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The Dispensable Ones

We may think of Thailand’s central plain as a rectangle measuring some 235 by 120 miles with its long axis running north and south.1 Down the middle of this flat surface cuts the mother of waters, the Mae Nam, running from the northern hills to the mudbanks of the south, where her waters cross into the Gulf of Siam.2 Like a good mother, she sends her water to nourish everything along her course. Each year in flood she renews the gray-black soil of the plain for many miles to east and west with a fresh layer of silt. Before these plains became a succession of padi fields, her waters revived the tall grasses and canes along her banks and tributaries, as well as the bushy thickets of the scrub jungle found on somewhat higher ground (LS 10/22/48).3 In the bottoms of pools dried, baked, and hardened in the hot season, her floodwaters restored the green of desiccated vegetation at the edges and stirred the vitality of the fish hibernating in the moist clay beneath.4 As ponds filled with water from rains as well as floods, elephant and deer herds, together with the tigers that always follow, moved out again from the hills on the horizon to fresh pasture in the plains. Then the weaverbirds could build their nests in the thickets and cranes moved inland from the riverbanks and sea-shore in search of fish.5 Here the pause in the annual cycle, caused in temperate zones by cold, is caused by tropical monsoon heat.

Human residents of the plain were scarce before 1850. An occasional group of Khā hunters dwelt on the edge of some permanent pond, dibbling a patch of rice on its bank, but most such hunting groups preferred the uplands.6 The Thai clung to the main watercourses, avoiding the plains between. They even named the plain east of Bangkok Sāen Sāeb, or 100,000 Stings, hence a wilderness to be avoided. The mosquitoes and scorpions mattered less, however, than the inconstant water supply, for the water that flowed so
abundantly for seven or eight months across the entire plain all but vanished for the rest of the year. Of course, a family might have stored enough in big earthen jars to last through the dry season, but the Thai found it far more convenient to dip water from a river as needed. Besides, the larger rivers afforded daily fishing and bathing throughout the year. Along the riverbanks, with many neighbors at one’s side, the Thai could live without fear that elephants would trample a house or flatten a garden. So they built their houses and moored their boats along the rivers, and rarely did anyone venture the twenty miles or so from the capital city out into the plains toward Bang Chan’s present site.

These central Thai had adapted their living to the water. Sir John Bowring, with pleasant memories of the scene where he successfully concluded a commercial treaty, described his approach to Bangkok in 1855:

But the houses thicken as you proceed; the boats increase in number; the noise of voices becomes louder; and one after another temples, domes, and palaces are seen towering above the gardens and forests. . . . On both sides of the river a line of floating bazaars crowded with men, women and children, and houses built on piles along the banks, present all objects of consumption or commerce. Meanwhile multitudes of ambulatory boats are engaged in traffic with various groups around. If it be morning, vast numbers of priests will be seen in their skiffs on the Meinam with their iron pots and scripts, levying their contributions of food from the well-known devotees. [Bowring 1857, 1:392–393]

Not a road but a river served as the avenue for travel and trade as well as the source of food and domestic water and the catchall for waste. Had Bowring remained a few weeks longer, he would have witnessed boatloads of merry people dousing each other with water at the New Year’s Festival (Song Krān). In the full moon of May on the Lord Buddha’s birthday (Wisākhabūchā) he would have seen all the temples on the shores aglow with lanterns. In November on the night of Lāuj Krathong he would have seen the water itself illuminated by thousands of miniature boats bearing candles and sins down toward the sea. Over these waters moved also the king with his mighty officials and soldiers in caparisoned barges and swiftly paddled men-of-war.

After the excitement of Bangkok, most early travelers along the river seem to have been bored by the monotonous succession of gardens, padi fields, and clusters of houses. Monsignor Jean Baptiste Pallegoix (1854:84–97) was always relieved on his trips during the
1830s and 1840s to find a pleasant town of four to six thousand souls where life was not quite so dull as in the river villages. Two decades later, Adolf Bastian (1867:20–48) headed downstream and later remembered chiefly the villages where he showed his pass to a hospitable governor or stopped to spend the night near a few thatched houses. People of this region, too, lived facing the river with their backs to the forbidding plain.\(^7\)

Whether or not the Thai scene appealed to Europeans, residents were happy to have peace. By the time of King Rama III (1824–1851), little more than two generations had lived along the Māē Nām since the last invasion by a foreign army. This peace had begun when Phrayā Tāksin (1768–1782) reestablished the Thai state after the Burmese sack of Ayutthaya and regained the vassal principalities of the north. His successor, King Rama I (1782–1809), then founded the capital at Bangkok, drove the Burmans from the western and southern provinces, and held them in check along the western hills (Hall 1955:389–399). Subsequent friction with the British gave the Burmans little time or strength to reengage the Thai. On the other hand, the British at Penang also disturbed the flow of tribute from the Malay rajahs to Bangkok, and there the maintenance of Thai sovereignty continued to be a problem into the second half of the nineteenth century (Hall 1955:443–452; Vella 1957:59–77). Yet these matters to the south scarcely disturbed the peace of the center.

A much more serious threat came from the east, where the unified and aggressive Vietnamese were contending for sovereignty over the intervening states (Hall 1955:372–375; Vella 1957:111–112). Though the kings of Cambodia tried to prevent invasion by sending tribute both to Huế and Bangkok, any move that might be interpreted as favorable to the other power was answered with threatened invasion by the affronted rival. The contest also concerned the Laotian principalities to the northeast, where secret missions proffered military aid to the vassal who would revolt. From Luang Prabāng through Vientiane and Xieng Khouang to Phnom Penh the country was uneasy (Hall 1955:400–401; Vella 1957:94–118; Wyatt 1963).

