Between 1984 and 1994 Thailand was the country with the highest economic growth rate in the world – around 10 per cent annually. These were the years of the boom when Thailand was industrializing, urbanizing and modernizing at an astonishing speed. Asphalt was poured over rice paddies and concrete over tropical beaches; foreign companies located their assembly plants here, and international banks and hoteliers built skyscrapers. Pollution increased, occupational safety standards slipped, and new disparities in wealth made Thailand one of the most inegalitarian countries in the world.

The old pre-boom Thailand had been a far more quiet and more predictable place. It was a country of peasants run by a series of authoritarian, if never actually repressive, military regimes in cahoots with a small class of Chinese businessmen and a large class of hidebound civil servants. With close to 90 per cent of the population living in the countryside, farming completely dominated economic and social life. Agriculture was commercialized late, and in remote parts of the country such as the north-eastern region of Isaan subsistence farming lasted well into the 1960s. In the pre-boom years there was little in the way of manufacturing industry and no working-class. In fact, apart from the capital, there were not even any genuine cities.

Changes which in other countries took centuries to accomplish were thus in the case of Thailand dramatically compressed. In the span of a few short decades former subsistence farmers were exposed to the full force of global capitalism. The question is what happens to a society that is forced to change this quickly and this irrevocably. How can people maintain a sense of who they are, and how can the fabric of social life be preserved? The answer in the case of Thailand, as in the case of all societies, is necessarily complex. In the end individuals and groups employ all kinds of different strategies. What made a great difference in the case of Thailand, however, is the structure of the traditional agricultural village and the personal networks which people had formed there. These networks constituted the social grammar which the villagers brought with them as they migrated to the rapidly expanding cities.
The Thai Village

Before the 1960s Thailand was predominantly rural, Thais were predominantly peasants, and many of them had little or nothing to do with the money economy. Until 1905, instead of paying their taxes in ready cash, people worked as corvée labourers for up to half the year on the land of the feudal lords. Since labour could be extracted by force, there was little need for a labour market. Neither was there a market in land, but the reason was primarily that land was so extraordinarily plentiful. Before agriculture was thoroughly commercialized in the 1960s, there was far more land than anyone ever needed, and for that reason it had no proper price. There was always more virgin forest to be cut down and fields to be cleared further north and further east.

However, traditional village life was quite different from romantic European notions of the ‘Asian village’. It was not best described as a tightly-knit community in which everyone was helping everyone else out in times of need. In many cases this was above all because the village was a rather badly defined unit. Often it was simply impossible to tell where one village ended and another village began, and who should be included as a member. Under such circumstances a strong sense of community was difficult to forge. In fact, it has often been argued that there were few social organizations of any kind in traditional Thai society, apart from the family and the monkhood. And even the family and the monkhood were in many ways surprisingly impermanent. Monastic vows were, for example, easily rescinded, and although a large proportion of young males spent time in a monastery, it was a rite of passage which only lasted a few months. Similarly, because land was plentiful, many young couples preferred to leave their parents and settle in a house of their own once they were married. Rural Thailand was matrilocal rather than patrilocal – couples moved in with the wife’s family rather than the groom’s – but often enough it was simply neolocal, meaning that the couple ended up living somewhere altogether new.

The first American anthropologists who arrived in the country after World War II were quick to identify this as the ‘loose’ structure of Thai society. As they concluded, the over-abundance of land and the constantly moving internal frontier had created – just as in their own country in the nineteenth century – a unique ‘frontier spirit’. The Thais were constantly on the move, always breaking up and starting again somewhere else. As a result they never paid much attention to rights or duties, and they cared little for social discipline and regimentation. Just like the rugged occupants of one of the most enduring of American myths, Thai farmers were perceived as committed individualists.

But if this is individualism, it is an individualism that allows surprisingly little space for individuals. In contrast to the situation in Europe and North America, individual members of Thai society were not expected to make it on their own. The traditional Thai conception of the person was relational
rather than atomistic; people defined themselves in relation to others rather than as independent units sufficient unto themselves.\textsuperscript{12} Hence the importance of gifts and gift-giving, the obsession with saving or losing ‘face’, and the acute sense of hierarchy that characterizes most social interactions.\textsuperscript{13} Consider too the extraordinarily detailed vocabulary which the Thai language provides for describing relations of kinship.\textsuperscript{14} In a society where unique labels are given to maternal and paternal cousins, or to a father’s oldest and youngest brothers, families can surely not be completely unimportant.

