Towards Chamlong Srimuang's Political Philosophy

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INTRODUCTION

Typically, the prominent Thai politician Major-General Chamlong Srimuang has been viewed in terms of the institutions and organisations with which he is associated: the Royal Thai Army, the Santi Asoke Buddhist sect, the Bangkok Metropolitan Authority, and the Palang Dhama Party. But Chamlong's electoral success derived also from his ability to draw upon, and to popularize, various anti-state political ideas. Influences upon Chamlong's political rhetoric and thought include Thai expositions of Schumacherian 'Buddhist economics' the life and teachings of Mahatma Gandhi, and the 'community culture school of thought' which has provided intellectual underwiring for the Thai NGO movement. His most distinctive variation upon these themes is his emphasis upon the need to preserve khwam pen thai, Thailand's indigenous culture.

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The author would like to thank Michael Drolet, Sudipta Kaviraj and Robert H. Taylor for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article. I am also extremely grateful to Sunai Setboonsarng, who discussed with me at considerable length many of the ideas contained here.
Nevertheless, it is difficult to define the precise nature of Chamlong's guiding philosophy. His thinking has been eclectic rather than systematic; the determined pursuit of lofty ideals has been inextricable from the pragmatic pursuit of short-term political advantage. It will be argued that the political thought of Chamlong Srimuang is an attractive hotch-potch of other peoples ideas.

BUDDHIST ECONOMICS

The principles of so-called 'Buddhist economics' underlie much of the social organisation of the Santi Asoke sect. The term 'Buddhist economics' appears to have been coined by E.F. Schumacher, who used it as a chapter title in his 1973 book, *Small is Beautiful*. Schumacher's central argument ran as follows:

Buddhist economics must be very different from the economics of modern materialism, since the Buddhist sees the essence of civilisation not in a multiplication of wants but in the purification of human character.¹

He proceeded to suggest that a state run along Buddhist economic lines would make the achievement of full employment a priority, since human character

was formed primarily by work. Schumacher did not provide a reference to any Buddhist text to support this view, though he did cite the writings of J.C. Kumarappa, an Indian philosopher. Schumacher's argument that a work ethic lies at the core of Buddhism appealed to Santi Asoke practitioners, since the survival of their small communities depended in large measure upon creating a culture of intense diligence and frugality. Schumacher's ideas helped to popularise and legitimise Santi Asoke's anti-materialist, self-sufficient ethos and practices.

Whether or not Chamlong fully understood Schumacher's approach to economic matters, his writings, speeches and activities were deeply permeated with similar ideas. This was evident from the maxim: 'Eat little, use little, work very, very hard, and

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2Kumarappa was a disciple of Gandhi, and author of a study of Gandhian economic thought.

3Schumacher's chapter on 'Buddhist economics' was published in Thai translation as 'Economic failure in the recent period is because we aren't interested in Buddhist economics', ('Khwamlom-laew khong sethasat samaimai phro mai sonchai setthasat cheng phut') in a collection somewhat curiously entitled Confessions of Colonel Chamlong Srimuang (Kamsarapap kho'ng pan ek Chamlong Srimuang, Bangkok: Samnakphim Benjamit), pp. 89-140. The book is undated, but internal evidence suggests that it was published towards the end of 1981. The translation of Schumacher had been carried out by Santi Asoke, and may well have appeared in one of the sect's publications at an earlier date. The prominent orthodox monk Phra Depvethi also acknowledges the importance of Schumacher's work in his short book Buddhist Economics, Bangkok: Buddhadasam Foundation Publications, 1992, pp. 1-2. This is an English translation of talk given in 1988, and published in Thai that same year.
donate the surplus to help society’, a personal slogan which Chamlong disseminated on specially-produced bookmarks. Chamlong’s secretary at the Bangkok Metropolitan Authority, Sunai Setboonsarng, was the main theoretical thinker both of the Santi Asoke sect, and of the corresponding wing of the Palang Dhama Party. Whilst working at the BMA, Sunai completed a Master’s degree at Thammasat University’s Faculty of Political Science. His thesis analysed the political principles of Santi Asoke; part of it was subsequently published in book form. Sunai’s thesis work was complex, and sometimes rather impenetrable, even for well-educated native speakers of Thai. However, the key points of his theory of Buddhist economics were also set out in more readable form, in a chapter which appeared in the 1988 Santi Asoke-produced volume *Buddhist Economics.*

4Sunai Setboonsarng, *Buddhist political principles: a case study of the thought of the Santi Asoke centre,* MA thesis, Department of Government, Faculty of Political Science, Thammasat University, 1990 (in Thai). Dr. Sombat Chantornvong, who has himself carried out research on both Santi Asoke and the Phalang Tham Party, was Sunai’s advisor for the thesis.

5Sunai Setboonsarng, *Udomakan thang sangkom nai phuthasatsana tam naewkhwamkit khong samnak santi asok* (Buddhist social principles according to the thought of the Santi Asoke centre), Bangkok: Fa Apay Co. Ltd., 1990, 432 pp. The book is based upon the first section of Sunai’s 1990 MA thesis. Fa Apay is a publishing concern owned by Santi Asoke.

Sunai began by criticising the dominant economic models which exist in the contemporary world. Although capitalism might succeed in achieving high-quality production of goods, it is unsuccessful in distributing the benefits of production.\textsuperscript{7} Socialism, by contrast, distributes products and produce quite equitably, but the goods themselves are of poor quality.\textsuperscript{8} A good economic system ought to be capable of bringing about both a high quality of production and an effective means of distribution. For Sunai, socialism and capitalism were not fundamentally different, since both economic models accepted the principle of consumerism, seeking to maximise production so as to satisfy ever-increasing demand. Both capitalism and socialism were based upon greed and selfishness;\textsuperscript{9} the era of capitalism corresponded with the growth of moral defilements (\textit{kilesa}), lustful desires and illusions.\textsuperscript{10} Socialism only differed from capitalism in that the state, rather than individual capitalists, owned the means of production. All countries were subject to the world capitalist system, and both capitalism and socialism were harmful to humanity, producing people who did not possess real freedom, suffered from a sense of alienation, and lacked feelings of fraternity and brotherhood.\textsuperscript{11} People tended to think of work as a kind of punishment, feeling that on Fridays they were escaping from gaol. Work itself had no value for them, only the money, status and esteem which they attained by working.\textsuperscript{12} Sunai