Rama III turned to fortifying the east. A chain of forts was erected and cities were hastily fortified; the naval arm was strengthened with new ships; soldiers were drafted to man the defenses (Thipphakarawong 1934b:246). A plan was devised to make these eastern
forts more accessible to Bangkok by connecting the Mekhā Nām river system with the Bāng Pa Kong River, which drains the eastern borderlands. A connecting canal would save the defenders at least two days in reaching such points as Battambāng and Siemreap, for instead of following three sides of a rectangle, they would have a direct route without exposure to winds and tides. The *Chronicle of the Third Reign* relates for 1837:

Moving to the second month on the fourth day of the rising moon, his Majesty decreed that Phrayā Sriphiphat Rātanarātchakosa become director and hire Chinese to dig a canal from Huamāk to Bāng Khanak of 1,337 sen, 19 wā, 2 sok in length, 6 sok in depth, and 6 wā in width [about 34 miles in length, 10 feet deep, 40 feet in width]. . . . The digging was not completed until the year of the Rat, the second year of the decade, 1202 of the Sakrād [1840/41]. [Thiphakarawong 1934b:179]8

This canal, which then ran through the plain to the east of the capital, was known as Sāen Sāeb (Thiphakarawong 1934a:70). Every basket of clay carried up from the oozing pit on the back of a Chinese coolie and dumped upon the dyke was accompanied by the bites, nips, and stings of the myriad creatures living along the way. The pains of some five thousand hired Chinese transformed the waste-land of the 100,000 Stings into a land for living.

Both Rama III and his famous successor, Rama IV (1851-1868), encouraged the settling of this region. At a point west of where a little rivulet, now known as Bang Chan canal, entered Sāen Sāeb canal, a parcel of 2,000 rai (800 acres) of land was given to an august member of the Bunnag family. Probably this land was given by King Rama III to Chao Phrayā Phraklāng (Dit Bunnag), who had served with distinction as foreign minister, and indeed had functioned also as prime minister (Bowring 1857, 1:441). Among his many services, Chao Phrayā Phraklāng had helped restore the sovereignty of Bangkok over the Malay provinces of the south; after suppressing a last major rebellion in Kedah and Kelantan in 1839/40, he had returned in triumph with many prisoners of war (Vella 1957:67-69; Thiphakarawong 1934b:118-119). The king turned over a number of the prisoners to him as a reward for his services, and they became retainers for his estates.9 Then when he or his son, Chao Phrayā Srisurijawong (Chuang Bunnag), prime minister under Rama IV, wished to settle people on his fief, these former prisoners of war or their descendants were moved to the new land. The people in
question were Moslems “from Saiburi” (presumably Kedah or Kelantan), and some of their descendants still live today on the land where their forebears had settled (LS 12/31/48; LMH 9/18/57). They report that His Excellency directed them to dig a mound above the floodwaters and build him a residence. At the same time they were to construct huts in the vicinity, and to raise garden produce and animals to feed their master during his periodic visits. Perhaps his house bore some resemblance to another country residence of Chao Phrayā Srisurijawong which Carl Bock reached late one night in 1881:

After an hour’s absence he [the servant] returned with a servant of the second governor who told me that the first governor was at Radburī on a visit to the ex-Regent, whose summer palace was at my disposal—a white washed building on the wall of which was a tablet with English letters engraved as follows, “His Excellency the Prime Minister of Siam. A.D. 1861.” It was a small building of two stories, a very modest residence for so wealthy and great a man; and judging by the dilapidated state it was in, it could not have been inhabited for years. The staircase was almost eaten up by white ants, and the air inside was foul, as if the windows had not been opened for ages. [Bock 1884:81]

For some years, we are told, the prime minister came to his residence near Bang Chan. Later he seems to have come infrequently. His descendants did not use the house, and it gradually crumbled. Today there remains only the mound known as the Governor’s Mound (Khök Chuan) alongside the lotus pond formed when the earth was removed (LMH 8/18/57), with fields owned by a landlord known as Nāj Chyd Bunag (KJ 9/12/49).

Near this point a group of Laotian prisoners of war was settled by the “second king” (wâng nā or uparād) under Rama IV, who seems also to have assisted the move to populate the region. The then second king had taken an active part in the rebellion at Vientiane in 1828 and returned with many prisoners of war (Vella 1957:83–84). After being forced to witness the punishment of their leaders, they began a new life as slaves in various palaces (LMH 11/31/53, 7/16/57). After twenty or more years of life in Bangkok, some of these people were moved out of the city to build a village on the banks of Săèn Săèb canal and to maintain themselves with rice grown in the lowland behind their houses (LMH 7/6/57, 7/22/57, 7/23/57). Not far from them a second village of Moslem prisoners of war was also
begun. So the banks of Sāen Sāeb canal were populated under royal direction. We believe all these settlements were made between 1841 and the middle 1850s.¹⁰

From City to Wilderness

In the 1850s one could follow the east bank of the Māē Nam a mile or so upstream from the grand palace in Bangkok and reach a small suburb of a few hundred houses called Sāmsen. Here the river was thick with sampans, large sailing barges, and junks from across the sea. Even at that time the main handlers of commerce were Chinese, and we may infer that a sizable portion of Sāmsen’s residents were Chinese. William Skinner observed, “It is perhaps significant that the oldest and largest Hainanese temple in Bangkok is located in Samsen near the old wharf from which all upriver traffic begins” (1957:84). Skinner further suggests (p. 136) some of the activities of Sāmsen in describing the Hainanese: “[They] were hand sawyers, market gardeners, fishermen, domestic servants, waiters, tea shop operators, and, not infrequently, coolies, miners, and peddlers. They were the poorest of all the [Chinese] speech groups, and their general low standing was undisputed.”

