Bang Chan

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Newcomers

Chaêm's small household survived in the wilderness along the middle reaches of the rivulet that was to be Bang Chan canal, the first known settlers on that site. If others had preceded them in the days before the Fourth Reign, like sterile seeds underneath a spreading tree, they never took root or left a trace after the annual floods. Chaêm's survival was probably a matter less of courage than of dogged effort and good luck. Or, as his fellow Buddhists would say, Chaêm had sufficient merit to reach a weed-choked backwater and not die of bites, disease, or exhaustion before help came.

Within a few years Chaêm's two older brothers had forced their sampans up the rivulet and agreed to join him. Perhaps the fishing was better in the natural streams than in the newly dug canal, where food, water, and the living fish had not yet reached a balance. Perhaps someone had bought the fishing rights for the main canal and sent the poachers scurrying to the backwaters.

The eldest brother, named Tô, came not only with his wife and Chaêm's mother but with two sons and a blind co-wife. Despite her handicap, she could help prepare a meal by pounding seeds in a mortar and swing the hammock of a sleeping baby, thus relieving other hands for more complex chores. The second brother, Thêp, came with his wife and their infant son. Tô planned to locate across the stream, while Thêp chose a site next to Chaêm; the three thus put the wilderness to their backs and human habitation within sight through the doorways. Tô summoned the strength (khâu raeng) of the other two households to raise a mound and sink the corner posts of a new hut. At the end of each day the women of his household prepared a meal to reward the workers and make them eager to work
again on the morrow. When the thatch for the roof and walls was tied into place, the same crew moved at Thẹp’s invitation to repeat their labors for him. As host he would then feast his workers.

In a few days a tiny hamlet arose in the wilderness. The nine adults and five children could then make life flow more smoothly, and not just because new hands increased the working force; gaiety too lightened the joint tasks, and numbers reinforced courage when a trumpeting herd of elephants moved close. Yet these numbers could not entirely extinguish the fear of the wilderness. One day during the first rainy season Tō’s blind wife, alone in the hut with the children, was startled by a rustling in the thatch overhead followed by a splash in the floodwater outside. Her cries drew help only slowly, and then no one could find a trace to explain what had happened. They guessed it was only a crocodile on the roof, but as crocodiles were infrequent in the area, let alone on the roofs, she remained unconsolled by this explanation and beseeched Tō to let her return to the more populated shore of Sāën Sāēb canal. Tō acquiesced, but she came back a year or two later with her infant son, conceived by Tō before she had left; she then needed the help of her co-wife’s eyes to raise the child (LMH 7/24/57).

Though mutual help was commonplace within a household, no contract bound together the households of the hamlet. The fisherman from each household sculled his own catch home in his own boat, dried the fish on leaves provided by his own helpers, sold these wares to a merchant of his own choosing, and spent the earnings on his own wants. Such arrangements certainly sufficed for these three households, but even larger hamlets with fifty households may develop no corporate arrangements. The concept of the commonweal, which expeditiously organized hundreds of communities in North America and Australia and furnished a basis for enforceable authority, rarely took root in this moist tropical heat. The three brothers did not even erect a common dock where they could tie their boats and unload their fish, or set aside common land to grow the rice needed equally by all. Of course, the three households might one morning jointly build a bridge, which would have facilitated their visiting and sped help in an emergency. A few months later, however, if a lashing parted or a bamboo pole crumpled, no common will would impel anyone to step forward to repair it. To agree to meet
and cut a few more bamboos some other morning would be far easier than to organize an authority to erect and maintain a permanent bridge in the hamlet.