\textsuperscript{7}Sunai 1988, p.39.  
\textsuperscript{8}Ibid, p.40.  
\textsuperscript{9}Ibid, p. 42.  
\textsuperscript{10}Ibid, p. 44.  
\textsuperscript{11}Ibid, p. 45.  
\textsuperscript{12}Ibid, p. 46.
was deeply pessimistic about the prevailing economic order, arguing that the capitalist mode of development offered no chance of lasting peace or real human liberty.\textsuperscript{13}

In order to find a way out of this impasse, Sunai looked at the origins of the capitalist mode of development, and questioned its fundamental assumptions. Borrowing the language of generative grammar, he argued that human society had a 'deep structure' which may not be readily visible. Fundamental to Sunai's interpretation was the Buddhist idea of a 'state of nature', by which he did not mean a Hobbesian barbarism, but a 'natural' human order of harmony.\textsuperscript{14} In a pre-monetary society, people had to barter their goods, living and working in close co-operation with their neighbours. The temple was the centre of every village, the focal point for a community founded upon principles of mutual self-help. The crucial change in the village economy took place when people switched from the daily gathering of food, to the collecting of food for storage and later consumption.\textsuperscript{15} This marked the beginnings of capitalist bulk production, allowing some villagers to become merchants and dealers rather than subsistence farmers. The social problems of greed and laziness associated with consumerism dated from this development, as legal disputes began over property rights, and the environment began to suffer from excessive commercial exploitation.\textsuperscript{16} Sunai argued that

\textsuperscript{13}Ibid, p. 47.
\textsuperscript{14}Ibid, p. 49.
\textsuperscript{15}Author's interview with Sunai Setboonsarng, 16 October 1991.
\textsuperscript{16}Sunai 1988, pp. 53-55.
the problems of the existing economic order could not be solved through refinements in the mechanisms attendant upon consumerism; that is, people needed to scale down their demands, rather than attempt continually to increase production in line with ever-increasing demand. The myth of an early human society untainted by consumerism was essential to Sunai's argument that consumerism was not integral to the 'deep structure' of the contemporary economy the society. Implicit in his line of argument was a belief that the ideal of the pre-modern Buddhist village could be re-established in the present world.

Sunai advocated an alternative economic system, which he called *bun-niyom*, or in English, 'meritism'. Since the problems of humanity derived from excessive demands, the focus of the economy should change from maximising the quantity of production, to maximising the quality of production. Sunai borrowed from utilitarianism to define 'quality' as that which brings maximum benefit to humanity. The pursuit of this principle would lead to a reduction in consumer demand, in accordance with the teachings of all major religions, and particularly of Buddhism, by promoting generous behaviour, and discouraging sinful selfishness. Sunai argued that by replacing monetary capital with spiritual capital (merit, *bun*) as the 'currency' of society, it would be possible to solve the problem of combining efficient production with effective distribution of the benefits of production. Sunai

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17Ibid, p. 58.
19Ibid, p. 66.
proceeded to offer a detailed case study of the Palang Bun ('force of merit') trading company, a chain of retail outlets run by the Santi Asoke sect on meritist principles. These stores sold essential goods of high quality at low prices, staffed by volunteer workers.

Interviewed in 1991, Sunai explained that charitable projects set up by Chamlong Srimuang, such as the 'Thueng Shop' (*ran thueng*) and the 'break-even company' (*borisat tao tun*) were even better examples than Palang Bun of enterprises run according to Buddhist economic principles.\(^{20}\) A short English essay by Sunai entitled "Thueng Shop", an example of Buddhism economic concepts offered another explanation of his theory.\(^{21}\) The shops in question sold donated second-hand goods at bargain prices, Sunai argued that *ran thueng* was an important venture, not so much on its own merits, but because it served to illustrate the application of Buddhist economic principles. Clearly, Sunai equated 'demand' in the economic sense with 'desire' in the Buddhist sense; reducing worldly attachments was inseparable from reducing material demands. Rather like British charity shops—the ones run by Oxfam, for example—*ran thueng* offered satisfaction to those who donated items for sale.

\(^{20}\)Sunai interview, 16 October 1991.

\(^{21}\)Sunai Setboonsarng, (translated into English by Mrs. Soyangkoon Bulyalert) "Thueng Shop" as an example of Buddhism economic concept,' undated photocopied document (circa 1990), 3 pp.
(they had rid themselves of attachment), to those who purchased the items at a low price, and to those who benefitted from the funds raised by the shop. Sunai saw the charity shop as a model for the redistribution of wealth and resources.

Chamlong's 'break-even company' toured the country, selling cheap basic items from market-trucks. Unlike Palang Bun, it made no profit at all. Shareholders received no dividends; their investments were effectively a form of donation. The company's operating costs were covered by the income from share capital. Sunai compared Palang Bun and Chamlong's charities with the co-operative movement in England, conceding that the ideals underlying them could be described as socialist. However, these small-scale socialistic enterprises lacked the qualities of compulsion and rigidity which characterised orthodox state Marxism. For Sunai, the teachings of the Buddha, with their monastic ideal of a life without money or possessions, were anti-consumerist and broadly socialist. The organisation of Santi Asoke communities such as Pathom Asoke reflected collectivist ideals of common ownership. Sunai described Santi Asoke's political ideology as *rabob sahaserisangkhomniyom*, 'social liberalism.'

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22 Interview with Sunai Setboonsarng, 18 November 1991.
23 Interview with Sunai Setboonsarng, 4 September 1992.
Sunai emphasised that Buddhist economics did not, as yet, form part of Palang Dhama Party policy, and admitted that Chamlong himself had not read his 1990 MA thesis, nor his 1991 book: Chamlong was a man of action rather than a theoretical thinker. When asked in October 1991 whether or not he believed in Buddhist economics, Chamlong immediately confirmed that he did; but to his mind, ventures such as the *thueng* shop and the break-even company had nothing at all to do with Buddhist economics. Less than a year later, however, Chamlong offered an entirely different analysis in his Magsaysay Award acceptance speech, given in Manila in September 1992:

I set up "Theung" Shop and a "No-profit" company to adapt the economic theory to suit the Buddhist philosophy in order to solve the economic problem of society.