The first resident of the area we know today as Bang Chan came from Sāmsen (LMH 7/30/57). His name was Chāem. He grew up in a Sāmsen family with two older brothers and an older sister. Our records tell us only that his mother was a gardener, though whether she grew rice or was a market gardener is not specified. The father is not mentioned at all. Possibly he was a Chinese immigrant who married a Thai and gardened or fished for a living. When the oldest boy was a young man, the father died or disappeared, leaving the mother with no land to work (JRH 2/18/54).

We do not know how long the family remained in Sāmsen after the father’s disappearance, but before long the eldest son moved out with his wife, his mother, and a younger brother along the newly opened Sāen Sāeb canal. The sister married and settled with her husband in Sāmsen, where she is said to have become rich and thereafter visited her kinsmen in the country. Chāem, the youngest, married and moved in with his wife’s parents, who were also gardeners (JRH 2/18/54). He did not remain in the city long; within a few years Chāem set off with his wife and mother-in-law along Sāen Sāeb canal.
THE DISPENSABLE ONES

To go from Sāmsen to Sāen Sāeb canal required going down the Māe Nām to Phra Khanong, below Bangkok, where the larger boats entered. Yet there may also have been a more direct route via such smaller waterways as the Sāmsen and Bāngkapi canals.11 Once on the broad canal, the boat must have paused to visit at the hut where Chaem’s brothers and their mother were living, yet he chose not to stay long with them. Turning north from the main canal into a rivulet, he passed the country residence of Chao Phrayā Srisurijawong, where in the hot season the going must have been difficult because of weeds.12 A part of the stream was so jammed with vegetable debris that the water itself ran underground (LS 12/31/48). There Chaem dug a channel through tangled roots and mud a foot or two thick in order to slide his boat along. Subsequent heavy rains and floods would wash the stream bed clear down to the old clay base. Near a point where the sluggish stream branched, he found a slight rise and stopped there. This spot offered a natural mound that might stay dry a little longer than surrounding areas during the floods. Besides, he would have at least two streams for fishing, and with the Moslem village downstream and the Khā hunters to the east, he would not be cut off entirely from human association.

As the new settlers unloaded their basket of milled rice, cooking pots, and sleeping mats in an opening where the tall dry grasses stood, a house was one of the least of their problems. In a few hours Chaem with his sword could cut enough bamboo from the nearby thicket for the frame, while the two women gathered and peeled rattan-like canes to bind the pieces together. Some rushes (pry) formed the roof and walls. Inside, a platform of bamboo provided a sleeping place above the dirt floor and the coming floods.13 All could be built in two days; and the following year they would know how high to heap up the soil for a more permanent mound. Nor was food a problem. The rice would not last until they had harvested their first crop, but they could trade some of the abundant fish for more. Fuel for the fire was everywhere, and when the rains came, plants could be gathered to eat with the rice and fish.

Their problem, the problem of all handcraft subsistence economies, was to husband and manage their labor to meet daily needs through the annual cycle and at the same time to make life more efficient and comfortable. For instance, during the dry season a
woman might fish, if there were a basket-like cone (sum) to plunge into the mud. Then she could seize a wriggling fish through the open end and toss it into a second basket in which the catch was collected. Yet it took most of four days to cut, prepare the reeds, and weave two such baskets. It was equally important, before the rains came, to cut and then burn the brush of a small patch of land for the rice plot and clear away the gnarled roots of grass and weeds, and at least a week of work was required for three people to prepare the soil properly with hoes. When the rains came and the seed that had been planted with a dibble stick began to grow, there still remained weeds to pull, and when the grain was almost ready for harvest, someone might have to stand guard all day with a pellet bow to drive away the weaverbirds from the ripening crop. Then came the tiring though joyful work of
harvesting, threshing, winnowing, and milling before a single mouthful was ready for cooking.  

Before any of this could be done, one had to have harvesting and threshing tools; at least one winnowing tray, preferably two or three, to carry and clean the grain; baskets to hold it; a mortar and pestle for pounding off the husks; and a place built for dry storage through the year. For such equipment weeks more of labor must be invested. In the meantime, four hours a day were constantly required for one person to gather the fuel, strike the spark, coax the fire, carry the water, and boil the rice dry enough for eating. Then during the first year when the padi supply ran low, all hands had to turn to for extra days of fishing before sending one person with a boatload to the nearest market. It would take at least a day, probably two, before the boatman returned, for the neighboring people had plenty of fish, and the best place to trade was in Bangkok. All these activities dealt with subsistence and had little to do with acquiring textiles and pottery or such comforts as a sleeping mat, a headrest, fish soy for a more savory meal, even an oil lamp for an emergency at night.