Authority in Thailand, rather than rising from a group’s agreement to some impersonal, overriding rule that applied to all alike, is personal and individual, or, more accurately, the attribute of a social position. The king, the governor of a town, the head of a household, all stand ready with the appurtenances of their positions to provide some kind of benefit for anyone ready to give wanted services. Here is the political aspect of the search for labor described in Chapter 2, for each person who contracts to provide services acknowledges the authority of his benefactor. Instead of being the administrator for an impersonal corporate system, the patron becomes the center of radiating reciprocal agreements with his individual clients. The number and kinds of benefits that he provides depend upon his resources and the market. No uniform standards apply to all; each contract is reached by separate bargaining, and should patron or client come to regret the terms, either may seek to modify or end the relationship.¹

No one of the three households could muster sufficient benefits to induce another to become a client. The differences in wealth among them were too slight. Tō’s household, with its four adult members, was probably better equipped than the other two. He had worked longer and had evidently accumulated more resources, or perhaps he was just more generous and compassionate than his two brothers when he married a helpless blind woman as his second wife and adopted a boy as his son. On the basis of household size, Thēp, with only his wife, was poorer than Chām, whose household included two adults besides himself. None of them seems to have expanded his household except with his own progeny. Only if one brother were the lone possessor of a boat or some essential gear would the other two have found some advantage in becoming his clients, but in fact each had his own boat, gear, and appointed house. In discussing common problems with his brothers, Tō, backed by the aging mother who lived under his roof as well as by his own seniority, could probably carry his points with little resistance. At meals in a brother’s house, respect dictated that Tō be served first with the best portion, though not necessarily before the elder woman. A child might also present the betel tray to an aging grandmother and then
out of deference to her toothlessness offer to pulverize the areca nuts. Neither this respect nor this deference, however, empowered Tō or the grandmothers to command the resources of another household; this right belonged exclusively to the husband and wife who jointly headed each household.

Mutual help occurred on the basis of exchange (tog raeng, chaj raeng). Each had a garden and a rice plot of approximately the same size as the others', so that it was easy enough to clear the weeds and harvest each field in succession. Labor given was returned in equal measure. Similarly, a household that ran short of rice or salt might borrow and return a like amount later.

When unique needs arose, a household simply had to hire labor, just as Tō and then Thẹp summoned the labor (kha⟩raeng) of the other two brothers to help build their huts and repay these services with a bounteous meal. Of course, one summoned the most experienced carpenter of the hamlet to repair the cracked prow of a sampan2 and the most experienced basketmaker to advise on the weaving of a basket of a new shape. Since the summoner of labor need not return the labor with his own hands but need only show himself able to compensate others for their services properly, summoning is more honorific than exchanging labor. But as in many a pioneer community, the urge for self-sufficiency and thriftiness and fear of imposition (krẹng chai) counterbalanced any possible reckless proclivity to hire workers.

At the same time common interests and sympathies neutralized the formal isolation of independent households. When a herd of elephants approached and only one person knew the proper manner of asking the guardian spirit Lord of the Place (Chao Thi) to turn them away, this specialist acted promptly. When Chẹn’s child died, the appropriate specialist stepped forward to recite the verbal formula that forces the spirit to depart promptly so as not to disturb the living. They simply buried the body, rather than arrange an expensive cremation at a distant temple. Compassion rather than expectation of reward prompted Tō’s blind wife to agree to hold the infant of Thẹp’s wife for a few hours, while its mother helped Thẹp weed the garden. Chẹn and his household may have liked to have his old mother spend a rainy day with them because she told good stories, and she liked to see Chẹn’s mother-in-law. Tō, returning from a hunting expedition with a wild pig, called for all to take the
day off, butcher the game, and prepare a local feast. Thus a neigh-
borliness arose within the hamlet that moved well beyond a mere 
exchange and hiring of services.

The authority of government seems to have rested lightly on the 
hamlet of the fishermen. To be sure, Pallegoix in the mid-nineteenth 
century describes rather onerous burdens for the ordinary man:

These people working at corvée, which is called *khao dien*, are held to three 
months of services per year. They are employed at building fortresses, 
pagodas, and palaces, deepening canals, making dykes, roads, shelters, and 
generally all royal public projects. If they wish to be released from corvée, 
they have only to pay the sum of sixteen ticals (baht) to their superiors, who 
keep it or perhaps hire some other person in their place.

