

ON MONKS AND METHODOLOGIES

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QUALITATIVE METHODS

On August 15, 1997 I gave a talk to a group of Burapha University's Faculty of Education lecturers on the characteristics and strengths of qualitative research techniques and the kinds of issues that confront academics who chose this methodology over quantitative research techniques. In the subsequent discussion I was struck by the fact that our faculties face similar challenges in helping students to use these ethnographic methods. I believe that while participant-observation and extensive interviewing and other qualitative techniques are time-intensive and have certain ambiguities in practice, they are well worth pursuing, as Faculty of Education at Burapha expands its graduate programs, because of their ability to provide penetrating portrayals of educational phenomena in current Thai society.

I came to this methodology out of my own dissertation experience and the subsequent research I have conducted in Thailand over the past twenty years. I have researched Dr.Puay Ungphakorn's study-service programs, based at Thammasat University(1973-75), and the assimilation of minority tribal students into Thai schools in Chiang Mai province(1990-91). In each case I have spent extensive time periods with key participants (students, villagers, government officials and others) to gain multilayered perspectives on the issues under investigation.

For the "outside" researcher in Thai society, qualitative methods, particularly extensive interviewing and discussion with multiple sources, are practical and comprehensive approaches to understanding critical issues. Oversimplified (though at first convincing) analysis loses out to further question; apparent contradictions become more complex.

For the “inside” researcher, qualitative methods also can be extraordinarily useful, as always, depending on the research question that is being asked. During the seminar at Burapha, I mentioned several topics that might be of interest to faculty and students. In each case, the time-consuming but ultimately rewarding observation/interview techniques can provide insight not available from quantitative techniques. The topics mentioned included an investigation of sex bias in classroom teaching (Do we favor boys more than girls in our classroom interactions? How? Why?), a study of the teaching techniques employed by the Village Scouts, or *Luk Sur Chao Ban*, (a researcher could participate in the training sessions and analyze the techniques used as well as interview former and current members of the Village Scout organization), and a study of the northeastern workers currently doing construction work on campus (What are their economic and social backgrounds and current needs? Are they part of an invisible, underground economy?)

Along with examples of potential research topics and the research techniques themselves, I also talked about problems often encountered by qualitative researchers. As a way to recap some of my thoughts on methodological issues, I would like to relate an incident that occurred during my visit to Burapha. While this example does not represent actual research processes, I think that it may illustrate both how qualitative techniques may help provide multifaceted explanations of social phenomenon, and the problem which may confront researchers who use these techniques.

THE TRIP TO KORAT

A group of Faculty of Education lecturers and I took a trip to Pak Chong, Korat to visit my old friend, Khamsing Srinawk (known better by his pen name Lao Khamhawm) at his farm. For me, it was an extraordinary reunion. With all the changes in Thailand over the last six years since my last visit, all the run-away construction and industrial expansion, Khamsing's farm retains its Walden Pond - like allure. And the man himself is as kind and generous as ever, using his Pak Chong retreat for Thailand's current group of writers as he did for others a generation ago. Seeing Khamsing again was an emotional moment for me, intensified by the fact that in recent months we have lost a dear mutual friend to cancer, and seeing Khamsing made me feel the enormity of this personal loss. It was Lou Setti, our friend, who first introduced me to Khamsing thirty years ago.

After the visit we discussed the possibility of going to see a famous monk whose temple, or Wat, was in the Korat area. Should we try? He travels often. Maybe he won't be available; he has had health problems recently. Finally we decided to give it a try which pleased me, because I had heard much discussion of Laung Por Koon in recent days - his popularity, his powers, his generosity and his sense of humor. He was reported to have raised millions of Baht in donations in recent years and immediately distributing the money for building schools and hospitals. My Burapha friends spoke with awe about his humanity and his honored role in contemporary Thai society.

Timing is everything. We arrived about 5.00 in the afternoon and Laung Por Koon was in the building blessing amulets that people had brought him. He then came to the crowd to receive contribution, taking one of the two bills offered him by each individual, returning the second with his blessing. People also placed their I.D. cards on the floor so that he would walk on them, thus securing another level of blessing.

After receiving the offerings, Luang Por Koon proceeded down the line blessing each individual with a gentle tap on the forehead with a rolled up paper. When he came to me, Dr.Sakda, engaged him in conversation, providing some background about my

experience in Thailand, saying that I particularly liked the Northeast and enjoyed eating sticky rice, or *Khao Neo*. I added a couple sentences, Luang Por Koon looked at me in a kindly way and then joked by asking me if I would be willing to teach him how to eat sticky rice!

Then a remarkable thing happened. Very quietly, Luang Por Koon drew in his breath and blew gently on my forehead. He paused, then blew again. Then he gently tapped my head, and moved over to tap the next individual in the line. My Thai friends were excited that I had received a special blessing from Thailand's famous monk!

Indeed, I had. As a direct participant in the event, I had an intuitive sense of what had transpired. This monk had chosen to share with me something from the essence of his being - his breath - and delivered this essence directly to my mind. I had received his physical and spiritual gift.