In some twelve-odd hours of tropical daylight, three able adults were none too many to make a bare living in this out-of-the-way spot. Of these working days, many were reduced in effectiveness by fevers, storms, and accidents. A single elephant could trample the rice patch flat; a single storm could blow the house down. The provision of labor, not of material resources, was the problem; and it is no wonder that an enduring tradition developed that material wealth in Bang Chan should be measured not in material possessions, but in the number of productive workers included in a household over a long term (LS 12/31/48). One might gamble labor in hand against the promise of future labor. Chaem gambled but without great success, for only six of his fourteen children survived to maturity.

Economics, the Social Order, and Kinship

We may pause in our narrative to ask how one person might acquire the labor of others in this part of the world. The question is pertinent in view of the scarcity of workers, and we may wonder why Chaem and his brothers failed to share their labor. Cooperation would seem to have been the obvious solution for their needs; then all might have lived somewhat more comfortably than they did in that
array of separate households in which only parents, spouses, and children shared the rewards of joint labor. Our answers must be drawn from generalities concerning the organization of Thai society and the kinship system as well as the economic scene.

To acquire labor in Thailand, then as now, one simply offered certain working conditions and rewards in return for the services that one sought. In Chaem’s day a householder or an employer might offer only food, lodging, and clothing for a domestic servant, a waiter in a teahouse, or a hand on a fishing boat. In return the offspring, the widowed mother-in-law, or the employee would be available any time he or she was needed. If one wished time off, he would ask for it or find a substitute. A married man might ask his wife or child to carry on during his absence; an older child might ask a younger. Should working conditions look more favorable elsewhere because of fewer demands or more adequate living conditions, the employee, the still capable parent, or the child past adolescence might announce his intention to leave. If the head of the house or employer wished him to stay, some of the duties might be shifted to another person or other rearrangements made to relieve him.

Here are no ethnological mysteries. The system has the familiar shape of Adam Smith’s free enterprise: each person bargains in the open market for the best arrangement he can make, and if this is not satisfactory, he may move elsewhere. An employer invests food, clothing, and shelter in return for services. An employer’s investments vary in the amount invested, the risk involved, the time before a return can be expected, and of course the amount of return. A parent asks a child to carry the teacups to the restaurant next door or a faithful servant to take the family gold to the goldsmith. A boat owner lends his sampan to a neighbor for an afternoon’s fishing or his seagoing junk for a trip to China. Thereby he has fished or made the trip to China, and these labors will be approximately rewarded. In this market, labor, services, and goods flow between related people rather than between institutions. A principal feature of Thai society is the ubiquity of this kind of transaction, and the ease with which relationships can be broken off.

A parent considers his children in somewhat the same way an employer views his workers. Bearing and bringing up children are troublesome, particularly for the mother, and parents look forward to a return for their trouble. A Bang Chan woman said, “Having children is a lot of trouble. Babies are afraid of noises and cry a lot.
Some say having no children is comfortable; some say that having none is bad because there will be no one to feed parents when they are old.” Another observed, “Nāng Jū never married. It was too much trouble to have children. Unmarried persons live all right. She is living with a younger brother and a girl on her parents’ land” (JRH 2/12/54).

At each stage of growth, farm children begin a new chore commensurate with their mounting strength. They carry wood, tend the buffaloes, and bring in sheaves of grain from the field to the threshing floor; when fully grown, a girl may plow while a boy uproots rice seedlings. A farmer’s moment of greatest pleasure and profit comes when all of his children are working at home in his fields. This is the return on a parent’s investment. In adopting a child, a man declared, “I want a girl for cooking, a boy for farmwork, and later to be ordained into the priesthood” (JRH 12/18/53). The return on a parent’s investment is about right when a twenty-one-year-old son, after a youth of farmwork, enters the priesthood. Parents thus give one of their valuable workers to the temple and gain merit for a better existence in their next incarnation. Should a son leave home before coming of age and without entering the priesthood, the returns are thin. Should he become a priest, then resign from the priesthood and return home to work again for his parents, the return is more ample than expected. One looks forward to a daughter’s labor until marriage and the “milk money” that her husband or his parents pay her mother for the milk that the bride once drank at her mother’s breast. If she marries young or elopes, the return is small; if she brings a husband into the home to help with the work, the return increases.

On these long and risky investments, parents try to increase their security. They bury the umbilical cord and placenta under the house to keep the child from “wandering” (paj thiaw). Disobedient children are told that someone will come and take them away from their homes. Adolescents are constantly admonished to stay at home and not wander: “If a boy wanders, and his friends invite him to do wrong, he agrees at fifteen or sixteen because he is too young [to know right from wrong]. Better not wander. But sometimes he disobey and goes. Parents do nothing but murmur and grumble a lot. If a girl wanders, people will gossip; she is meeting a boy” (JRH 6/17/53). Under these circumstances, wandering always hints at delinquency.

Another device to counter the risk that children may leave home
occurs during the topknot-cutting ceremony and the ordination for the priesthood, when songs may be sung concerning the pains the candidate has caused his parents: "[At birth your mother] is losing her soul and feels so frightened, despairing, and suffering that she throws herself up and down as if her mind were badly wounded by the poisoned arrow of a hunter. She is uneasy and moans loudly as if a big mountain had fallen upon her. She does not think of her pain but tries to save your life. You are grown up by her affection and care . . ." (SS 5/18/54). The child to whom this song is addressed, even the young man of twenty-one, is overcome by emotion and is likely to break into tears, though a few minutes later they may be dried by laughter at a comic interlude: the singer improvises a song about a troublesome child who will not stop crying; the child refuses food, he does not want to be held in his mother’s arms, no distraction works, the parents are desperate, and the child finally stops when he accidentally finds a bottle of Pepsi-Cola.

