THAI PEASANT PERSONALITY

*The Patterning of Interpersonal Behavior
in the Village of Bang Chan*

HERBERT P. PHILLIPS

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For Barbara, Katherine, and Elizabeth

Preface

In a felicitous bit of phrasing, the psychologist Abraham Maslow (1954) characterized the research activities of American social scientists as either "problem centered" or "means centered" in their basic purposes. By the former he means studies that are concerned with describing and analyzing a problem that is important or interesting in its own right, and in which the question of *how* the study is conducted is self-evident, secondary, or unstated; by the latter he means studies concerned with illustrating the merit or validity of a particular research strategy or method, and in which the research findings themselves are subsidiary to the precision, elegance, or thoughtfulness of their formulation. Maslow's characterization applies with particular cogency to the writings of sociologists and psychologists. However, it is also relevant to anthropology, a field in which, on the one hand, authors continue to write splendid ethnographies without devoting more than a paragraph or two to how they collected their data, but in which, on the other hand, the editor of the *American Anthropologist* can introduce an article in his journal by saying (Spindler 1963: 1001): "The paper is intended as a solution of a procedural problem in data ordering, and nothing more, but one of the significant trends in modern anthropology is just this."

In culture and personality studies there has in recent years been an attempt to break through this tendency toward intellectual separatism. Some of the most significant contributions to the field have in fact been dual research efforts. Thus, despite their titles and theoretical concerns, such studies as Wallace's *The Modal Personality Structure of the Tuscarora Indians,* Kaplan's *A Study of Rorschach Responses in Four Cultures,* Gladwin and Sarason's *Truk: Man in Paradise,* and Spindler's *Sociocultural and Psychological Processes in Menomini Acculturation* have given from one-third to one-half of their total volume to problems of research design and method.

The present study is written in terms of this emerging syncretic tradition. It is concerned with two different but closely related problems: the description and analysis of selected aspects of the psychological life of Central Plain Thai peasants, particularly aspects of the villagers' daily encounters with one another; and the presentation of an approach for dealing with some of the problems involved in designing and carrying out cross-cultural personality research. Although all the chapters deal with both issues, certain chapters emphasize one more than the other. Readers interested mainly in the description of Thai peasant personality are urged to go directly to chapters I, II, and the first part of III, V, and VI; those interested primarily in the theoretical and methodological framework of the study are referred to the Introduction and chapters III and IV.

This study is also a product of the recent anthropological trend toward team research. If the author had been a lone field researcher, working in a completely unknown community, he could never have undertaken the kind of specialized project reported here. As will be seen below, it was only because considerable ethnographic material was already in hand, providing the cultural framework so necessary for intelligent psychological analysis, that the research was at all feasible. It is left to the reader to determine whether this kind of study is simply an anthropological luxury or whether it adds a new dimension to traditional anthropological approaches.

Acknowledgments

Note on the Transliteration of Thai

Thai terms (excepting titles and proper names) have been transcribed according to the Haas phonetic system (Haas, *Thai Vocabulary*, 1955, and *The Thai System of Writing*, 1956. Washington D. C., American Council of Learned Societies). However, the five tonal markers have been omitted.

Briefly the system is as follows: voiced unaspirated stops are written *b, d,* and (only in final position) *g;* voiceless unaspirated stops are *p, t, c, k,* and *ʔ;* voiceless aspirated stops are *ph, th, ch,* and *kh;* voiceless unaspirated spirants are *f, s,* and *h;* voiced semivowel sonorants are *w* and *j;* voiced nasal sonorants are *m, n,* and *ŋ;* the voiced lateral sonorant is *l;* and the voiced trill sonorant is *r.* The vowels are written thus: front unrounded, *i, ii, ia, e, ee, ɛ, ɛɛ;* central unrounded, *y, yy, ya, ə, əə, a, aa;* and back rounded, *u, uu, ua, o, oo, ɔ, ɔɔ.*

Contents

Introduction

The purpose of this study is twofold: (1) to provide a *basic* description of the dominant personality traits of the adult members of a Central Plain Thai community; and (2) to demonstrate a procedure for dealing with many of the methodological problems, theoretical and technical, that are encountered in cross-cultural personality research. The primary data are observational materials and the responses of 111 Bang Chan villagers to a Sentence Completion Test, a so-called "projective technique."

Several considerations have prompted this work, its planning, emphases, and aims.