I felt lucky and blessed. Certainly the event carried additional weight given the emotion I had felt during the visit to Khamsing's farm earlier in the day. (Could he have been aware of my psychological state?) But what did it all mean? I began to ask various Thai friends and acquaintances, and the search continues. It seems to me that my brief encounter with Luang Por Koon can be used as an example of how qualitative methods can enrich one's personal and general understanding. Questions stemming from that moment certainly have given me a window on contemporary Thai society.

PERSONAL AND SOCIAL MEANING

Most people I talked to agreed that Luang Por Koon gave me a blessing of some kind. After that, the questions began to multiply. On the personal level: Was the blessing about health? Personal protection? Material success? All of these? On the religious level: What does the blessing have to do with Buddhism? Where was it borrowed from? What other kinds of blessings does this monk confer? On the societal level: How can one account for the enormous popularity of this individual? Does it have to do with his down-to-earth style?

His perceived spiritual powers? Is his popularity related to Thailand's very real economic crisis? Are people anxious to receive his blessing because of increasing "spiritual insecurity"? Does the "Luang Por Koon phenomenon" - million of Baht raised for charitable purposes each year - tell us that the essence of Buddhist compassion is alive and well in Thailand? Or does it represent another facet of growing Thai materialism with the blessing of a popular religious figure? (Perhaps one can sidestep personal Buddhist discipline by donating material wealth to this individual, thus securing both spiritual health and tax-write offs.)

What I have discovered is that my single moment with this individual Luang Por has led me to ask many questions, and that the more I learn, the more I realize how complex this phenomenon is. If I had a chance to pursue these issues, however, I would be faced with a number of the dilemmas. Let me briefly discuss two of these: research bias and focus.

RESEARCH BIAS

While both qualitative and quantitative researchers in earlier generations claimed that one could be totally "objective" in research, most recent qualitative scholars focus on the importance of analyzing and understanding one's cultural and intellectual "baggage" and not pretending that it does not exist. Thus the researcher works to overcome bias by understanding clearly where he or she is starting from, which will have an influence on choice and scope of topic, methodology and analysis. Clearly, if I were to study Luang Por Koon, I would be acutely aware that I am starting from a very positive perspective. How often is one blessed by his or her research subject?

FOCUS

In the days since my trip to Korat, my questions about this monk have mushroomed. All aspects of his work - and how he is perceived by various groups in Thai society - fascinate me. Would I want to focus on how he is perceived by various Buddhist groups, including Sulak Sivaraksa's "engaged Buddhists"? Am I interested in how different

classes in Thai society perceive this monk and what they feel they receive from him? Are the auto dealer who invited Luang Por Koon to open his show room in Banglamung, Chonburi, the politicians who visit him before elections, and a villager from Roi Et visiting his temple making similar assumptions? Would I want to spend extended periods at his Wat, observing his actions, the people's responses, and learning from his staff and fellow monks? If I tried to interview him, would I have the same experience as Sutichai Yoon, editor of the *NATION* who found Luang Por Koon to be a clever and thoughtful, but less - than - forthcoming interviewee?

Obviously, I would need to choose among a host of interesting topics. This might well be aided by what others have written about this famous monk. Still, choices would have to be made. I would have to decide what is the social context and background for my study vs. what is it that I want to zero in on. My admonitions to my graduate students at the University come back to haunt me: if you want to complete a research project, even if all elements of the study interest you, you **have to limit the scope**. Focus, focus, focus.

Researcher bias and the problem of focus are, of course, also significant issues in quantitative research. Who we are influences what we study and why we study it. However, given the nature of qualitative techniques of research, these issues can be particularly troublesome. When a survey is written and sent out, and data collected, there is a sense of boundaries about the research process. Qualitative studies ask different and sometimes broader questions, and the study needs to be reined in and refocused at various times, because the more one learns, the more questions one has. And the instrument of research in qualitative work is the researcher - an all-too-human being, vulnerable to his or her own biases and interpretations of experiences.

Yet I believe that qualitative work has the potential to produce in depth portraits of society that cannot come from other "more precise" methodologies. For example, two months spent at Wat Ban Rai (Luang Por Koon's temple) could produce some insights on the nature of Luang Por Koon, the man and his extraordinary works. I am not suggesting that Burapha

professors and students should immediately begin a study of this monk. However, I am suggesting that the kinds of complex social questions raised because of my brief encounter with this religious figure lend themselves to the qualitative methods of participant observation and personal engagement with the man and his followers.

POSTSCRIPT

As during my other stays in Thailand, I have been blessed by friendship and an extraordinary level of cultural receptivity and generosity. In my brief time here, I have already established my new "home town" of friendly shop owners at the Nong Mon Market, from the husband - wife team who sell newspapers to the woman who sells *Khao Tom* in the morning. And on the faculty, I have renewed my friendship with Dr.Sakda, and Dean Surin, Dr.Anong, Ajarns Ladda and Kanjana, who visited me in Iowa City, and met many other friendly and thoughtful Ajarns.

I look forward to a continuing academic and personal relationship between our two institutions. Particularly, I would like some of my colleagues to have a chance to experience some of what I had during the six years that I spent in Thailand, since I first arrived at Thammasat University back in August 1968. I feel that after our trip to Korat our academic relationship has received a special blessing. For that I am grateful and I look forward to our continued cooperation and exchanges in the future.