The child may be an asset to be transferred for a longer or shorter period as a favor to another person. So children are passed to grandparents, who may be lonely, or to some aunt or uncle who wants an extra hand to watch a two-year-old during harvest week.16

Children who become liabilities may be given away: "Her parents were very poor hired laborers and had many children. That girl was always sick, so her parents came to me and offered her to me. I felt pity for her and accepted her. She cooked before and after school and helped generally" (JRH 12/18/53). Delinquent or sickly boys (and healthy ones too) may be given to the local temple; as temple boys (dek wat) they serve the priests their meals, accompany them on their daily rounds, and may be cured of their failings by association with the benign temple.

If we glance again at the household of Chaem’s parents, we are able to understand something of the difficulty experienced by Chaem and his brother in uniting cooperatively. Chaem’s father’s death or disappearance ended the usual tacit parent-child arrangement. Dead men give no favors, so all the children were free to go their ways. The father’s valuables were simply divided equally among the surviving children. There remained behind no vacant seat or office to be filled, for there was no corporate body, only an aggregate of implied contracts between individuals. Hence there could be neither succession nor inheritance of rights and property. Each interested party began anew with whatever assets he might
have received from other survivors, children normally dividing the dead parent's property in equal shares.\textsuperscript{17}

The same principle of investment reappears in the relations between siblings. The older provides the younger with favors and expects a return in services. Though the contract is unverbalized, its form is quite clear. If Chaem's older sister acted as many older sisters still do in Bang Chan, she carried him many a day on her hip to the S"amsen market, bought a cowrie shell's worth of sweets, and gave most of them to him. Later some afternoon at home he might reciprocate by fetching a coconut shell of water for her to drink and by rubbing her back as she lay stretched on a mat. Chaem's eldest brother probably took the younger one to a shadow play in the market and the next day directed him to load the boat with fishing gear. A Bang Chan man described life with his younger brothers and sisters this way: "When I said something, my younger brothers listened to me and believed me, and they never argued with me. . . . Before telling them to do any kind of work, I first thought: 'That person ought to do that'; 'this person ought to do this.' Therefore there is nothing about which to have any conflict. . . . Whenever there was entertainment somewhere, I took them with me. My younger siblings loved me a lot" (HPP 7/22/57).

Though the favors and services vary widely from day to day, even five-year-olds may feel the responsibility of providing benefits and may work hard to favor a younger one. Because a child's ability to grant favors is limited, he or she can usually hold the allegiance of only one younger child, and so children in a family tend to form into pairs of adjacent aged siblings. On the other hand, disobedience is usually the responsibility of the younger: "If my children quarrel, I see who is wrong. If the younger boy or girl is wrong, I beat them; if it is the older boy or girl, I do not beat them. This is to prevent the younger ones from not respecting the older ones. Also I teach the younger ones always to say phi [in addressing the older]. The older girl and the older boy get the same respect, and they should protect their younger brothers and sisters" (JRH 7/7/53).\textsuperscript{18} These are not only the normal ways of acting; they are felt to be the necessary ways to maintain order in a household, which otherwise would ring with petulant quarrels. So fundamental is the hierarchy of age that parents of twins, though one be but a few minutes older, carefully train the younger to obey the elder.

We suspect that when the household of Chaem's father dispersed,
the decision for the two older brothers to move off together was easily made. They had long worked in harmony. As for Chaem and his older sister, the differences in sex predisposed them to move gradually apart after puberty, when girls’ work becomes more clearly distinguished from boys’ work. Finally, her marriage separated them somewhat more.

Chaem’s mother has remained outside of discussion until this moment because speaking of her involves comparing the values of two or more investments. As a married woman, she was a partner in her husband’s enterprise. After his death she might have continued to work in his stead, just as many Bang Chan widows manage the farms of their spouses and set their children to working in the fields. If the widow had owned a house and land, she would have held them for or given them to her daughter and son-in-law in return for care during her old age. Probably she had none. With few resources, she was forced to relinquish her position as an investor of favors and become a person who offered her services. If she had brothers or sisters to whom she might turn, she did not seek or accept their favors. Evidently her eldest son was best prepared among her children to offer her food and shelter in return for her help in starting a new household.

One usually acquires labor by investing favors in another who then becomes a client, an employee, or a kind of child or younger sibling. The price is set by the market, and each patron, employer, parent, or older brother must husband his assets so as to be able to increase his favors when the price of services rises. A Bang Chan woman observed: “Rich people are glad to have a baby because they have money to feed the child; but poor people worry about too many children” (JRH 11/3/53). So when hard times come, all must reach less often into the rice pot, or some must move to other patrons. An employer addressed his factory hands: “Whoever can get a better job, paying more money, then let him go and get this other job. Whenever the time comes that money is good again, I want you to come back and help me again” (HPP 7/17/57). So groups grow with prosperity and decrease in size during hard times.