How can this about-turn be understood? Either Chamlong had arrived at a Sunai-style conception of the relationship between his charity projects and the

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24Interview with Sunai Setboonsarng, 16 October 1991. The policy manifestos prepared by the Phalang Tham Party for the March and September 1992 general elections contained no reference to the term 'Buddhist economics'; for example, the September 1992 document was written in the typical style of Thai party manifestos, confining its discussion of economic policy to twelve pledges, the majority of them vague promises to 'emphasise', 'develop' and 'improve' various areas of the economy. See *Nayobai borihan prathet* (Policy for administering the country), Bangkok: Phalang Tham Party, 1992, pp. 7-8.

25Interview with Major-General Chamlong Srimuang, 29 October 1991.
precepts of Buddhist economics between October 1991 and September 1992, or Chamlong’s Magsaysay acceptance speech had been written by somebody else; either this account of the projects resulted from a genuine re-conceptualisation of the matter by Chamlong, or else Chamlong’s real view of the ventures bore little relation to the account he gave of them in Manila.

TRANSFORMING THAI SOCIETY: MACROSCOPIC VERSUS MICROSCOPIC ACTION

Having identified the central economic issue facing Thais as one of reconciling their ever-increasing consumer demands with shortfalls in supply, Sunai argued that the solution lay in reducing demand: scaling down the economy to a manageable level which did not result in an escalation of selfishness, alienation and dissatisfaction. The problem was how best to bring about such a transformation: what was the optimum point of state power? Without state encouragement, the transition to meritist practices and principles would be difficult to accomplish. Yet compulsion by the state would be likely to undermine the very ethos of meritism itself. Sunai identified two dominant schools of thought among political actors in contemporary Thailand: macroscopic, and microscopic.26 Macroscopic actors were attempting to transform Thai society through the power of the state, for example, by forming political parties, by standing for elected office, or (in the case of many academics) by working with the government in an advisory capacity, for example.

26Interview with Sunai Setboonsarng, 16 October 1991.
Microscopic actors concerned themselves with the need to change the behaviour of individuals, since they saw personal moral education as a prerequisite for the transformation of society. Such actors include activists in non-governmental organisations (NGOs), so-called 'development monks', and intellectuals who declined involvement in mainstream politics. Sunai cited Dr. Prawet Wasi as an outstanding example of such an actor.

According to Sunai, Chamlong combined both perspectives, working through the power of the state as Bangkok governor and Palang Dhama party leader (later, of course, as an MP), and through micro-level individual transformation in his charitable projects. Sunai rejected the idea that there was a fundamental discrepancy between the two approaches, arguing that the goals could be the same, although methods differed. Yet it must be assumed that the natural sympathies of Santi Asoke practitioners lay with society-based initiatives, given the tensions which had long existed between the beleaguered sect and the Thai government. Having themselves suffered at the hands of a powerful and intrusive state, Santi Asoke members could hardly argue for the solution of social and economic problems through strong state intervention. It was apparent that Sunai, although a member of the Palang Dhama Party's first executive committee in 1988, felt rather ambivalent about the establishment of the party. He insisted that Palang Dhama had been set up originally to provide protection for Chamlong, in the event that the Prachakorn Thai Party had been able to join the government coalition following the July 1988 general elections.27 Palang Dhama was a child of necessity, rather

27Interview with Sunai Setboonsarng. 18 November 1991.
than an ideal instrument for the improvement of society. Sunai compared Chamlong's establishment of Palang Dhama with Mahatma Gandhi's reluctant involvement with Congress: like Gandhi, Chamlong was always balancing moral and religious considerations with purely political ones. Chamlong was following 'two paths' (*Thang so'ng phraeng*, the title of his 1989 book of collected writings), the path of religion and the path of politics. Sunai argued that Chamlong quite probably would not stand in the spring 1992 general election then impending, but might instead opt to see out his four year term as Bangkok governor before retiring from the mainstream political scene, devoting himself instead to 'independent work' (*tham ngan isara*) on charitable ventures. This withdrawal from national political life, however, need not be permanent, and the possibility would remain that Chamlong might stand for parliament at a later date. In the event, Chamlong proceeded to resign the Bangkok governorship, win election to parliament, and become a major player on the national political scene. Chamlong's ambivalence about committing himself to the political path appears not to have been so strong as Sunai and other Santi Asoke practitioners might have preferred. Community work, and the promotion of moral, meritist values, continued to play a secondary role: Chamlong's sights remained on the main chance, his hopes of forming a government based upon Palang Dhama. Chamlong's claims that he was torn between worldly and unworldly courses of action had grown increasingly implausible during his public prominence from 1985 to 1992—despite his frequent protestations to the contrary, and continued insistence that he longed to 'go home' to his Pathom Asoke ashram where he could be 'the old Chamlong' once again:
No one believed that if I could choose and had no commitments, what I really wanted was to be just plain "Chamlong," live in a small hut engrossed in nature, and follow the Buddha's teachings in order to reduce my desires.\(^{28}\)

Whatever abstract distaste he may have felt for the cut-and-thrust of party politics, Chamlong clearly thrived in the political limelight, and his shrill insistence that he lacked worldly ambition became increasingly difficult to reconcile with his actions.\(^{29}\)

**GANDHISM: THE MODEL FOR CHAMLONGISM?**

M.K.Gandhi always insisted that there was no such thing as Gandhism; Chamlong Srimuang never claimed to have a systematic political philosophy. Whilst their reluctance to publish codified answers to human and social problems might suggest modesty and humility, it


\(^{29}\)The argument that Chamlong's faced a choice between pursuing a political career and working in the social development field became an even more pertinent one following Chamlong's prominent role in the May 1992 protests against the premiership of General Suchinda Kraprayoon. Chamlong's critics argued that he had shown a lack of judgement in attempting to lead thousands of protesters towards Government House, and urged that he withdraw from mainstream political leadership. For a discussion of these issues, see Ampa Santimatanedol, "Principles at stake...or just politics", *Catalyst for change: uprising in May*, Bangkok: Post Publishing Co. Ltd, 1992, pp. 64-65.
also had the advantage of allowing both men considerable leeway to modify their views. Like Gandhi, 'Maha' Chamlong (the same word 'maha', or 'great', forms the first part of Gandhi's popular appellation, 'Mahatma', or 'great soul') allowed him to engage in a blind pursuit of 'truth', without regard for more mundane considerations such as consistency or logic. Chamlong sought to make virtues out of his frequent changes of tactics and position—the outstanding example being the decision to give up his hunger strike against the premiership of General Suchinda Kraprayoon on 9 May 1992—an action which, only five days earlier, he had vowed to continue until death. It should be stressed, however, that Gandhi was far more of an intellectual than Chamlong, a deeper thinker altogether.