In the entire extent of the kingdom, a good portion of the people were not 
subject to corvée but had to pay tribute annually, the value of which varied 
from eight to sixteen ticals. There are those who pay in wooden beams, 
bricks, tiles, lime, sand, bamboo, wax, honey, *bois d'aigle*, stick lac, oil, 
resin, etc. This portion of the people is perhaps the happiest in that, 
providing they pay their tribute in goods or silver, they are free the whole 
year to do what they wish, except that in case of war they must enter 
military service. [Pallegoix 1854, 1:296-297]

Had Tō, Thēp, and Chaem remained in Bangkok, they would not 
have escaped corvée or some other payment of tribute. The govern-
ment of Rama IV continued building fortifications, temples, and 
pleasure gardens, yet from 1855 onward, as the trade treaties began 
to bring more goods from overseas, policy turned increasingly to 
collecting taxes in currency and paying wages for the king's work. 
Money was becoming as important as labor and produce along the 
river front. Without his former monopoly on foreign trade, the king 
sought income by tax farming and selling rights to collect taxes. 
Before the end of the reign, cash revenue had more than doubled 
(Thiphakarawong 1934a:336; Skinner 1957:119–125). So if the 
fisherman brothers had remained in the capital they would have 
spent fewer hours each year at forced labor but would have been 
dunned or blackmailed by registration officials into paying the ex-
orbitant charges about which Dan Beach Bradley complained (see 
*Bangkok Calendar* 1871:70–71).

Little or no mention of government occurs during these first 
decades in Bang Chan, and this is the more surprising since the 
advent of officials in the 1890s produced quite a stir. To be sure, the 
presence of a Bunnag or even the existence of His Excellency's
residence exerted an influence, but not necessarily a protective one, over these squatters. We suspect that Bang Chan lay beyond the orbit of government, its inhabitants having “headed for the woods” (paj pā) as effectively as an escaped slave. Well-fed tax collectors on the outskirts of Bangkok chose not to squeeze these impecunious fisherfolk in a remote backwater. Had anyone followed their movements, he would see them turning in the side stream from the main canal like the tax-exempt retainers of His Excellency the Prime Minister. In the Bangkok market a fish dealer would do all he could to ensure smooth access of suppliers to his pier. A little tip to the local tax collector might help ensure this privilege, and perhaps he made up for this expense by paying less for the fish of certain people.

On each trip the fisherman brothers received some portion of the stated price for fish in Bangkok markets, 6.50 to 7.50 baht per picul (133.3 pounds) during the 1850s (Van der Heide 1906:84). They returned home with no more cash than they came with, but each time with another purchased item that made living a little gentler. Of course, the labor-saving knives, mats, and baskets slowly accumulated as persons returned from the markets and women devoted more days to weaving. Hands to lighten the work increased, so that Tō, with two sons by his first wife, a third by his blind wife, and the adopted fourth child, could gradually turn more over to the new generation. Similarly Thēp, with two sons and three daughters, and Chāem, with the six who survived, counted on the growing ones to gather firewood and grind in a mortar the seasoning for evening meals. By the age of fourteen they could handle a boat expertly and help enough to catch a portion of the needed fish. In the season of gardening, children helped weed the fields, drive birds from ripening crops, and carry sheaves of grain, each year doing a little more until at sixteen or eighteen they worked like adults. Chāem’s daughter and granddaughter recalled some of the scene:

We could not grow much rice because we could not drive the birds away. We grew only enough rice to eat, for no one wanted to buy rice in those days. We got some things like cloth by exchanging it for padi at Sāen Sāeb canal. Every year my parents bought me a new cloth. After harvest people started fishing. Every family would fish. We use jāu and kbōb [types of fishing gear] for catching plā chāum and plā sa lid [types of fish]. If the husband fishes, the wife stays home and tends the house, and if the wife goes, the husband stays home. [Did anyone get rich?] No. One lives from hand to mouth [tham mī, kin mī: work by the hand, eat by the hand]. In the dry
season. Chaem had to live by digging earth. He earned one and a quarter baht for digging each cubic wà of earth [about four cubic meters and two days of work]. Before ordination all helped our parents to work; after that no one helped them anymore. [LMH 7/30/57; 8/6/57]

Before the grown children had departed, the households of the three brothers needed to summon each other and exchange labor less frequently. Each household could pound its own padi into rice and rethatch its own roof. So the three households tended to reserve their neighbors’ help for harvest or special occasions such as the ordination of Tô’s eldest son into the priesthood at the new temple called Bam Phen on Saën Sàeb canal. By the decade of the 1870s these first settlers were looking for house sites where some of their children might settle and still remain near enough to lend an occasional hand.