A second contractual device for securing labor is marriage, phrased as a partnership of equals in a new enterprise. To enter such a partnership each side ordinarily attempts to contribute equal amounts. When the resources are said to be considerable, families
employ a go-between for the difficult equating of contributions. In Bang Chan the consent of the bride and groom together with the knowledge of their astrological compatibility set the necessary conditions for negotiations. The parents would fix the amount of land, the size of the house, the kinds of furnishings that each must contribute toward the new household. All must be satisfied that these incommensurables reach a balance in which a house built by the groom’s family equals the land given by the bride’s family. On the appointed day of the marriage, the groom’s party, with the final items of the wedding contract in hand, comes to the bride’s parental house, shouting like soldiers assaulting a fortress. The bride’s kinsmen stoutly defend their stronghold with barriers manned by clowns, who exact an entrance fee from each of the groom’s party, as though these latter inevitably were not contributing enough. Then the terms of the contract are carefully counted and approved by witnesses before the bride is permitted to come forth. After ceremonial blessings and feasting, the newlyweds are installed as partners in their new establishment.

It is a fortunate couple that has house and land at the start. More often the parents can provide only a little to help them, and the couple must set about earning the remainder needed. Then the newlyweds offer their services to a parent or some other kinsman until they can amass the farming equipment and the buffalo necessary to operate their own rented house and land. Couples that can expect no help from their kinsmen elope and simply pay the bride’s parents a price of “forgiveness,” which may include a token of milk money for the trouble of raising the bride. Such a couple without resources must find someone who will accept their services in return for help in getting started. Of course, just the desire of two persons to join together may suffice for a marriage, and such contracts involve no payments or exchange. Two poor people may start this way, and the usually poor minor wife of a rich man enters matrimony happy for the shelter a husband can provide. Divorce, too, is simple when no joint property need be divided, but complex when former spouses and their kinsmen haggle over the division of joint property.

Chaeem and his sister seem to have had no assets other than hands and backs to bring to marriage, yet the sister was said to have become rich. She may have married a poor man who became rich; she may have become a second wife of someone already rich; or if, as a poor
girl, she were chosen by a rich man, her potential role as partner
might be minimized so that she became a kind of servant and
childbearer for her husband's family. As for Châem himself, he
seems to have found a humble family that contracted for his services
through marriage to their daughter.

The Thai phrase kbraub kbru, which is usually translated as
"family," means literally "cover arrangement of the hearth" and
seems to connote no special membership in a group other than those
who eat from a single common fire. A Thai household usually
includes parents and their unmarried children, for bearing (or rais-
ing) children is the ordinary means of acquiring labor.19 Often it
includes one or two persons more: a parent, an aunt, an uncle, a
younger sibling, or, as with Châem when he first married, a son-in-
law.20 However, one also finds households in which an unmarried
woman has taken in her nephews, or in which two or three unrelated
lonely people have clubbed together.

My uncle and Phrayâ Urupong served in the same regiment in the army.
Phrayâ Urupong had higher rank than my uncle. When my uncle was
discharged from the army, he had no way to earn a living, so Phrayâ
Urupong gave him some land for cultivating durian. It was near the Rama
VI bridge in Thonburi. In the house lived more than ten people: my father;
my mother; mother's sister; her husband who is the uncle from the army
and who had no children but who adopted some of my mother's younger
sister's children; and my six brothers and sisters. [LMH 12/8/53]

We can infer the distribution of favors, beginning with Phrayâ
Urupong and going first to the uncle and his wife, and from them to
the wife's sister and her husband. Each person in a chain redis-
tributes to his own group the food and clothing received, and de-
livers their services according to the needs of the superior. So a Thai
household is a family only in a special sense. It does not necessarily
raise children or provide for the aged. It lacks predetermined stan-
dardized roles; rather, within the house, roles tend to be improvised
and permit much latitude for variation within a broad range of
minimum role requirements. This vague system of kin or kinlike
relationships is really an assemblage of individually contracted and
variable arrangements that provide participants with basic needs.
For a cluster of such kin, or for two or more clusters around separate
hearts in one house, we shall use the word "household" in prefe-
rence to "family."
If these are the essential transactions occurring among all Thai, what special meaning, if any, does kinship have in the Thai situation? Thai kinship is heavily influenced by these voluntary contractual relationships. They give to each family relationship a certain twist that is entirely lacking in our own kinship system. Our relatives are acquired by birth. We are required to display special decorous manners toward another because he or she is a grandparent, a cousin, or an aunt. Whether we enjoy our meetings or not, the prescribed conduct must continue for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, till death us do part. Indeed, we may appeal to the law when certain crucial expectations are unfulfilled.

On the other hand, if a person of our culture volunteers the identical services that a nephew performs for his uncle or aunt, the net effect of a “real” nephew–uncle relationship is accomplished. In two particulars only does this relationship differ from a kinship tie: It is voluntarily contracted and may be voluntarily terminated, while a kinsman’s services should continue indefinitely in an inescapable relationship.

Somewhere between this prescribed obligation of our kinsmen and this voluntary contract lie the obligations of a Thai kinsman. There are many ways to become a sibling or a parent by Thai standards. Furthermore, one who acts like a parent is a parent and will continue to be a parent until he chooses to act in some other way. In this sense the Thai construe their kinsmen, yet the idea of a continuing and fixed obligation is not altogether absent.

Like nature in its abundance, the Thai kinship system offers hundreds of potential kinsmen. Siblings include cousins, potentially in all degrees, the wives of these cousins and the cousins of these wives, as well as the husbands of these cousins and the cousins of these husbands. The parents of all these cousins are aunts and uncles, and the cousins’ children become categorized with grandchildren. The Christian and Islamic brotherhoods of man scarcely exceed the possible range offered by the Thai system. How does one select among them?