As Sunai pointed out, Gandhi was torn through out his life by the competing claims of 'high politics,' such his work with Congress, and his preoccupation with small-scale issues and their solutions. There are clear parallels between Chamlong's years as a part-time wandering preacher (1979-85), delivering moral homilies to villagers the length and breadth of Thailand, and Gandhi's numerous pilgrimages to 'penetrate' the Indian village, to understand the concerns of his uneducated rural countrymen, and inculcate them with the principles of sanitation. Like Gandhi, Chamlong sought to bring

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30Chamlong described his 'upcountry' preaching tours in a piece entitled 'Mai thong kho'p khun chan' (You don't have to thank me'), *Thang sam phraeng*, Vol.3., Bangkok: Khlet Thai, 1986, pp. 93-98. He wrote that he sometimes gave a three hour talk in the morning, another in the afternoon, and a two hour talk in the evening, at different villages in the same district.

about the moral transformation of individuals by improving their economic conditions and educational opportunities. Just as Gandhi founded his own model communities—the ashrams of Sabarmati and Sevagram—Chamlong became involved in Photirak’s Santi Asoke villages in Bangkok and Nakhorn Pathom. Chamlong hoped to translate the principles of diligence, honesty, co-operation and self-help which obtained in Santi Asoke communities into national-level Thai politics. However, his Santi Asoke experiences had made him uneasy about the coercive power of the state, whilst his military background bred in him a strong mistrust of politicians and political parties, and his travels in the provinces had left him ambivalent about his own birthplace, Bangkok, which he saw as a centre of corruption and moral degeneracy. Like Gandhi, Chamlong was a trained professional (a communications engineer as well as a soldier) whose education in the West had equipped him to criticise his own society, not for its inferiority to western ways, but for its failure to nurture an indigenous civilisation. Like Gandhi, Chamlong had the intellectual tools of the educated westerner, but the sentiments of the patriotic Asian. He took upon himself the task of using modern mass media and political pressure groups to bring about the revitalisation of 'Thai-ness', just as Gandhi attempted to 'regenerate' Indian culture and values.\(^{32}\) Whereas for Gandhi, cultural regeneration was a necessary prerequisite for the independence of India from British rule, for Chamlong the moral rejuvenation of Thailand was the overriding political objective in its own right: politics were first and foremost a means of promoting the ideals of virtue and morality.

\(^{32}\)Ibid, p. 55.
Gandhi felt deeply ambivalent about the state, cherishing a vision of a non-statal polity, comprising concentric circles of villages, each village well-organised and self-determining:

Life will not be a pyramid with the apex sustained by the bottom. But it will be an oceanic circle whose centre will be the individuals—a vision with which Santi Asoke practitioners would feel very comfortable. Although Gandhi was for many years a leading figure in Congress, Congress was not a political party in the conventional sense: Gandhi's dominance of the organisation was essentially the result of his personal charisma. Gandhi did not always seek to influence political events in India through Congress; in 1934, he withdrew briefly from day-to-day involvement in the organisation, later explaining that he did not accept the existence of 'watertight compartments' separating political from non-political work. Gandhi proved able to move between the national political stage and village-level work with alacrity, arguing that the two activities were not simply complementary, but indivisible. He was able to play the role of 'external conscience' to Congress, influencing the course of events from the sidelines. Gandhi argued that Congress ought to be disbanded following Independence. He never sought legislative office, believing that there was little value in such position. Instead, he preferred to operate as a free-floating source of political inspiration, largely unburdened by formal title or status.

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33Parekh, p. 115.
35Brown, p. 283.
Many of Chamlong Srimuang's Santi Asoke supporters wished him to operate in a similar fashion: although they initially accepted Chamlong's assumption of the Bangkok governorship as an 'independent', their unease grew after he formed the Palang Dhama Party in 1988, and later stood for parliament in March 1992. Chamlong showed no sign of withdrawing from public life, tactically or otherwise, but appeared increasingly to resemble other Thai politicians in his attempts to raise his own national profile, and that of his party. As a retired army officer, a man who owed everything to his career in Thai government service, Chamlong did not entirely share the mistrust of the state, and of orthodox political institutions, felt by a Gandhi or a Photirak. He found himself torn between the Gandhian visions of his image-makers, and his own repressed ambition: the conventional desire of the Thai general-and former Chulachomklao cadet class president-to assume his 'natural' right to high office. For Chamlong had discovered that his lifestyle as a religious ascetic could prove a formidable electoral asset, allowing him to win hundreds of thousands of votes in the Thai capital. The pursuit of power, if not corrupting in any direct financial or moral sense, came increasingly to dominate his thoughts. Whereas he had originally sought public office on the grounds that it would allow him more scope for doing good, some of his later 'altruistic' ventures seemed deliberately calculated to raise his political profile. A prime example was the 'break-even company' (borisat tao tun), founded in 1991, which toured Thailand selling cut-price goods from two huge red articulated trucks, proclaiming in bright yellow letters that the company was 'led by Major-General Chamlong Srimuang', and featuring huge cartoons of Chamlong. Chamlong's charitable activities adopted
much of the rhetoric of what Chatthip Nartsupha has called 'community culture', the alternative, anti-statal thinking of many NGOs working in Thailand; yet it could be argued that Chamlong was using this idiom partly or mainly to further his conventional political aspirations.