The puzzle is how to combine the ‘looseness’ of the social structure with this obvious attention to social relationships. A solution can be found by looking at the way in which Thai farmers dealt with problems of collective action. Since rice farming is highly labour-intensive at particular times during the year, farmers always need additional help. And yet, in the case of Thailand, the exit options created by the moving frontier meant that it was difficult to coerce or cajole people into helping each other out. Since membership of the village was fluid, commitments were not credible. A similar logic applied within families, although parents tried their best to instil cooperative values in their children.\textsuperscript{15} Daughters, in particular, were expected to be on hand and support their parents. As a way to elicit their cooperation, the youngest, stay-at-home, daughter would typically get to inherit the family farm. And yet the availability of land meant that young couples could often afford to ignore their obligations.

This is not to say that people were left entirely to their own devices. Although few formal labour-sharing schemes existed, farmers relied heavily on informal ones.\textsuperscript{16} The best example was a person’s network of friends. His personal friends were the people a farmer knew he could depend on, and making and holding on to friends thus became a matter of utmost importance. This explains the great value attached to friendships in agrarian Thai society and the constant socializing that characterizes all interpersonal interaction.\textsuperscript{17} It explains the importance of late-night drinking sessions, of music and recurring feasts, as well as the particular Thai obsession with everything that is sanuk, or ‘fun’.

Expressed more schematically, Thai society was not so much atomistic and individualized as organized in informal relationships formed by social dyads, or pairs of individuals.\textsuperscript{18} Everywhere in Thai society there are such pairs, and they are usually hierarchically ordered. In traditional Thailand there were phrai, ‘freemen’, and nai, ‘masters’, and in contemporary society there are patrons surrounding themselves by numerous clients.\textsuperscript{19} Families too divide into pairs since the vertical relationships between fathers and sons, or mothers and daughters, are considered more important than the horizontal relationships between spouses or siblings. Much the same is true of friends who, despite their bonds of affection, are rarely completely equal. Such hierarchical pairs – and not individuals taken by themselves – are the true building blocks of Thai society. Individuals mean little, in short, before they are paired-up.
Redefined in this manner, traditional Thai society can be seen at the same time as fluid and as profoundly relational. Although individuals always belong to a social pairing, the pairs never form a single social structure but instead many mini-structures with unclear relationships between them. Instead of forming horizontal organizations with large numbers of individual members as in Europe, the dyads form vertical, but at the same time rather poorly integrated, networks. Social hierarchies are informal, temporary, and perceived in different ways by different people.

However, it is clear that there always have been considerable regional variations in this grammar. What has been said thus far pertains above all to villages in the Chao Phraya river basin in central Thailand. It was here that the problems of collective action were the most acute. In northern and northeastern parts of the country, different rules often applied. Here villages were better defined, but also more isolated and more exposed to the vagaries of nature – and people for that reason were far more dependent on each other. One particularly strong bond was religion, but not the official Buddhism of the Thai state as much as traditional and semi-animist folk beliefs. In Isaan each village had its own guardian spirit, and as a member of the village each person had to make sure that the spirit was kept in a benevolent mood. In this way a spiritual community was created which brought people closer together in other ways too – through communal feasting and merrymaking but also in common enterprises and labour-sharing schemes.

These were consequently the traditional patterns of social interaction as they existed at the time when farming was commercialized. And as for commercialization, a first thing to notice is how uneven the process was. In Thailand domestic markets were always limited in scope. Although there had been trade between Europe and Siam as early as in the seventeenth century, it involved only a few select luxury items. When trade expanded following the conclusion of the Bowring Treaty of 1866, it still concerned only a few key commodities produced mainly in central and southern Thailand. Only in the 1960s did farmers throughout the country really begin producing for the market rather than for themselves. The impetus here was not purely economic. At the time of the Vietnam War, the United States constructed military bases in the jungles of eastern Thailand, and with the bases came roads which opened up the hinterland to commercial opportunities.

This reorientation had a number of far-reaching consequences. First and most fundamentally it meant that land was transformed from an abundant into a scarce resource. When the peasants began producing for the market rather than for themselves, more land was always needed, and before long they started cutting down the jungle in order to enlarge their fields. In this way agricultural land expanded dramatically until the 1980s when there was suddenly no more forest to fell. In 1988 logging, and with it the clearing of new fields, was finally banned by the government. Greeted as a victory for the rainforest by environmental activists around the world, the
decision also put an end to a traditional way of life. The social exit option was now closed. There was suddenly nowhere new for people – for newlyweds or others – to go.