First comes shared experience. Chāem and his siblings were thought to have the common experience not only of growing up together in the same household but also of developing in the same womb. Thus the Thai distinguish immediate siblings from that indefinite mass of possible siblings. Sometimes when two siblings
seem exceptionally devoted, people explain that they were siblings in a previous incarnation. In fact, common experience as neighbors, pupils in the same school, or recruits in the same regiment forms a relationship that may become as intimate as that between near kinsmen.

But common experience is not enough. The underlying exchange of services and favors must exceed a calculated quid pro quo and work toward an easy flow of mutual help with no final date for reckoning the balance. To the extent that an investor in or reciprocator of services lays aside all conditions for ensuring his gain, love and respect dominate the relationship. These two people, then, whatever their origin, “become” kinsmen.

Now my second and third brothers are grown up, and when I ask them to do some kind of work, they go and do it. They never disobey, and when there is no disobedience, there is no hatred. Formerly whenever there was entertainment, I took them with me. My younger siblings loved me a lot.

In my family my younger brother once fought with me. Father was away, but when he returned, he stopped the quarrel. If father had found us quarreling, he would have to punish the younger brother, because he disobeyed. He must pay respect.

From these examples it can be seen that kinsmanly love means giving favors and that respect means obedience to orders and willingness to be ordered.

Even the relationship of mother and child is phrased as love that showers care and favors upon a child, who reciprocates with obedient respect. The common experience starts with conception; a mother begins to nourish a child from that day with her own blood, after birth with her milk. The father contributes sperm to form the body, but the body is but a vehicle for several souls of obscure origin which enter with the first breath after birth. These souls may be complete strangers to both parents, as shown by the wish of pregnant mothers: “May the soul of my child be that of a divine spirit and not of a criminal.” Then after normal birth the midwife, holding the newborn, formally asks, “Whose child is this?” Though we know of no parents who refused to accept their child, this ceremony implies the forming of a contract with the infant. Thus kinship, instead of being a set of relationships given by birth, is acquired. Furthermore, the element of investment of favors by a parent reappears again and
again. A priest recited a sermon at Bang Chan about the Rice Mother (Mae Pōsob), the goddess who brings the crop:

The word 'mother' means one who can provide children. Mother is the person to whom we should pay gratitude. Human beings and animals owe a great deal to rice; so rice is approved to be called 'mother.' Mothers love children so that the red color of blood is turned into the white of milk in order to show her innocence, as in the following poem:

Mother's mind is as merciful as Phra Phrōm.
Mother's milk is like the moon feeding the world.
Mother's hands are as high as the sky.
Mother's mouth is like the sun shining.

[SS 2/10/54]

Because of these boundless favors, children should respect their mother by obeying her, and the texts of songs from the life-cycle rites reiterate the obligation. The debt to a father, while less dramatized, comes from his work as provider for the household.

If kinship can be easily contracted, it can also be easily dissolved. Instances of the reorganization of contemporary Bang Chan households after the departure of a parent are numerous:

My son's first wife had a house and lands, but she died. His second wife was a hired girl in the house when she became pregnant. I told my son to take her as a wife, but he didn't do it. She was not beautiful; now she lives in Bangkok. I don't like his present wife; she talks too much and you can't trust her. She had five children before marrying my son, and they are all living in Bangkok. She keeps a lot of money to send them. . . . My son should be rich. I wonder where all the money goes. [JRH 1/29/54]

The son's household grew from the death of one wife, an extramarital affair, and marriage with a woman who resolved to leave her children. The mother accused the new wife of secretly spending money from the venture jointly shared with her husband on children of another husband who lived elsewhere. Such an offense has broken many a household apart, for a parent is expected to use only his or her individually owned assets to support children by another spouse who makes no contribution to the present household. Happy are the husband of an industrious and devoted wife, the wife of a dutiful husband, and the parents of respectful children.

Despite flux, kinship hints at permanent obligations. The woman of the foregoing case left her five children in Bangkok but continued to send them money. Chāem's older brother did not abandon his
mother in the Sämsen market to beg for a living. People say an adopted child is more likely to desert his parents than a natural child. Beneath the easily contracted arrangements lie symptoms of a kinship system with fixed obligations.

Though some government posts may once have been passed on patrilineally, and the patriline is emphasized by elite urban families, in the countryside farmers incline toward a matrilineal reference. Mother’s mother (jāj) is somewhat closer than father’s mother (jā), and it is this term for mother’s mother that tends to be extended to very old but unrelated women as a form of polite address. An uncle or aunt who is a father’s younger sibling and who works intimately with a nephew or niece may be called mother’s younger sibling (nā), ignoring the relationship through the father (JRH 11/26/53). Newly married couples tend to live near if not with the bride’s parents; the house and hearth customarily go at death to the youngest daughter.

The clear kin designations of elder and younger echo the duties of patron and client. The respect a parent accords his elder siblings is carried on by his own children, who in turn call the children of these elder aunts and uncles elder sibling (phi), regardless of relative age. Terminology further marks off one’s own household from all others by allowing no aunt to be categorized with mother or uncle with father. Parents are uniquely addressed, and in their household age clearly subordinates the younger to the elder.