In 1955, when I participated in the preparation of a sociological handbook on Thailand (Sharp *et al.* 1956), I had the task of writing a description of the "social values and personality patterns of the Thai," using as sources all available materials in the English language. These sources consisted largely of the writings of travelers, businessmen, and government servants who had worked in Thailand, the comments of introspective Thai, and some preliminary ethnographic studies (R. F. Benedict 1946, Embree 1950, Sharp *et al.* 1953, deYoung 1955, Kaufman 1955, and unpublished field notes of the Cornell Thailand project). It quickly became apparent that these documents—written originally for purposes quite removed from those of psychological analysis—could provide little more than cursory impressions or intriguing clues to the psychological functioning of the Thai, and that a focused, systematic study of Thai personality was a problem for future research. The account that finally emerged from my review of the literature was hardly more than a vocabulary for describing some of the stereotyped forms of Thai social interaction: politeness, the maintenance of a stoical mien in stressful situations, the love of fun, and the like. Although worthy of note, such a lexicon obviously did not represent a thorough or intensive portrayal of Siamese personality. It was with the aim of redressing this situation, therefore, that in the winter of 1956 I undertook a twenty-two-month field research project, a major portion of which is presented in this monograph. Since the research concerns

only the members of the village of Bang Chan, its descriptive universe is limited to this sample of the relatively homogeneous peasant population of Thailand's Central Plain.

A fundamental problem of cross-cultural personality research, however, is the question of precisely what to study and how to study it. Culture-personality studies are now universally acknowledged to be a legitimate part of the anthropological endeavor, but it should be remembered that the first research in this area, Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928), is less than four decades old.[1] Forty years is not a long period in the development of a field of study, and much of the research during these years has necessarily been given to experimentation and the pursuit of randomly emerging problems. There is as yet no widely accepted "universal personality pattern," equivalent to the "universal culture pattern" in anthropology proper, to organize and guide psychological studies in non-Western cultures and, by specifying invariant points of reference, to expedite the overriding aim of such research: the determination of the range and variation of human personality. Too, despite the fashionableness of the field, there have in fact been comparatively few research projects that have focused *primarily* on the delineation of personality. With a few notable exceptions (DuBois 1944, Leighton and Kluckhohn 1947, Wallace 1952, Gladwin and Sarason 1953, Kaplan 1954, Hallowell 1955a, Spindler 1955a, Spiro 1958, and isolated life histories) the majority of psychological studies by anthropologists—and most of the personality research in the non-Western world has been done by anthropologists, not psychologists—have been peripheral to the field worker's major concern, ethnographic description, with the result that much of our personality material to date is scanty or ill-collected. Finally, as Inkeles and Levinson have pointed out (1954), the vast majority of personality-in-culture studies have been based not upon descriptions of individual human beings, the loci of personality, but upon descriptions of the institutions by which they were reared or the

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[1] Questions of origins are of course always debatable. By stretching the concept of personality, one might make a case for Myers' and Rivers' work on the Torres Straits Expedition, 1898, or for Kroeber's three Gros Ventre biographies (1908) being the first culture-personality studies. During the teens and early and mid-twenties, Radin's Winnebago biographies (1913 and 1926), Elsie Clews Parsons' anthology (1922), Malinowski's work (1927), and Sapir's theoretical papers (1924 and 1927), although not in themselves culture-personality studies, certainly helped create a felicitous intellectual climate for Mead's research and for Benedict's *Psychological Types in the Cultures of the Southwest*, published the same year. In his synoptic review, Kluckhohn (1944) credits the Mead–Benedict–Sapir triumvirate with providing the groundwork for culture-personality studies in 1928. On the other hand, LaBarre (1958: 279) says: "Culture-personality studies essentially began in the 1930's at Yale University, when Edward Sapir and John Dollard began the first seminar on 'Culture and Personality.'" Milton Singer in his more recent historical review (1961) points to both events as marking the beginnings of the field.

collective cultural products they have created: myths, folktales, religious conceptions and practices. In these instances, personality has been conceived of as either a hypothetical construct linking two sets of cultural institutions (child training methods and adult collective products) or the seat of unconscious processes for the handling of anxiety (created primarily by the child training methods and unconsciously expressed in the adult collective products). Although there is considerable cogency in this last approach (Kardiner 1939 and 1945, Erikson 1950: 98–160, Whiting and Child 1953, Whiting 1961), I would suggest that limiting the meaning of personality to a mechanism for handling anxiety represents a somewhat narrow conception of its functions and attributes. Several scholars (Opler 1936 and 1938, Hallowell 1941, Kluckhohn 1943*a*, Spiro 1952, among others) have ignored the issue of child rearing and have focused on the psycho-cultural functions of the collective products—both as sources and outlets for the anxieties as well as the realistic problems of adult life. These studies have been concerned not so much with portraying personality as with bringing psychological perspective and insight to the interpretation of ethnographic materials.

These comments are made not in criticism of past research, but rather to note that there are still few firmly established conventions for precisely how a cross-cultural personality study should or can be conducted. Much personality data in the past has *had* to be scanty, simply because the careful collection of ethnographic facts—a fundamental prerequisite to the interpretation of psychological data—is in itself so time-consuming.

Given this lack of a clear methodological mandate, I formulated the following general strategy for the study of the personality characteristics of Siamese villagers.