At the same time as a market was created in land, a market was created in labour. The people who worked the new fields were increasingly agricultural labourers, hired to carry out a specified job and paid in ready cash. The majority of them were without, or with far too little, land of their own, or they were heavily in debt. In this way the commercialization of agriculture led to a polarization of social conditions in the villages. People with access to land and credit could make good money for themselves, while people without such access were forced to sell their labour in an uncertain labour market. The result was an emiseration and social degradation of the new agricultural working class. Not surprisingly, many of them were highly susceptible to the propaganda of the Thai Communist Party. At the height of its power the Communist guerrillas had up to 5,000 men under arms, and they were active in 34 of Thailand’s 72 provinces.

The new commercial environment also put pressure on the traditional labour-sharing schemes. Since work was now undertaken for profit rather than for subsistence, time could be measured in terms of money and not even good friends could be expected to volunteer their labour for free. In central parts of the country this led to a further dissolution of the already loose communal bonds. In northern and north-eastern parts, however, commercialization seems to have had the opposite effect, and cooperative labour exchanges became more, rather than less, common. What made the difference here was the type of village community that preceded commercialization. From the 1960s onward, traditional labour-sharing schemes were put on a more commercial footing. Villagers increasingly established savings and funeral cooperatives as well as rice banks from which members could borrow in times of need. The guardian spirit of the village who had previously protected the people from wild animals and diseases now protected them from the onslaught of commercialization.

For similar reasons the family unit was often strengthened rather than weakened. Once land became scarce and expensive, newlyweds had fewer opportunities to start life together in a new location. The incentive was rather to stay with the parents and the in-laws and to help out on the family farm. It was only in this way that young couples could hope one day to inherit and thereby to make themselves independent. This provided a particular incentive for daughters, since the prospect of inheriting the family farm allowed them access to assets that now had a genuine market value for the first time.

The Years of the Boom

Another coping strategy for the rural poor was to go off and look for new opportunities in the cities. Indeed, from the 1980s onward the
new opportunities that were appearing in urban areas seemed roughly proportionate to the old opportunities that were disappearing in the countryside. More than anywhere else it was to Bangkok that everyone wanted to go – and when everyone suddenly did, the city started growing at a phenomenal pace. From 1 million people in 1947, the capital expanded to more than 6.3 million 50 years later, with an additional 3 million people in the greater metropolitan area. Before long the capital had become a sprawling, chaotic megalopolis famous above all for its traffic jams, its glistening high-rise buildings and its colourful slums. ‘Bangkok is not place to live,’ as its governor Bhichit Rattakul put it in 1997. ‘There are fumes, disasters, accidents, uncollected garbage, uncontrolled goods in the supermarkets… This is a jungle, an unorganized place.’

As the predominant centre of commerce and industry, not to mention consumption and entertainment, Bangkok is the generally recognized symbol of modernity and of a thamsamai, ‘up-to-date’, lifestyle. Although Bangkokians have always been better off, the relative advantage of the capital increased markedly during the years of the boom. The difference between the capital and the provinces in the north and the north-east, from which a majority of the migrants come, is particularly striking. Pushed by unemployment and pulled by expectations of high wages and modernity, former rice farmers soon queued up to do any number of odd jobs. Today, some work in factories and on construction sites; others have become maids and nannies; many young men drive taxis and tuk-tuks and many young women are go-go dancers and masseuses in the capital’s rapidly proliferating red-light districts.

As a matter of logistics, the question is how all these millions of bodies could be moved from the countryside and slotted into the rudimentary social infrastructure of the metropolis. As a personal problem, the question is who a recent arrival in the city might rely on for emotional and material support. The answer to both questions is basically that the vast majority of migrants rely on their traditional social networks of neighbours, relatives and friends. Although the migrants may leave their villages alone, they nearly always go to someone in the city they know beforehand. This contact is the person who sets them up, lends them money, and finds them a job and a place to stay. In this way, instead of simply breaking social ties, migration often ends up reaffirming them.

The move to the city has also been facilitated by the fact that the migrants have brought such a lot of their rural lives with them. By the middle of the 1980s the culture of the countryside had established a visible presence everywhere throughout the capital. Street-hawkers were selling the hot food of Isaan – som tam, papaya salad, and khao niaow, sticky rice – and radio stations on the prestigious FM band were playing phlaeng luk thung, Thai-style country-and-western music. Additional protection was provided by the small shrines, known as sampapoom or ‘spirit houses’, that occupy every empty plot of land throughout the city, and to which even busy office workers bring...
flowers, food and incense during their lunch breaks. The guardian spirits and are now looking after the villagers while they seek their fortune far away from home.