In the kin nomenclature, an individual’s sex is recognized only after marriage and then only by a person’s spouse and children and by the children of younger siblings. In other words, it would seem that in kinship a distinction of sex is unimportant until a person reaches maturity and produces children; elder aunt or uncle, grandfather or grandmother contrast with the cousin or sibling or children of those whose sex is not indicated. Male and female become distinct with age.

We shall come to see that the households that banded together to move to Bang Chan were usually those of siblings. Should some cousin happen to join the group, all were well aware that he was more distantly related than the siblings of the same parents. A sibling who was cousin beyond the second degree usually did not join them. In practice, if not in theory, the obligations among siblings extend mainly to the children of one’s own parents, less definitely to the myriad possible cousin-like siblings.
Adam Smith anticipated that free economic intercourse would lead to peace and harmony among nations. Perhaps he conceived the thesis by observing that when individuals enter freely into transactions with each other, such intercourse may lead more frequently to love and respect than to hate and antagonism. In the Thai situation, when love and respect grow, the parties to the relationship are kinsmen, whether acquired by accident of birth or by voluntary association. These kinsmanly qualities may be more readily and usually nourished through years of experience in a common household than when left to chance associations in a world of mobile people. Yet when uncertainties vanish as a result of long association, the partners too become kinsmen. Thereafter one cannot quickly forget the other, even though circumstances change. The links of kinship are less likely to be broken than are others. Kinship softens the brittle edges of sheer opportunism, at the same time that it provides a more permanent tie that more readily frames the relationships and defines the mode of conduct between people.

Neighbors in the Wilderness

Chāem, his wife, and his mother-in-law experienced many of the hardships, successes, and failures undergone by settlers of the American frontier, yet they did not consider themselves pioneers. They were not developing a land for the future, nor did they anticipate that someday, through their efforts and those of others who would join them, the wilderness would be transformed. They had little pride in the possession of the land they occupied, partly because all land belonged to the king, and they owned only a small acreage by squatter’s preemption. Partly the land was worthless as a commodity just because of its vastness, and only years later did anyone petition for a title deed. They felt no drama in penetrating the untouched land, and instead of seeking an idyllic spot far out in the distant vastnesses, they moved just beyond their nearest neighbors, as close to the thoroughfare as possible.

If Chāem saw himself in these terms, he might have said, “I am a poor man who could not make a living in the city. So I had to move to this desolation.”

However primitive we might consider Chāem’s living arrangements, his urban habits clearly distinguished him from his Khā neighbors. Both Chāem and the Khā peoples probably lived in houses of the same material, fished, and raised a little rice, and
Chaem doubtless hunted from time to time. But when a household member needed a new loincloth or scarf to cover his shoulders, no one in Chaem's household was prepared to spin and weave it. If mother-in-law cracked the pot, she might patch it but did not press out a new one. When Chaem broke his knife, there was no smith at hand to anneal the pieces. In these respects the Khâ were self-sufficient while Chaem, like any helpless city person, had to run to the market. But this became his pride, to have a more finely woven scarf, a more uniformly glazed pot, and a sword of better quality than any the bush people had. He built his life on the assumption of a market, and until the Khâ discovered what the traders would buy, until they had learned the language of the market and could haggle over price, they had not acquired the habits that would place them on a level with Chaem.

Chaem also felt superior to his Moslem neighbors, though their standard of living probably surpassed his. They, as the slaves of a wealthy man, enjoyed some special advantages. They could use the lumber and tools left over after they built the residence of His Excellency. They must raise animals and vegetables for His Excellency's table, but when the season was good, nothing prevented them from enjoying a few of these eggs and ducks. The presence of many households simplified house building, the preparation of fields, and the harvesting of crops. Not many years after settling, these Moslem people built their first surao for sabbath prayers. But Chaem was not a slave. Though his actual land was worthless on the market, his right as a free man (sakdi) to hold ten acres or twenty-five rai of the king's land and the small measure of honorary authority this gave him placed his station clearly above that of these villagers. His twenty-five rai compared unfavorably with the honorary four hundred rai of minor government officials and could only emphasize his insignificance alongside Chao Phraya Srisurijawong's twenty thousand, yet it distinguished him clearly from slaves. Of course, the retainers of this great man could scarcely complain about the severity of their bondage. His Excellency was in residence with his entourage only a few days in the year, and at these times they served his needs and might petition him for certain favors as well. On a still further score Chaem counted as a blessing his rebirth into the Buddhist faith. Though both Buddhists and Moslems suffered from the rats and birds that ate their rice, from the elephants and the
storms, and though both took life in fishing, Chāem knew of merit (bun) and sin or demerit (bap). Only in some future existence did Chāem expect that his Moslem neighbors might accumulate sufficient merit to be reborn Buddhists.

When he had paddled past this Moslem village and headed his boat along the broad Sāen Sāeb canal toward Bangkok, Chāem knew that he was just a humble man from the wilderness who must address respectfully his superiors living in the city. Only in some future existence might he be reborn with enough merit to spend his whole life in the city. There he would not have to work hard under the sun and rain, the clouds of mosquitoes and the threats of wild animals. When city people had to purchase necessities in the market, they did not need to spend a day boating on the canal. They could make merit at the temples and dispatch the ghosts of the dead with proper rites. On New Year’s, visitors would come saying blessings and invite them to join the gay crowds on the great river to see the fireworks. Their karma (kam) did not destine them to live by fishing, or set them apart from people’s cheerful gatherings and banter. Chāem had to accept his role as the uncouth one, bear his suffering, and resolve to live virtuously.