengthen discipline and purge corruptions. His Thammayut followers advocated an austere, almost Puritanical textualism. They did not reject benevolence--after all, a pure monk had loving kindness (*metta*)--but they would not abide by practices without textual authority, even though many of these popularly expressed benevolence. They frowned on curing and magical protection, even though the laity craved this beneficent use of monastic power. They discouraged temple fairs, some popular folk ceremonies, and the all-too-entertaining preaching monks (*nakthet*) as inconsistent with monastic discipline. If this kept them pure, it also kept them apart from the laity who looked to the temple for entertainment. Thammayut monks insisted on tight temple administration, even though this eventually meant collecting proper rents--hardly benevolent in tenants' eyes. Once abbots and lay leaders managed temple money as they saw fit. This funded their benevolence and attracted followers. If in some years they profited handsomely (Reynolds 1979), when the temple needed funds, they were expected to lead the efforts. But this looked corrupt in Thammayut eyes. Account books and title deeds were better. Of course not all Thammayut temples followed this regime completely, but their formal discipline carried them in this direction. Stripped of

magic and superstition, their Buddhism was everything the modern world and a modernizing elite could want, and so when the Sangha modernized, the Thammayut Order's strict textualism and tight administration became a model for the whole monkhood. Today civil and monastic governments propagate what were once Thammayut reforms. Now they are simply the dictates of progress. Though this modern Buddhism is widely accepted, it is not as widely practiced. Commoner temples and laymen cling to traditional practices that express benevolence.

MERCHANTS vs. MONKS

This then set the stage for Wat Lek's conflict: the laity sought traditional benevolence where the young monks offered reformed discipline. Decades of reform had made self-interested use of the temple look bad, while it had also crippled the benevolence that checked conflict. Had benevolence built strong ties, local respect would have pressured the merchants to abide by the monks' wishes. But the laity did not act and so the monks had to. Wisely the abbot avoided the conflict, but this left the young monks with no traditional authority to act. Once this would have been the end of it. Less than a century before, few monks knew the rules for passing a popular motion, and out of respect for the abbot's complete authority, far fewer would have dared use them.⁷ But the new programs in Pali scholarship had schooled the young monks well, using the letter of the discipline, they called a meeting of the Sangha; the abbot and older monks stayed away; and the young monks gained the consensus for an order of the Sangha (*sangkhakam*) and hence the authority to tell the taxi company and the plant merchants to leave.

Neither left willingly. Both begged delays. They were, they said, only trying to earn an honest living. So the monks waited. Delay led to delay. Finally the monks had to act. To expel the taxi company they called a meeting of the shophome merchants who had backyards in the temple. They announced that the temple would have to lock its gate. Realizing that then no one could park in the temple compound, the merchants quickly offered to "make more merit" to keep the gate open. The monks refused. This they said was like asking them to "sell the temple." That they would not do. Then the other merchants turned on the taxi owner and amid a flurry of Chinese curses he agreed to look for another place. Time passed and he found nothing, and so finally the monks put in a toll bar and locked one of

7. Reynolds (1973:217-219) describes how puzzled the monks in one temple were by the Prince Patriarch's suggestion that they vote to decide who would manage temple affairs and receive the end-of-Lent offering.

his cabs in and the others out. He simply shifted repairs to the temple entrance just outside the toll bar. It's hard to say what the monks would have done had not a run of bad luck befallen the taxi owner. After accidents destroyed several of his cars, he decided that he had been foolish to curse monks. He offered to make amends.

The plant merchants also dragged their feet. After all, they argued, the temple was not using the land anyway. This was a powerful argument. It made casting them out look callous and arbitrary. The monks' answer was to use the land. They decided to build a hall (*sala*) where the plants were. This was no hoax. They actually built the hall, organizing contributions and adding their own labor when funds fell short. In the end it had taken a 250,000 baht (approx. U.S. \$12,000) building to clear the plants and assert discipline. When denying benevolence usually meant petty self-interest, what else could they have done?

FROM TEMPLE TO SOCIETY

How do we generalize from one temple to Thai society? The usual way is to ask, 'are the events at Wat Lek representative of Thai society?' Certainly benevolence-respect exchange is common to the whole of Thai society. It underlies the patriarchal and hierarchical rule that reigns everywhere from the family to the nation (O'Connor 1981); and it is embedded in the patron—client relations that structure Thai society (Akin 1969; Hanks 1962). Here Wat Lek is typically Thai. Even disagreement is common, although conflict is rarely so open. In part this can happen at Wat Lek because many of the merchants are Chinese for whom discipline holds little aura and self-interest is freely expressed.⁸ To the Thai this is uncouth and provocative, tantamount to denying the benevolence-respect relationship and debasing the discipline-respect one.