It is striking how even born-and-bred Bangkokians seem to enjoy the new rural fads, although a majority of them strictly speaking are of Chinese rather than Thai descent. Eating the food and listening to the music, everyone is able to reconnect with their real or their imaginary roots. The fact that the rural culture is commercially available only makes it more appealing; it is a commodified lifestyle which urbanites can consume without actually having to give up any of their modern conveniences. The need for rural roots seems to have been particularly pressing in the aftermath of the financial crisis of 1997, when nostalgia for the simple life suddenly overcame a large proportion of the urban population. For example, Thai newspapers were inundated with stories of elephants, a wise and friendly animal and a powerful symbol of the traditional way of life.

But there were many other ways of coping. A belief in the protective powers of amulets has always been a part of popular Buddhism, and prominent monks have often been active participants in the vigorous commerce that surrounds them. During the boom years, as well as in the subsequent bust, this trade gathered unprecedented momentum. When the economy was growing, everyone sought to assure themselves of success, and when the economy was contracting, everyone sought protection against disaster. New ‘prosperity religions’, based on Daoist beliefs common among families of Chinese descent, benefited from the same anxieties, as did various charismatic Buddhist movements which flourished in particular among members of the middle class. In addition, a new cult emerged centred on King Rama V, king Chulalongkorn, who modernized the country in the nineteenth century and preserved its independence in the face of European imperialism. In 1990 people began gathering around the king’s equestrian statue in the centre of Bangkok making offerings of flowers, candles and the Scotch whisky he is said to have favoured. By the middle of the decade these meetings were held two evenings a week.

The true secret of survival in Bangkok, however, is that most of the migrants never plan to stay all that long. At least in their own minds they are not settlers but sojourners. Just like the workers who migrated from China in the nineteenth century, they have been forced to leave their homes in search of work. In the city the sojourners are outsiders and spectators and they have only a physical and not a social presence. But more often than not, this is precisely as they want it to be. They take whatever work they can find, and if the job is risky and dirty, all the better, as long as the pay is correspondingly higher. The more money they can make, the sooner they can return to where their real lives are – back home in the village.

In Thailand the most obvious sojourners of this kind are the hundreds of thousands of people who synchronize their migration to coincide with the seasons of the agricultural calendar. Rice farming is a labour-intensive
occupation during the planting and harvesting seasons, but at other times many peasants are free to go off to the city to work for a cash wage. In the boom years such temporary migration increased dramatically. It seems clear – although exact figures are difficult to establish – that most migrants are young and single, and a majority are female. Many such seasonal workers become cab-drivers or construction workers, and many women end up as domestic servants or in the sex industry.

This is consequently how the Thais survived capitalism. By moving back and forth between two separate worlds organized according to two different logics, they are able to reap the benefits of both. The migrants are able to cope with the city since they only have to stay there for a couple of months at a time. In the city they are commodified, but taking on the temporary role of sojourner, they accept this fact. They do not pretend to belong to Bangkok and they do not look for recognition from the people who live there. Hence commodification results in no loss of prestige or standing. On the contrary, prestige and standing accumulate at the same rate as their savings, and the day is constantly coming closer when they can go back home and cash in. At the same time, migration is not only a way to make money but also a way of preserving social relationships – people are separated, but by means of seasonal migration they are reunited again. When the dyadic partner arrives in Bangkok, the pair once more live and work together. In this way the social units remain intact despite the social turmoil that takes place around them.

If this is how the Thais survived the years of the economic boom, it is also how they survived the subsequent bust. After the financial crisis of 1997, while the true Bangkokians were harking back to their imaginary memories of rural life, the cab-drivers and nannies just went home to the rice fields. Back on the farm there would always be something for them to do and something for them to eat. That is why there was little unemployment as a result of the crisis, and seemingly little social dislocation. In this way, however, the problems produced in the city were simply transferred back to the countryside. More migrants were returning and fewer migrants were leaving, so there were more mouths to feed and fewer remittances to collect. In the end it was the Thai peasants who absorbed the shocks caused by the global financial market.