A New Hamlet

During this same decade of the 1870s a group of people, five or so households strong, suddenly appeared in the Bang Chan area. They chose to settle at a site downstream between the hamlet of the three brothers and the Moslem village at the neglected residence of Chao Phraya Srisurijawong. Word passed that these people had come from the village of former Laotian prisoners of war on Saën Sàeb canal, and they could be seen building a large mound somewhat back from the rivulet, on the high ground. Thatched huts arose, and after a few rainy seasons the number of huts multiplied to twenty or so. They called their hamlet after the mound they had raised, Village of the Mound of Earthly Splendor (Bān ĐẢUN SĪ Phūm), and under this auspicious name seemed to look forward to a new and richer life (LMH 7/29/57; VIC 7/18/57).

Unfortunately the tale of these Laotians has so decayed through their descendants’ lack of interest in the past and through the turbulent jolts of subsequent events that many important features have disappeared. Clearly they were released from servitude, yet the royal order of Rama V in 1874 which “liberated” the slaves differed considerably from Lincoln’s emancipation with a single stroke of the pen. The court in Bangkok and His Excellency Chao Phraya Srisurijawong in his capacity as regent for the young king were generally aware of the turmoil that followed liberation in the United States, even if they had not specifically heard of the thousands of former slaves who wandered the countryside singing hymns in
search of Kingdom Come in the Land of the Blessed. King Rama V sought to smooth the transition and phrased the emancipation order in such gradual terms that there was no need for any change to be evident for many years. Only children of slaves who had been born since the beginning of his reign in 1868 would be free, and then only on reaching maturity. Of course, they might redeem themselves a few years earlier by paying a price that diminished each year as they grew older, but all others would presumably remain slaves until the end of their days, unless they could buy their freedom. News of such an edict may have launched celebrations in many slave villages, but on the following day and for the years to come they would feel no automatic change. Only by 1889 would the first few emerge to taste life as freemen.

No sudden exodus from the Laotian villages on Saen Saeb canal took place in the 1870s, yet the people were apparently free to move. One informant told of a grandfather who had lived in a Laotian village while serving as temple boy in nearby Bam Phen Temple (LMH 7/23/57). A cousin from Vientiane found him and proposed that he return to Vientiane. He replied that he was content to remain in Thailand. So the cousin left without him. It is unlikely that a slave boy would have entered a temple, even to carry the alms bowl of a priest, and certainly no slave was free to move where he wished. We suspect that some abolitionist nobleman ordered the liberation of these Laotians long before the royal edict took effect.

This prisoner-of-war village was somewhat less well off than the hamlet of To, Thêp, and Cháem. The Laotians lived side by side in clusters of thatched huts, each household tilling for its own subsistence a strip of land amounting to a rai or two (a rai is 0.4 acres), as compared with To’s three to five rai (LMH 7/23/57). A man could usually raise just enough rice for a family of four on one or two rai, and some years there might be enough surplus to distill some liquor or barter a little padi for market goods (Janlekha 1957:52–53). More persons in a household burdened the resources considerably; yet by borrowing a little from some neighboring kinsman, one could somehow get along. There were always fish and vegetables. With little or no cash in hand and with seldom any surplus to sell, they had even fewer tools and clothing than the fishing brothers. Freedom only added further strains. Each family had suddenly become a renter and had to pay, perhaps, a trifling rent to the proprietor. Taxes
increased from four baht per year for slaves, which the master often had to pay from his own purse, to the freeman's sixteen baht. These payments could be made in padi, but the old resources for growing no longer sufficed. Households had to look elsewhere to meet these demands.