Is discipline-respect exchange representative? If 'representative' means what is common or typical, then the obvious answer is no. Yet this obvious answer and the question itself hide a preconceived model of Thai society. After all, you cannot ask if 'A' represents a larger society unless you already know the nature of that society. Now within this 'already known' model we do not ask if a coup or the

8. Like Thai reserve, Chinese candor is well rooted in their social organization. The local Chinese fuse Business with family so that the open material self-interest in the former cannot easily be denied in the latter sphere or social life generally. While for the Thai choice keeps them conscious of a self-interest they dare not say, for the Chinese such denials are not only unnecessary, their very lack of choice makes them implausible. Most businesses have local clienteles that take years to build up, and so they cannot easily move. Thus when it comes to a dispute, they have to fight for their material self-interests while local Thai can always move on, perhaps physically but always, socially.

bureaucracy is statistically representative. Coups are rare and bureaucrats are few. Even so, we do not doubt their significance. Why? We know, which is to say the model presumes, that coups and bureaucrats represent the elite who by definition are significant. We cannot leave this preconceived model unquestioned, but for now let us take it as a first approximation and rephrase our question to ask 'are the events at Wat Lek representative of the elite?' Here the answer is yes.

Wat Lek is an elite temple. Its abbot has a royally-awarded title (*ratchathinanam*) and holds a high position within the Sangha's government. The temple itself is a royal temple, and honor held by less than seven-tenths of one percent of Thai temples (Vajiradhammapadip Temple 1976). It is also a Thammayut temple. In itself this makes it unusual (outnumbered about twenty to one by Mahanikai temples [Vajiradhammapadip Temple 1976]), not necessarily elite. But for Wat Lek the Thammayut Order's historically strong elite connections mean both a legacy of old elite patrons and the aura to attract new ones. More important, its Thammayut affiliation together with its royal status explain the monks' dedication to discipline.

So Wat Lek is an elite temple, but how is reformed monastic discipline 'representative' of the elite? In brief, this monastic discipline has strong affinities with the elite's modern bureaucratic discipline. The historical connection is particularly close. Beginning with King Mongkut (1851-68) and continuing through King Chulalongkorn (1868-1910) and his brothers, the same people who initiated and encouraged Sangha reform also modernized the bureaucracy. Indeed, the two spheres were never wholly separate. Ideally the Monarch's Domain (*anačhak*) and the Buddha's Domain (*putthačhak*) were aligned with each other (Reynolds 1973:5; Damrong 1968:36-37), and certainly bureaucratic and monastic discipline both enjoyed royal favor. This royal favor lives on in part because the Thai elite know and honor the past. But even if the past were forgotten, the prestige that royalty first gave discipline is now well embedded in the status system. Thus, whether it is Wat Lek or government agencies and officials, strict conformity to discipline wins honor.

Yet this is more than the dead hand of the past. Symbolic affinities unite monastic and bureaucratic discipline. Discipline's subordination to a larger order, whether that order is Buddhist or modern or both, demands rationalism. Thus simple rationalism unites the two and makes respect for reformed monasticism a plausible and meaningful religion for a bureaucratic elite. As Weber (1964:89) has

observed, "a dominant bureaucracy ...is always the carrier of a comprehensive sober rationalism and ...the ideal of a disciplined 'order' ..." Setting this affinity in time, it appears that the two evolved together. When King Mongkut began monastic reforms in the Third Reign (1824-51) there was no bureaucracy in the modern sense. He saw Buddhism as corrupted by magic and improper customs, but then perhaps that was appropriate to the needs of the traditional elite because, as Weber (1964:85) observes, "warrior nobles, and indeed feudal powers generally" do not ask of their religion "anything beyond protection against evil magic or such ceremonial rites as are congruent with their caste, such as priestly prayers for victory..." Certainly an austere rationalism made little sense when chance loomed so large in warfare, factional politics and courting royal favor. Yet rationalism began to make sense as the elite started to see themselves in a modern world grounded in rationalism and particularly science. Here the rationalism that King Mongkut found within Buddhism prefigured the elite's acceptance of the modern world. Indeed, science fit easily within this reformed Buddhism (e.g. Thipakornwong 1965). Thus as modernity came to define more and more of the elite and a modern bureaucracy arose, a similarly rational Buddhism founded on monastic reform grew along with it. So whether we look at direct historical connections or enduring symbolic ones, Wat Lek's concern for discipline represented the concerns of the elite.