First, it was decided to concentrate on the description and analysis of the typical dispositions, feelings, conflicts, character traits, and psychological defenses of individual adult informants viewed within the setting of Thai peasant culture. This meant that the point of departure would be a series of psychological states and processes characteristic of individuals rather than a series of cultural institutions which might or might not reflect such states. It was clear, however, that this approach would be practicable only if substantial ethnographic data on the villagers were in hand to provide both general background information and the local cultural meanings necessary for interpreting the personality data. The issue of local cultural meanings will be amplified in a later section; for the present it is sufficient to note that I proceeded from the premise that a study concerned *primarily w*ith the portrayal of personality would be effective to the extent to which, on the one hand, it rested on solid ethnographic data and, on the other, freed the researcher from devoting his time and energy to collecting

such data. Fortunately, the conditions for putting this plan into effect were present in the Thai situation, where extensive ethnographic studies had already been conducted in Bang Chan by Sharp and his colleagues (Sharp *et al.* 1953, Janlekha 1955, L. M. Hanks 1959*a*–*c*, J. R. Hanks 1959, Textor 1960). To a large degree, the design and phrasing of my project was predicated on the prior existence of these materials.

Second, it was assumed that the states and processes referred to by the concept of personality are among the most complex of phenomena, with as many dimensions and attributes as there are to the concept of culture. This "primitive assumption" was made of course not to acknowledge an obvious truth, but to affirm the necessity that research designs for the study of personality in non-Western societies explicitly exhibit a recognition of the complexity of the task. I would suggest, for example, that collecting a set of Rorschach or TAT protocols during the last hurried weeks of one's field work—not an atypical practice (see Nadel 1955, Spindler 1955*b*, and Hallowell 1955*c*)—and then assuming that the personality portion of one's field work has been "done" is like collecting a list of kinship terms and assuming that all the complex emotional, economic, and juridical elements of actual kinship relationships have been covered. Although most anthropologists recognize the limited intellectual reference of kinship terms (Kroeber 1909 and 1952: 172, Opler 1937 and 1955: 190, Murdock 1949: 113–183, Edmonson 1957, Wallace and Atkins 1960), relatively few have taken an equally circumspect attitude toward the meaning of projective test materials, at least insofar as they have represented themselves to readers. The point is not that TAT protocols or kinship terms are unimportant, but rather that they should be seen as forming only a portion of a complex, cumulative research process, each stage of which should be carefully executed and aimed at dealing with a specific descriptive task. If personality is as involved and multi-dimensional as we all tacitly assume it to be, we should be willing to work with research designs that are equally involved and multi-dimensional.

It was with the above in mind that I worked out a five-stage cumulative research program, the first two stages of which are represented by the data and interpretations in the present volume. The main body of this book has been limited to the two initial stages principally to permit a more complete exploration of the issues involved while at the same time keeping the report to a manageable size. The complete design is outlined below solely to provide the broader theoretical and methodological setting of the present study and to indicate its precise limits.

The first stage (chaps. II and VI) is perhaps descriptively the most

interesting, but methodologically the most vulnerable. It involves sketching a naturalistic portrayal of the villagers' dominant personality traits on the basis of their overt behavior, and the patterning of these traits in their interpersonal contacts. Basically this entails trying to arrive at several generalizations about the villagers' characteristic types of response, drawing from several areas of cultural life—kinship, religion, gossip-group behavior, and so forth—and ignoring for the most part detailed situational considerations, deviations, and differences of age, sex, and status. The purpose of such a description is not to provide a precise picture of psychological modes and variations, which is a task in and of itself (stage two), but to sketch in broad strokes for the Western reader some of the manifestations of Thai character which are strikingly different from our own and are important elements in their pattern of expectancies. The emphasis here is on the psychological dimensions of interaction and on those traits which are possible, expectable, and—most important—inimitably Thai, not on those traits which are most frequent in a statistical sense. "Interaction" and "interpersonal contacts" are discussed mainly as attributes of the personalities of individual villagers rather than as attributes of the sociocultural system in which these individuals exist.

It must be emphasized that since the first approach is based on a spectator's observations of overt behavior, it cannot be expected to provide information about how, from a subjective viewpoint, villagers perceive their own behavior and feelings (particularly in psychologically loaded situations), what sentiments they feel but do not express, how they deal with such sentiments psychodynamically, what their unconscious defense mechanisms and private fantasies are (as contrasted to codified beliefs, which in some cases may be institutionalized fantasies); this type of information, commonly assigned to "deeper levels" of personality, is best dealt with in subsequent sections of the research. The major aim of the first section is to provide a general psychological map upon which finer points can later be traced.

The second stage (chaps. IV—VI), involving the use of the Sentence Completion Technique, is concerned with delineating in a statistical sense the subjectively held dispositions of the villagers in various areas of psychological concern: aggression, dependency, achievement, and the like. These dispositions refer not to a series of characteristics consistently shared by any distinguishable segments of the Bang Chan population but rather to the modal and variant characteristics held by villagers in different psychological situations. Since villagers who have similar dispositions in an aggression situation, for example, may have different ones in an achievement situation, it is expected that the frequencies of modes and variants, and their