Bhikhu Parekh has highlighted the sense in which Gandhi saw Indian civilisation as qualitatively different from European civilisation, reasoning that India was essentially 'spiritual.' Gandhi even claimed that India's failure to develop economically apace with Europe resulted from a deliberate historical decision by Indians, who had decided to call a halt to growth so as to concentrate on the pursuit of higher ends. Nevertheless, Parekh argues that Gandhi was not a nationalist in the 'collectivist, monolithic, aggressive and xenophobic' sense of many European nationalists: his vision of India derived from a sense of India as a 'distinct civilisation.' Clearly, Gandhi's concept of Indian civilisation derived its considerable popular appeal from the evocation of beguiling historical myths. Gandhi sought to counter his countrymen's feelings of envy and admiration for the West, by claiming that India had always held the moral and spiritual high ground. In fact, however, the realities of violent communalism which came to the fore at the time of partition were

36See the essay "The "community culture" school of thought,' by Chatthip Nartsupha, in Manas Chitakasem and Andrew Turton (eds.), Thai constructions of knowledge, London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1991, pp. 118-141. The question of the relationship between Chamlong's political thought, and that of the community culture school, will be discussed below.

37Parekh, p. 37.
38Ibid, p. 38.
deeply challenging to Gandhi's ideal of a broad Indian culture which transcended differences of faith. Chamlong Srimuang's idea of 'Thai-ness' (khwampenthai), though far less elaborate than Gandhi's vision of Indian civilisation, was a similar surrogate nationalism, drawing upon Thai folk memories of a simple, contented village past which had probably never existed. Just as Gandhi's idea of India was essentially a Hindu conception, so Chamlong Srimuang was never able to separate Thai-ness from Buddhism.

**PRESERVING 'THAI-NESS': A SURROGATE NATIONALISM**

The need to preserve what he saw as 'traditional' Thai values, products and techniques was an important theme in Chamlong Srimuang's political rhetoric. In this respect, Chamlong could be compared with previous Thai political leaders such as Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, who had always claimed to base his despotic personal rule upon *lakkanmuang Thai*, 'indigenous principles of the state,' of questionable ancestry. In Chamlong's case, however, the appeal was based upon indigenous qualities of Thai society; more specifically, upon the supposed qualities of traditional rural Thai life. This was the same myth which underpinned Sunai's analysis.

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41The term 'surrogate nationalism' has been coined in this paper to refer to an alternative form of nationalism, one rooted less in conventional ideas of nationhood than in an idealised vision of indigenous culture.

42For a discussion of Sarit's nationalist ideology, see Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Thailand: the politics of despotic paternalism*, Bangkok: Social Science Association of Thailand/Thai Khadi Institute, Thammasat University, 1979, pp. 155-161. Thak argues that Sarit wanted the Thai people 'to remain agrarian in outlook and condition', 'at least for the time being' (163), but Sarit's ultimate goal was modernisation.
of the 'deep structure' of Thai society, that of a village whose residents lived together cooperatively, harmoniously and frugally, without need of money, and without the disturbing temptations brought by western materialist culture. As Chamlong put it:

Our ancestors were not cash-crop-oriented. In an integrated farm where they planted rice, vegetables and fruit, as well as raised cattle, they could survive, while the additional gains were distributed throughout the community. And there were no such things as debt and severe need among farmers.43

A fine exposition of Chamlong's thinking on the subject of khwam pen thai appeared in a 1981 magazine article, entitled 'How can we use religion to solve socio-economic problem?' which seems originally to have been the text of a talk given to an audience of Santi Asoke devotees.44 The piece was subsequently reprinted in a book entitled Confessions of Colonel Chamlong.45 The article exemplifies Chamlong at his

43Quoted in Ernst W. Gohlert, Power and culture: the struggle against poverty in Thailand, Bangkok: White Lotus, 1991, pp. 150-51. Gohlert cites Bangkok Post, 20 August 1987, as his source. Chamlong's emphasis upon the need to avoid debt was a recurrent theme in his election campaigns, when he would claim that every Thai owed thousands of baht 'at birth,' as a result of Thailand's national debts. This idea of 'original debt' is discussed in Duncan McCargo, The three paths of Major-General Chamlong Srimuang, South East Asia Research, 1993, 1 (1).

44The article first appeared in Prachamit, 22 June 1981.

45Chamlong Srimuang, 'Rao cha chai satsana kae panha sangkhom sethakit dai yangrai' ('How can we use religion to solve socio-economic problem'), in Kamsaraphap khong phan ek Chamlong Srimuang, op.cit., pp. 61-88.
boldest and most outspoken, speaking with all the over-zealousness of a recent convert to the sect, and without the constraints of a politician dependent upon votes for his continued survival.

Chamlong argued in this speech that if people lacked religion, attempts to 'modernise' their way of life would end in failure. He cited the example of a village in Ayutthaya province, whose inhabitants eke-d out a bare subsistence by making bricks. A travelling cinema had visited the village, and offered the about 400 baht a night for the hire of the temple. The abbot eagerly agreed, and the cinema operators began showing a film at the temple one night a month. The films proved extremely popular with the villagers, and gradually the number of showing increased, until there were films on at the temple every other night. The price of admission to the double-bill showings was 10 baht, but the villagers were struggling to earn 12 bath a day, the price they received for 100 bricks. As a result, the villagers became poorer and poorer, as they gave an increasingly large proportion of their modest income to the cinema operators. This was an instance where the lack of 'true religion' (satsana thi thaeching) impeded development: the abbot, seeing the deleterious effects of the cinema upon the well-being of his community, ought to have stopped hiring out the temple—yet he had failed to do so. This moral anecdote can be understood on more than one level. At its most basic, it is an attack on the hypocrisy of the orthodox Thai Buddhist sangha, and its complicity with immoral elements in society. Chamlong argues

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for a 'true' Buddhism, which places the needs of ordinary people above the self-interest of monks and temples. On another level, it criticises the failure of the village concerned to exercise moral and economic self-determination by resisting pernicious outside influences. Chamlong's ire is not directed at the profiteering cinema operators for their high admission prices, still less at the economic exploitation of the villagers by the brick-dealers. Instead, he castigates the individual and collective failures of self-control by the villagers, their inability to reject the temptations of frivolous amusement. This anecdote is a prelude for a disquisition upon the nature of khwam pen thai. The unstated moral of the homily: had the abbot and his community been at one with their own Thai-ness, their indigenous Buddhist culture, they would never have succumbed to the evil advances of the cinema operators.