Now we have linked discipline to the elite, but it does not follow that they are always disciplined. Indeed, few are. But then few should be if discipline is an ideal that establishes a hierarchy of moral excellence. Here we must challenge the preconceived model of Thai society that finds order in common behavior (e.g. Potter 1976). If Thai society is hierarchical, then it is predicated on differences. Yet the question 'is it representative?' asks for similarity and denies difference its determining role. Or if Thai society revolves around a center, then again the very question denies the essential differences that separate center from periphery. Of course the solution is to say that hierarchy and center are deeply shared beliefs that presume diversity in behavior. So discipline is at once representative and yet rare. To say that the discipline-related events at Wat Lek are not 'representative' is simply to assert a preconceived uniformitarian model of Thai society when much of what we know points to a society predicated on diversity.

MARKET EXCHANGE IN A THAI CONTEXT

Having set benevolence and discipline in context, we now need to introduce

a third model of exchange—the market—where self-interest is most open. This is the opposite of the other two. In benevolence-respect exchange self-interest is unspoken while in discipline-respect it is unimagined. For both materialism is indeterminate, obligations deep and relations hierarchical. In stark contrast, in market exchange materialism is calculable, obligations minimal, and relations egalitarian.

The opposition is obvious and yet it hides affinities that appear when, following Weber (1958a:17), we distinguish two sorts of market-based self-interest—the simple greed sufficient for a bazaar economy as opposed to the rational pursuit of profit necessary for capitalism. Given this distinction, bazaar-like greed and benevolence-respect exchange share a profound similarity—a double standard. In the bazaar you favor friends and cheat strangers just as within benevolence-respect you owe everything to your group and nothing to outsiders. Each thus promotes an assumption that strengthens the other. Opponents on the surface, they are allies underneath in the consciousness they create.

By the same token capitalism and discipline-respect share a single standard. Friend or enemy, a capitalist charges the same price just as a strict monk follows the same rules. Now this similarity would be little more than curious were discipline confined to the temple, but it is also the model for the modern bureaucracy and modernization. While a traditional bureaucrat favors friends and a corrupt one favors money, the ideal modern bureaucrat simply follows the proper rules like a strict monk. Discipline and capitalism oppose each other openly, and yet their shared insistence on a single standard promotes a consistent rationalism that may someday dwarf their differences. After all, it was the ethical imperative to deal with strangers and friends by the same standard that Weber (1950:356-358; 1958a:57-58) saw as an essential step in unleashing the market economy in the West.

Will the Thai sense of discipline work the way the Protestant Ethic did? I doubt it. The Thai see discipline as an ideal few can attain, not a duty for all as the Protestant Ethic was.⁹ This expectation that people will differ sustains the social

9. Of course this does not deny that some Thai do cultivate personal discipline or that their practice could prove to be a trend. I have known ex-monks, lay meditators and two Seventh Reign noblemen who lived profoundly disciplined lives. But in itself this is hardly new. Strict personal discipline (e.g. avoidance of women) has long been a way to attain magical powers. Yet this has not made discipline an attribute of ordinary individuals. To the contrary, most people admire rather than imitate the disciplined few. Indeed, they are so admired that the bureaucracy eagerly absorbs them and so gives their personal discipline institutional expression.

hierarchy and its institutions as expressions of these differences. Thus discipline remains an ideal usually locked up in the monastery, the bureaucracy and modern institutions, while the duty for everyone else is not discipline but respect. To set discipline free, to make it an attribute of not key institutions but ordinary individuals, would destroy the very meaning that makes it powerful—its prestige as participation in the larger societal order. For discipline to be widespread, individual and meaningful, social participation and indeed Thai society itself would have to be reconceptualized so that simple self-interested rationalism is as meaningful and universal a social act as it is, say, in the United States where it expresses democracy and individualism. Or, put another way, the Thai's hierarchical assumption (and toleration) of differences would have to dissolve into an egalitarian assumption of (and demand for) uniformity (cf. Tocqueville 1945; Dumont 1970). If this is possible, little in Bangkok now suggests it is probable.¹⁰

So long as the Thai see sheer capitalism as simple greed, not acceptable self-interest, they will remain poles apart from the thoroughgoing rationalism of a Protestant Ethic. Instead of a studied neutrality, they judge how profit is gained and used. By these standards some merchants acquit themselves well, but the Thai are a long way from accepting the label 'capitalist' (*naithun*) as just descriptive, not derisive. True, even large-scale corporate capitalism can put itself above greed. It can tap discipline's aura if its consistent rationalism culminates in conspicuous merit-making or the economic development that benefits the nation as a whole. Here capitalism can enter openly. Not that the Thai want capitalism, they want modernity. But modernity has been wedded to a capitalist ideology of development. So it is not a Protestant Ethic but modernity's symbols that accept capitalism as an unwelcome but needed guest.