The new hamlet of Laotians seems to have sprung from the effort of two households that moved and established themselves, accompanied by others who settled on separate but adjacent mounds. Silā and his wife Māūm led a group to one mound. The two had come to the banks of Saēn Saēb canal as children and subsequently married while still slaves. By the time they were freed, their household included seven children, so that keeping rice bowls full from a small patch of land was difficult. Yet a large family might become an advantage in the wilderness, where production is limited only by personal strength and will. There were always younger siblings, cousins, nephews, and nieces, restless young people eager to join a new venture. The second group to move to the new hamlet on its own mound was led by a middle-aged couple with two grown children; Li and his wife, Taw, came from Bangkok, where they had been serving in the palace of some nobleman. Their wealthy patron had evidently sent them away amply provided for, and they reached the older Laotian settlement equipped for farming with a buffalo and plow. People were eager to join a man of such substance, and he accepted five or six as clients.

Probably Silā and Māūm reached Bang Chan first, built a joint mound for themselves and three or four other households, and turned primarily to agriculture rather than fishing. A year or two later Li and Taw arrived with their glistening plow and buffalo to build an adjacent mound. Land was abundant, the members of both groups were probably kinsmen; no grounds for competition arose except on one score. On Silā's mound differences of wealth were small, and work had to be done by exchange of labor. Li, with his buffalo and plow, on the other hand, acted as patron to his clients and potentially was poised to draw the group from Silā's mound into his circle. This would have ended the separate venture. Whatever tensions may have arisen on this score, a granddaughter of Silā and Māūm told of the resolution: "At the time when Silā and Māūm were first here, they had no buffalo. They used a mattock [chānb] and sword [phrabtād] to cut weeds: then they burned them. After that
Preparing the rice field
Photo by Lauriston Sharp

they worked the land over again with a mattock [and finally made holes for planting the padi]. They put one seed of rice in each hole. Later they bought a buffalo for twelve baht” (LMH 7/23/57). Siła and Māum were anxious to increase the size of their fields by cultivating with buffalo and plow. Then they could grow padi on five or more rai of land, for these implements lightened the labor of weeding, and seeds could be broadcast without individual planting if one plowed a second time lightly. No less important, they could hold the labor force of one mound before it was tempted by the new equipment to join with Li and Taw. So under two patrons the new hamlet grew to twenty households (LMH 7/29/57).

Despite the new equipment, the hamlet was a ragged sight for many years. Until protective cover grew to hold the soil, rains cut
deep gashes into the slowly settling mound. Without trees to shade the roofs, the huts were oven-like at midday. For many seasons padi surplus was small and cash almost nonexistent, so that people wore their loincloths (phākbaawmaa) to gray and tattered thinness, while inside the huts handy pots and knives were few. Boats as well as buffalo and plow had to be shared, but these circumstances unified the hamlet to a degree that could not be matched where resources were distributed more evenly. The two patrons could summon the work force to raise a common mound and later clear a small canal so that boats moved during high water from the hamlet to Bang Chan rivulet. After the harvest the whole work force could be mobilized to carry on shoulder poles the baskets of surplus padi for sale or barter on the banks of Sāen Sāeb canal. The new hamlet was beginning to realize the promise of its auspicious name.

The Moslems passed through the same years with fewer changes than the Laotians. During the period when Chao Phrayā Srisurijawong served as regent and during his subsequent retirement at his country seat in Ratchaburi, their patron’s visits stopped; but after the royal edict on slavery in 1874 his deputy came to address the assembled villagers. He offered them their freedom to move elsewhere but granted the privilege of continuing in the hamlet rent-free to anyone who wished to stay (LMH 7/18/57). We infer that when the imam and the elders of the hamlet met to consider this offer, they sensed a continuing obligation to serve the great man whose father before him had protected their community and who himself had shown equal love over the years and reaffirmed it with this generous offer. They thanked him, and no one moved from the hamlet. These elders were unlike Tō, who could influence no one but his brothers by his personal weight; they owned little if any more property than the poorer families, and so could withhold no favors from a willful client. Instead their village lay under the protection of Allah, who through holy writ directed the elders to command the good and punish the bad. A Moslem who acted contrary to the will of the elders risked both secular and divine punishment.10 So life continued with little apparent change. Children were born, some young people married and moved to neighboring Moslem villages, elders died, and then in 1883 their patron died. He had not visited for many years, but had he come, many days would have been needed to replace the rotten planks and fallen shutters of his residence. Now
his country clients visited him in Bangkok and paid their final respects at his cremation.