Chamlong proceeded to argue that practiseing the Buddhist dharma was inextricably linked with cherishing khwam pen thai, and began detailing examples of foreign incursions which could undermine indigenous civilisation:

If we want to have Thai characteristics, we must live in Thai-style houses. There are Thai-style houses here for you to see—the huts which you see here, both monks' huts and nuns' huts, characteristically Thai (Chamlong was clearly giving his talk at a Santi Asoke centre). People who live here have to be tough enough to cherish these characteristics, otherwise they will remain addicted to enticing things. By allowing foreign characteristics to come in, we allow styles of
furniture to come in: cupboards, beds, and all kinds of things. Wherever you step, you walk into something. It can't compete with the old style, the Thai style, which was roomy and spacious. In the matter of houses, just as elsewhere, we need dharma, so as to be able to cherish our characteristics.\textsuperscript{48}

Chamlong made a direct connection between following the dharma and preserving khwam pen thai, arguing that a simple, unmaterialistic way of life was a characteristic of the Thai people, and one which was being undermined by the import of foreign styles of housing and furnishing.\textsuperscript{49} The moral crusade against greed and selfishness was also a struggle for the preservation of an indigenous civilisation. The influence of foreign goods was corrupting, since it brought in its wake foreign ideas and values that were contrary to Buddhist teachings. He went on to cite foreign cosmetics as a further example of an undesirable import. On one occasion he had visited a well-known Bangkok hotel, and seen various brands of cosmetics on display:

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid, pp. 79-80.

\textsuperscript{49}From an Indian perspective, the word dharma is more than just a religious term; it describes an inherent quality which defines the essence of a particular entity. For example, fierceness might be the dharma of a tiger: a tiger which was not fierce would not be a tiger. Chamlong's use of the term dharma in this speech seems to transcend its technical Buddhist meaning in similar fashion: it is the dharma of a Thai to live in a Thai-style house (I am indebted to Dr. Sudipta Kaviraj for pointing this out).
If among us there are some who are still attached to cosmetics I'd like to propose that you use *dinsorpho'ng* (a form of talcum powder), because it is characteristically Thai.50

It was not enough that those addicted to cosmetics should switch to simpler, less expensive forms of cosmetic—these forms should also be 'characteristically Thai', their Thai-ness in some way helping to excuse their frivolity (Chamlong conveniently argued that *dinsorpho'ng* was actually useful, since, when mixed with water, it made the wearer feel cooler; would he have admitted that all talcum powders, even foreign ones, had this quality?). He then embarked upon a similar discussion of clothing, pointing out that he was wearing a *morhom* shirt (a simple blue denim collar-less shirt, commonly worn by Thais, especially upcountry villagers) from Chiang Mai. He had not dressed up specially to give his speech, since a *morhom* shirt was appropriate for any occasion, whether it be participating in a ministerial meeting, attending the Senate, or taking a flight.51

Although Chamlong's ideal of simple living might seem at first to have conformed closely to the rational, minimalist principles laid down in Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful*, closer scrutiny reveals that Chamlong was powerfully animated by a desire to preserve Thai-ness. Was preserving Thai-ness just a benefit of adhering to the *dharma*, or was adhering to the *dharma* primarily a means of pre-

50 Ibid, p. 80.
51 Ibid, p. 81.
serving Thai-ness? In Chamlong's utterances the two objectives were hopelessly entangled, virtually in separable. He may have been attempting to draw upon the instinctive nationalism of his audience, so as to win their sympathy for his outspoken views on the evils of cupboards and lipstick. On the other hand, Chamlong himself may quite uncynically have equated adherence to the dharma with the cherishing of khwam pen thai. An army cadet during the heyday of Field Marshal Sarit Thannarat, Chamlong had pledged to preserve the tree 'pillars' of nation, religion and monarchy. Whilst Sarit saw 'religion' (satsana) in terms of the orthodox Thai sangha, a central element in legitimating the Thai state, Chamlong had come to see satsana as the individual's attempt to follow the true dharma. This quest was inextricable from the cherishing of Thai ekalak (characteristics):

If we are firm of purpose and have dharma in our hearts, we will preserve our characteristics. The preservation of characteristics has to involve dharma-we will have to follow the dharma, getting rid of our self-importance and splendour.\(^{52}\)

Chamlong's correlation of dharma with khwam pen thai (Thai-ness) was a radical variation of the standard linkage between satsana (religion) and chat (nation), allowing him to refute any charge that his Santi Asoke-inspired message was unpatriotic. Significantly, the accusation that Santi Asoke was 'un-Thai' formed an important part of the denunciation made of the sect by the Supreme Patriarch at the

\(^{52}\) Ibid, pp. 81-82.
crucial meeting of the Sangha Council in May 1989, when Photirak and his fellow monks were cast out of the orthodox Buddhist order.\textsuperscript{53} Chamlong's emphasis upon \textit{khwam pen thai} was therefore effective on various levels, providing a line of intellectual defence against his critics in the establishment, appealing to a mass audience in a crude, populist fashion, and allowing him to reconcile his implicitly anti-statal message with his own deeply-held conservative beliefs. The beauty of \textit{khwam pen thai} as a rhetorical device lay in its vagueness, its ambiguity. There were many similarities between Gandhi's evocation of a timeless, mythical Indian 'civilisation', and Chamlong's allusions to \textit{khwam pen thai}. Gandhi's thought, however, was considerably more elaborate and systematic than that of Chamlong.

In an extended interview which appeared in the educational journal Kurupritat in 1987, Chamlong argued that Thai education was becoming too modern.\textsuperscript{54} The problems of the country could be solved, if only people were 'more Thai' in their behaviour. He advocated the use of more Thai books, and the use of Thai numerals in place of Arabic ones. Thais should strive to emulate their forefathers, and not allow the alien culture creeping into the country to take root. Interviewed in 1991, he explained that working to preserve \textit{khwam pen thai} included wearing Thai clothes, living in a Thai house, and eating Thai food and fruit (he refused to eat apples, for example, on the grounds

\textsuperscript{53}For the text of the Supreme Patriarch's speech, see Bunruam Tiamchanot, \textit{Khadi Santi Asok} (The Santi Asoke case), Bangkok: Saengdaw Publishing, 1989, p. 88.