CHANGES IN THAI SOCIETY

But modern capitalism does not need the Protestant Ethic or popular acceptance to prosper. Discipline's unintended consequences may be ally enough. Consider the way the two promote each other. Whether in the Sangha or the bureaucracy, administration by a single standard makes the costs of business

10. The Northeast, however, may be more open to such change because discipline is not just an elite dictum but a popular Buddhist tradition that can, as Keyes (1983:861) shows, sustain a village-level Thai entrepreneur. A long line of disciplined forest monks testify to the antiquity of this tradition. It is, then, apparently no accident that King Mongkut's Thammayut reforms were accepted more readily in the Northeast than any other region. While the Thammayut Order has prospered in the Northeast, elsewhere it has sunk often shallow or mostly urban roots.

calculable, a necessity for capitalism. Both bureaucracy and capitalism attack local autonomy. As Weber (1958b:230-231) observed:

Often bureaucratization has been carried out in direct alliance with capitalist interests... In general, a legal levelling and destruction of firmly established local structures...has usually made for a wider range of capitalist activity.

We need look no further than Wat Lek for an example. When the temple turned out the taxi owner and plant merchants, the market awaited them. Where once 'respect' and judicious merit-making had been enough, now only money would do. Here capitalism followed bureaucracy's discipline. But the reverse is also true. Wherever capitalism undermines local communities, petty patriarchs lose the means to defy central control (O'Connor 1981). Then resources that were once locked up in benevolence-respect move onto the market and often into the bureaucracy's hands. Indeed, as capitalism has moved out into the countryside, resources have flowed to Bangkok and funded the bureaucracy's prodigious growth.

I do not mean to imply that capitalism is taking over Thai society. Perhaps it is. Certainly our largely economic theories of society and the perspective of Western history encourage this conclusion. But self-interest is neither new nor honored. True, capitalism offers it new opportunities, but these need be no greater threat than the bazaar and amoral politics have been for centuries. Moreover, wherever capitalism shows an ugly face, it strengthens the mandate for the discipline that controls it. Each can grow and yet be stable opponents just as in the United States big business and big government have often been at once ideological opponents and functional allies. Thus I see only ideological reasons why capitalism need conquer discipline, benevolence or respect.

But where I do see one model of exchange replacing another is between discipline and benevolence as happened at Wat Lek. In this shift the people at the top subordinate themselves to rules. They lose patriarchal powers but gain respect. For the people at the bottom the requirements are the same—respect—but the rewards are different. Benevolence was always personal and often material, but discipline offers them the abstract reward of participating in the betterment of society. This is no trifle. It is meaningful to many, even though it stealthily saps their power. Of course they still hold the power to not participate, to refuse respect. In benevolence-respect this was acceptable self-interest and a powerful lever against superiors who needed manpower to keep or enhance their positions. Under

discipline, however, refusing respect has little power. Bureaucrats and titled monks get their positions from formal education and exams. Their financial support comes from taxes and monastic estates. Thus the respect of underlings is not the currency it once was. And when underlings challenge discipline their claims look corrupt. Self-interest changes from something you bartered discretely and even unknowingly to a vulgar assault on the social order.

Discipline won at Wat Lek, but benevolence does not always lose. True, in any clear confrontation discipline's enormous prestige and bureaucratic single-mindedness weigh heavily in its favor. Yet clear confrontations are concrete and local. Benevolence can, indeed does, still prosper as an abstract national symbol. Thus a traditional life style is transmuted into a modern ideology. Everyone now worries about how to help peasants and urban laborers, not as individuals but as societal categories. The government struggles to institute societal benevolence even as the discipline-directed programs that carry this out attack local benevolence. Practically, it is hard to see a solution as the contending factions (the so-called 'left' and 'right') both offer only discipline under different guises. Ideologically, the need to wed benevolence to discipline might be met through state socialism or a return to traditional symbols that joined discipline and benevolence in a single source—the King.¹¹ However the current crisis is resolved, the way to argue is clear. Each side will claim discipline and benevolence while tarring the other side with vulgar self-interest.

CONCLUSION

Self-interest lies at the heart of many popular and academic social theories, Thai and Western alike. One can easily claim it is a universal, human nature itself, but the proof of this universality rests on making the notion so broad that nothing can fail to fit. The incidents at Wat Lek can be lumped together as simple self-interest, but this dissolves the very distinctions that moved the actors. Why study the rich fabric of life if it is only to pull out a single thread? Stripped of cultural meanings and social conditions, self-interest as the simple answer is just too simple.

11. I am indebted to Thak Chaloermtiana for pointing out the affinity between benevolence-respect and state socialism.

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