Disaster

So the hamlet might have continued indefinitely with all the gradual shifts of growing up and growing old. Toward the end of the 1880s, disaster struck just at the season when the new rice was yellowing, and all were looking to the harvest as soon as the flood-waters had receded a little more. From the wilderness came brown waves of squeaking, voracious rats drawn to the ripening grain in the fields. The alarm was shouted out in time for some to save a few baskets of padi from their stores. Others could only retreat up the house ladder and club the occasional stray rodent that dared climb a house post. When the hordes departed, only straw remained in the dry fields and a thin band of untouched grain which the flood had protected (LMH 8/18/57).

People have faced lean years with equanimity, and certainly the people of the Moslem hamlet might have expected aid from the family of their late patron. Yet within a few months only two households remained; the rest had moved east, deeper into the wilderness. The two households were those of the son and granddaughter of their former leader. Even today some shadow of this leading man remains:

He was a brave and vigorous man. After the war in Saiburi, he came to Thonburi as prisoner of war with many of his younger kinsmen [län]. While there in Thonburi, one day he could not bear to see his niece courting with the Thai people of Somdet Chao Phrayā Srisurijawong the elder [presumably the father of Chao Phrayā Srisurijawong]. He had special power and put his finger on the head of this girl and broke her head. When Somdet Chao Phrayā heard about this, he had our leader seized. The Somdet wondered why he did not defend himself and noticed that he did not seem afraid. When questioned, our leader said that he did not want to kill Thai people, even if he could. If the Somdet Chao Phrayā did not believe in his power, he would demonstrate it. So he put his finger on a piece of wood and split it in order to demonstrate his power. After that the Somdet Chao Phrayā released him and later gave him land for the Moslem people on his estate. [LMH 8/6/57]

Having excited the admiration of their patron’s father as well as their patron himself, this unnamed man secured special treatment for his kinsmen, for they moved to Bang Chan to live next to His Excellency
BANG CHAN AREA
ABOUT 1880
Scale 1 : 50 000

Governor's Residence
Temple
Surao

Village of the Mound of Earthly Splendor

To Bangkok

0 1 2 3 Km.
0 1 2 Mi.
and with his help built their first surao. We can guess that at the meeting of the elders following the disaster of the rats some may have reminded the others that His Excellency had granted them freedom to move, and as he had not appeared for more than a decade, their obligations to him and his descendants had ended. The son of their former leader may have pointed to their continuing freedom from rent as evidence that the descendants of their patron still granted them benefits for which they owed services. Yet opportunities awaited those who would claim new lands, and many were clamoring to depart. Long debate only sharpened the differences among the elders, and no unitary sense of the meeting resulted. The hamlet could only divide, for the son of their former leader would not join in the error of the others, but remained alone to perform his duty.

About this same time the promising hamlet on the Mound of Earthly Splendor also disappeared. None of the descendants offered to explain why, nor did we press this question. Since the two hamlets lay within a few hundred yards of each other, the same wave of rats may have eaten their grain too. They had no patron in the city who might bring them rice in the emergency, and, with a lean year ahead when their own local patron could no longer help them, they may have decided to depart. Alternatively, after a few years of good crops, many may have been able to buy their own buffaloes and plows, so that they had no need of a patron's benefits. Māüm died, and Silā with his sons left for new lands. Li and Taw also died, but not before marrying their son to the daughter of Silā and Māüm. This household with one other remained at the Mound of Earthly Splendor, lone remnants of the former hamlet.

In a generation of settlement the number of human inhabitants had decreased. Where fifty or more households had once stood, ten or a dozen remained. The two most populous hamlets had all but disappeared, and the wilderness weeds took over the fields that had been cleared. Only the unnamed hamlet of the three fishermen had begun to grow with the households of the children of Tō, Thēp, and Chaēm.