\textsuperscript{54}Kurupritat, February 1987.
that they were not indigenous to Thailand). It also included speaking good Thai, and not leavening one's Thai with English words, a common practice among western-educated Thai intellectuals and academics. Chamlong pointed out with obvious pride that he had recently received a national award, as the politician who spoke the best Thai. He argued that khwam pen thai was so hard to find in Thailand that Thai people themselves had forgotten it. Someone had to take the lead in preserving Thai-ness. Asked how preserving khwam pen thai could be reconciled with living in today's international world, Chamlong pointed out that there were limits to the application of the principle (at the time of the interview, he was in the process of having his hair cut by his wife Sirilak, who was using a pair of electric hair clippers): accommodations had to be made. He wanted to improve contemporary Thai society, rather than simply reverting to the past. Chamlong's preoccupation with khwam pen thai appeared largely rhetorical, the conjuring up of an edifying mythical village past as a testimony to his own patriotism.

For all his talk of 'Thai-ness', Chamlong himself is entirely of Chinese extraction, and his father was born in China. In this respect, Chamlong was typical of those social reformers that Niels Mulder says 'wanted to improve upon Thai culture, even though they are only one or two generations removed from their Chinese origins,' among whom Mulder includes

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55 Interview with Major-General Chamlong Srimuang, 29 October 1991.
Buddhadasa, Photirak, Puey Ungphakorn, and Sulak Sivaraksa. Like fresh converts to Islam or Catholicism, these Chinese-turned-Thais plunged into their new identities with a vengeance, out-doing 'real' Thais in their determination to preserve the values of their adopted country. In his autobiography, *Chivit Chamlong*, Chamlong described his feelings in 1989 when he received, out of the blue, a letter from relatives in China:

This letter reminded me that I should think about my lineage. Actually, I have never forgotten who I am or where I came from. But I have always considered myself to be a Thai. My father died when I was still a baby and so I don't remember anything about him.57

Chamlong's belief in his own Thai-ness may successfully have filled a void left by the death of his father; although Chamlong subsequently attempted to retrace his Chinese 'roots', visiting the country during his Bangkok governorship, his preoccupation with preserving *khwam pen thai* showed no sign of diminishing. For Chamlong, cherishing *khwam pen thai* was not a question of straightforward nationalism, but a matter of resuscitating a dying civilisation, just as Gandhi had sought to revitalise India through the encouragement of tradition such as hand-spinning. Nevertheless, Chamlong's enthusiasm for all things Thai took on the quality of a surrogate nationalism-a bold

57 *Chiwat Chamlong* p. 33. Translation is from *FBIS JPRS-SEA-015* 18 May 1990, p. 2.
emotional allegiance to the culture into which he had been born—one with which the new generations of Bangkok Sino-Thais could readily identify.

ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO DEVELOPMENT: THE 'COMMUNITY CULTURE SCHOOL OF THOUGHT'

Chatthip Nartsupha identified what he called the 'community culture school of thought' (wathanatham chumchon) as the dominant intellectual approach of Thai non-governmental organisations: the school has exerted considerable influence among students and academics, especially those working in the development field.58 A similar approach to development could be seen in many other countries, both in Asia and beyond. Chatthip described the approach by examining the thought of four intellectuals associated with the ideas of community culture: Father Niphon Thianwihan, a Catholic priest whom Chatthip considered the 'originator' of the school of thought; Bamrung Bunpanya, 'the first development worker outside the Catholic organisations to think about community culture';59 Apichat Tho'ngyu, a Catholic ex-schoolteacher and prominent NGO activist; and Prawet Wasi, a well-known doctor, who had developed an anti-state, Buddhist political philosophy based upon the principles of community culture.

Chatthip reduced Father Niphot's theories to two essential points: every community has its own culture, and this culture values people and harmonious co-existence:

58 Chatthip, op. cit., p. 118.
59 Ibid, pp. 120-21.
A community has its own culture, that is to say a value system which has been assembled through time as a summary of the ideas and practices of the community. It is the way of life and the direction of development which the villagers themselves have evolved. The core of this community culture is the importance it places upon human beings and a harmonious community.60

Niphot's view of the community contained many parallels with the Santi Asoke/Chamlong idea of the morally and economically self-sufficient Thai village of the past, a community for which exploitation was an external threat, rather than a constant internal problem. For Niphot, as for Chamlong, the Thai community possessed an indigenous harmony which could be restored through the efforts of its members. Niphot's ideas, however, were truly Catholic—they were not specific either to Buddhist or to Thai communities. Rather, they resembled the argument of James C.Scott that certain moral principles were 'firmly embedded in both the social patterns and injunctions of peasant life.'61 A comparison of Niphot's theories with Chamlong's rhetoric about khwam pen thai shows up the crudities of Chamlong's thought, his populist recourse to overtones of nationalism. Chamlong was quick to congratulate his audience on being

60 Ibid, pp. 119.
61 James C.Scott, The moral economy of the peasant: rebellion and subsistence in Southeast Asia, New Haven: Yale, 1976, p. 167. the principles in question are the norm of reciprocity, and the right to subsistence.
both Thai and Buddhist, appealing to patriotism and religious pride, rather than directly to ideals of community. It was no accident that the name of Chamlong Srimuang, rather than that of Niphot Thianwihan, should have become a household word in Thailand.

The ideas of Bamrung Bunpanya were more pragmatic than those of Niphot: Bamrung emphasised the role of the middle class in promoting and refining community culture, though arguing that whilst the middle class had an important part to play, its members must not monopolise leadership positions in the NGO movement. Bamrung opposed the view that the rise of community culture would lead to the eventual disappearance of the middle class, an opinion held by some purists. Villagers and members of the middle class should form an alliance to oppose the dominant status of capitalist culture, and fight attempts by the state to oppress rural people. Apichat Tho'nyu was primarily concerned with restoring the traditional ethical value system of the Thai community, which he called 'the way of the village.' Apichat saw the village as an 'autonomous society' in its own right. Villagers needed to find solutions to development problems for themselves, by tapping the rich resources of their own culture, which he called 'the forgotten value'. He argued that:

62 Chatthip, pp. 121-22.
The moral-based way of thinking of the villagers has been changed gradually by the domination, and incursion of outside capitalist economy.\(^{64}\)

Apichat's approach did not offer a central role to the middle classes. For all his talk of traditional Thai rural values, Chamlong derived the bulk of his political support from those living in the more complex urban society of Bangkok; his *modus operandi* was closer to that advocated by Bamrung, than to the more idealistic model proposed by Apichat.