Commodified Labour

The most striking example of the commodification of labour is surely the many girls from rural backgrounds who find work in the flourishing sex industry. The exact number of prostitutes is difficult to estimate due to the nature of their work, but the most commonly cited numbers are between 80,000 and 150,000. Among them a majority are recent arrivals in the city – many are temporary migrants, and they are almost exclusively from the north and the north-east. It is poverty that compels the girls to go to
Bangkok, although a small percentage are forced into prostitution or even sold to pimps and brothels by their parents. Work in the sex industry is far better remunerated than any other job a country girl might hope to get, and many prostitutes make far more money than their clients. In a high-class massage parlour a woman can take home as much as 35,000 baht per month, whereas in a factory she would make only about 1500 baht. A reasonably well-paid prostitute makes as much money as a newly graduated university lecturer.\(^{57}\)

Reports on the sex industry – full of moral outrage yet at the same time quite deliberately titillating – probably represent the most common images of Thailand to be found in foreign media.\(^{58}\) The standard explanation given in the voice-overs is that the girls in the pictures are the innocent victims of a domestic culture that is chauvinistic and exploitative, together with an international culture of tourism that promotes the commodification of sex. Many urban Thais for their part are more inclined to view prostitution as a nefarious consequence of modernization and as a sign of decadent foreign influences. In traditional Thai society, they like to believe, Thai women were chaste and incorruptible.

Some of these views are simply inaccurate. It is not true, for example, that prostitution is a problem brought on by foreigners.\(^{59}\) The part of the sex industry most visible to foreign media – the go-go bars in the red-light districts of Bangkok and the major beach resorts – may be a foreign import, initially created to service American visitors from the Vietnam War. Yet Thai men have long sought the services of ‘consort women’ and ‘second wives’, and today perhaps as much as 95 per cent of the prostitution is Thai-on-Thai rather than Thai-on-foreigner.\(^{60}\) At the same time it is clear that the process of modernization has changed the nature of this traditional trade. The pattern of seasonal migration has created a vast new demand for sexual services, and the emiseration of many families in the countryside has meant that they lack alternative sources of income.\(^{61}\) Previously, prostitution was mainly an urban phenomenon, but with the rapid growth of the cities the trade has grown in equal proportion. It used above all to feature girls of Chinese descent, often smuggled into the country, but now although foreign girls are involved – still commonly Chinese, but also Burmese and Laotian – the far larger proportion are rural Thais.\(^{62}\)

Yet there are also quite different ways to understand Thai prostitution. One is to see the women as entrepreneurs and as agents of their own fate rather than as passive victims of outside forces.\(^{63}\) They might not like what they do, this argument goes, but given the options available to them, their choices are nevertheless rational. They make good money in an industry that is more glamorous than factory work and more thamsamai than a rice field. And they learn to deal with the degradation through the same strategies available to all sojourners. The girls go off to work in the big city, but not to settle there or to assimilate. They are indeed commodified, but they survive socially and emotionally since they appear in the marketplace only
as bodies. Although they are treated as objects by their customers, their real lives happen elsewhere.\(^6^4\) When they go back home, their value as human beings is restored and they can walk through the village with their heads held high. In the villages there is little moral censure of prostitution even though it accords spectacularly badly with traditional sexual mores.\(^6^5\) The women have made money, and this fact alone will stop the tongues from wagging.

Another reason why it is possible to cope is that prostitution serves to affirm traditional family values. In peasant society, we said, daughters were given a particular responsibility for supporting their parents, and in next to all cases this is what prostitutes do. As many as three quarters of all sex-workers reported that they regularly send money home – often half or more of their income.\(^6^6\) Studies show that families with daughters in the sex industry are poorer than other families, but that they have more electric appliances and better clothes. In addition, the daughter’s remittances often help cover family debts or pay for a sibling’s education, a new house, additional paddy fields or the parents’ medical bills. Being able to help out in these ways is a source of considerable pride to the women concerned.\(^6^7\) Instead of undermining the traditional social code, therefore, their city jobs help strengthen it.

Just as in the case of male migrants, but even more starkly so, prostitutes move between worlds ruled by opposing logics – a commodified life in the city and a decommodified life back home. And just like their brothers and fathers, they help preserve traditional social ties through their migratory movements. It is rarely a coincidence, after all, in which particular brothel or go-go bar a woman ends up working.\(^6^8\) In the vast majority of cases it is a friend or a family member who has introduced her to the job. Some 63 per cent of girls aged under sixteen are brought to the brothel by their parents, and in perhaps half of the cases a close relative – a sister or a cousin – is already working for the same employer.\(^6^9\) From some villages in northern Thailand up to 70 per cent of all young girls end up in the sex industry, often working in the same establishments.\(^7^0\)

None of this reduces the degree of commodification which the sex industry imposes, yet it goes a long way towards explaining how the girls cope with it. Once restored, the social bonds with family and villagers provide much-needed protection from the dehumanizing environment in which they work. Sisters and friends look out for each other and support each other in the face of aggression from customers, pimps and the police. They have moved out of the village, their line of business has changed, but they are still together, working alongside each other much as they would have done planting rice back in the village.