The thinking of Dr. Prawet Wasi was firmly antistate: Prawet argued that state institutions were incapable of promoting successful development.\(^{65}\) He favoured a thorough-going process of decentralization, giving local communities control over their own affairs. Prawet advocated the creation of small consciousness-raising groups in local communities, groups which sought to build upon their own 'popular wisdom' by studying 'universal culture'. Ultimately, these groups should be able to assume the power and responsibilities formerly carried out by the state, which will then be dissolved.\(^{66}\) Chatthip characterised Prawet's thought as 'an anarchistic ideology'; certainly, there appear to be numerous parallels between Prawet's vision of a decentralized village-state, and Gandhi's ideal of 'concentric circles' of self-sufficient local communities. Prawet also stressed the importance of Buddhism in development, arguing that

\(^{64}\)Apicaht, p. 70.

\(^{65}\)Chatthip, p. 124.

\(^{66}\)Ibid, p. 125.
development needed to have a strong moral and ethical base. Instead of being a state religion, Buddhism should become the basis of community culture. Prawet was the author of a study of new Buddhist movements, which contained a sympathetic account of Santi Asoke.\(^{67}\) According to Chatthip—who was plainly sympathetic to the 'anarchistic' character of Dr. Prawet's ideas—of the four thinkers he described, Prawet had the least understanding of the realities of village life: 'his proposal is made therefore from the position of a well-wisher from outside the community who is in sympathy with the villagers.'\(^{68}\)

Was Chamlong Srimuang, then, himself a proponent of 'community culture?' Certain of Chamlong's activities, notably the *ran thueng, borisat tao tun*, his involvement with the 'natural farming' movement, and his 'leadership school' – which aimed to train villagers in ethical behaviour—bore a close resemblance to the activities of many NGOs.\(^{69}\) During the political upheavals of May 1992, Chamlong worked closely with leaders from the NGO sector; the links established during this period were strengthened in the months that followed. It could be argued that Chamlong was running a private NGO or two from his house in the Dusit district of Bangkok. Ernst Gohlert, author of a book-length study of the NGO movement, cited Chamlong as a rare example of a figure in Thai governmental circles who shared the concerns of

\[^{67}\text{Prawet Wasi, } \textit{Suan Mok, Dhammakai, Santi Asok}, \text{ Bangkok: Mo'Chao Ban 1987.}\]

\[^{68}\text{Chatthip, p. 126.}\]

\[^{69}\text{For more details of Chamlong's charitable activities, see Chapter 6.}\]

\[^{70}\text{Gohlert, p. 24.}\]
NGOs regarding morality and values. He quotes from a speech of Chamlong's about farmers, alongside a description of Prawet's criticisms of capitalism.

Niels Mulder saw a close parallel between the aversion to traditional politics felt by 'fundamentalist', reform-oriented Southeast Asian religious movements (among which he includes Santi Asoke, and its 'political offshoot', Palang Dhama, and the similar aversion to traditional politics on the part of 'progressive' NGOs To his eye, conservative religious sects and liberal development workers made curious bedfellows. What was more, the same emphasis on 'person-centred ethics' favoured by anti-state groups such as Santi Asoke could be seen in the official teaching of religion in Thai and Indonesian state schools: 'By their promotion of individual ethical behaviour, both camouflage the structure of the economy and the state, while at the same time masking the pressing changes posed to these.' In other words, when Chamlong criticised village leaders for allowing the travelling cinema to impoverish their community, he distracted attention from the real issues of socio-economic change. This narrow analysis actually served the interests of the state. The distinction between state activity and anti-state activity was far from clear-cut. Dr. Prawet Wasi, for all his links with the NGO movement, was a highly-respected figure in Thailand, with access to the highest levels of government. Chamlong Srimuang.

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71 Gohlert, pp. 150-51.
72 Mulder, p. 121.
73 Ibid.
though drawing freely upon the ideas of community culture, had also operated extensively through conventional institutions such as the military, the BMA, his political party, and the Thai parliament. In his recourse to the rhetoric of *khwam pen thai*, Chamlong simply reduced the ideal of local self-sufficiency implicit in community culture to its lowest common denominator. In doing so, he converted community culture from a middle-class intellectual construct, into a product intended for mass dissemination and consumption.

**CONCLUSION**

It is sorely tempting to argue that Chamlong had no ideology, simply ideas, and woolly ones at that. Writing about Palang Dhama Niels Mulder said:

> Its theme-rather than programme-that
> the wellsprings of an orderly society are
> located in ethical behaviour, is more traditional than progressive.\(^7^4\)

Three sources for Chamlong's favourite themes have been identified: the social principles of Santi Asoke, a form of Buddhist economics which has been analysed in depth by Sunai Setboonsarng, the philosopher in Chamlong's court; the political thought of Gandhi, with its emphasis upon indigenous civilisation, enthusiasm for the village, and belief in the unsustainability of modernity; and the 'community culture school of thought' which underpins the NGO

\(^{74}\) Mulder, p. 160.
movement now so important in Thailand, and elsewhere in South East Asia.

To argue that the many ambiguities in Chamlong's thought disqualify it from the epithet 'ideology' is to make a problematic distinction. As one writer has noted:

Ideology by its very nature is often archaic, inconsistent and nostalgic. The example of Nazi ideology with its confused amalgam of mysticism, transcendent nature and industrial efficiency is a powerful reminder of the volatility of such constructs. Ideologies do not necessarily have to conform to a particular mode of production such as agrarian or industrial.\footnote{Christopher Brookeman, \textit{American culture and society since the 1930s}, New York: Schocken Books, 1984, p. 7.}

Inconsistent, archic and nostalgic though they may have been, the recurrent themes of Chamlong Srimuang's political rhetoric depicted the woes of Bangkok in a way which hundreds of thousands of Thai voters found highly persuasive. It could be argued that despite their inconsistencies, these themes did amount to a potential blueprint for an alternative political future. Such a future might be based upon a slow-down of growth in the Thai economy, an emphasis upon rural development funded by the taxation of luxury goods, the decentralization of power by transferring responsibilities from Bangkok-based ministries to elected local authorities, a
resurgence of cultural nationalism, and the introduction of community-based public welfare programmes. Yet Chamlong himself conspicuously failed to propound such a model. Rather, he declined to put forth a radical programme which might alienate political support from moderates and business interests. It is for this reason that, unlike Gandhi, Chamlong is far more likely to be remembered as a political actor than as a political thinker.