

## **Reflection of Confucianism, Hinduism, and Buddhism on Gender Relations and Gender Specific Occupation in Thai Society**

*Mona Shrestha\**

*Karl E. Weber\**

### **Confucianism and Chinese Influence**

The history of Tai<sup>1</sup> people shows strong Chinese affiliation. The Tai were relative newcomers to Southeast Asia. They had long been settled in what is now South China, in the provinces of Kwangtung, Kwangsi and Kweichow, where many of their descendants are still living (Mote 1964, 66). This theory refutes with the European Sinologists, according to whom the Tai of Siam originated in the kingdom of Nan-chao in Yun-nan. Some began spreading westward into Tongking, and later into Laos, before the Christian era started. Around the eleventh century some began moving westward and southwestward into Siam, bringing with them their ancient traditions, their tribal organization and their animist religion.

There are hardly any proper records or chronicles rendering evidence of role and status of women prior to the Sukothai period (1250-1350). Taking into account the prevailing practice of matrilocal residence, especially among rural people, it appears that this is a traditional practice which has still been followed. This practice can be understood as traditional, because residence patterns of the neolocal or patrilocal type are mainly found in urban areas, developed in the process of modernization. The patrilocal system developed through the influence of Chinese Confucian ideology with the influx of Chinese immigrants.

Confucius, a great Chinese Philosopher (around 551-479 B.C.) in his ethical teaching emphasizes devotion to parents, ancestor worship and the maintenance of justice and peace. His teaching was very gender biased, with low opinion about women, and practiced by his followers. According to him women should be always obedient and dependent on men. In his marriage manual he wrote:

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\* Human Settlements Development Program, School of Environment, Resources and Development, Asian Institute of Technology, G.P.O. Box 2754, Bangkok 10501

"Even though you sleep intimately in the same bed and use the same cover with him, you must treat your husband as if he were your king or your father." (Nha Trang 1973, 170).

A woman was expected to be like a child having unconditional obedience to her father, after marrying as wife her obedience transfers to her husband and in case of death of her husband to her eldest son. Upper-class Confucian proverb urged women to place their chastity above any concern for their own pleasure, which says 'chastity' is worth a thousand gold coins' (Eisen 1984, 16). Confucian dogma also barred women from attaining the position of a mandarin, a high ranking official of the Chinese empire.

Hence, it can be observed that there is virtually no matrilineal system in urban areas of Central Thailand especially Bangkok, where Chinese or Sino-Thai people have prospered in commerce, trade, banking or the professions. They have managed to retain their culture by adopting Thai customs.

Evidence of the existence of a matrilocal system is provided in the studies of Limanonda (1977), Podhisita (1984) and Sunthornphaesatra (1968). Limanonda found the matrilocality of families highest in the Northeast (72%) then in the North 57% in the central plain 35% and in the South 29%. In every region the urban area had patrilocal residence (Limanonda 1977). Podhisita and Limanonda reported that in the Northeast, son and daughter had equal right to inheritance. However, in practice daughters got a bigger share of land since their brothers would go and live with their wives, sometimes at faraway villages (Boonsue 1992).

The existence of the matrilineal system leading to women's higher status depicts a very egalitarian village kinship system at its base. Until Sukothai and Ayudhaya appeared in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, states were not consolidated in Thailand, which had relatively weak political structures. Due to lack of a consolidated landlord-feudal intermediary, these political structures barely exploited the egalitarian base village communities. This system is described as early class society. However, as a class-state society developed which instituted patriarchy Thai women were exploited, (Omvedt 1986).

Hundreds of thousands of Chinese migrated to Thailand since the mid-nineteenth century till the outbreak of world war II. The Chinese immigrants settled permanently and assimilated to Thai culture to a remarkable extent. There are several factors which enabled the Chinese immigrants to assimilate well into Thailand, among which the two important ones are the necessity of learning the Thai language and the openness of Buddhist religion.

Unlike many other colonized countries where French, Dutch or English had to be learned, in Thailand, which never got colonized, Thai language remained the predominant and only means of communication. The immigrant Chinese had to learn Thai to communicate with the elites. Thai language was to be the primary language of instruction in all schools, even those run by Christians as well as Chinese, when a compulsory system of education was introduced in the 1920s and 1930s (Keyes 1989, 133).

The openness of Theravada Buddhism let Chinese become Buddhist without having to abandon their religious practice. Their religious practice included ancestor worship and the social practices strongly influenced by Confucian ideology. Skinner (1957) wrote that most third-generation descendants of Chinese migrants had "become Thai" in that they were Thai citizens with Thai names, spoke Thai as their primary language, and professed adherence to the Thai form of Buddhism (Skinner, 1957).

Though Chinese have assimilated themselves and become 'Thai', there are Chinese who became 'Sino-Thai' and there are areas and shops in Bangkok where still Chinese language is spoken and Chinese customs can be observed. These Sino-Thai people still recognize their link with their Chinese past. As already discussed Chinese customs are very much influenced by the teaching of Confucians, the Sino-Thai give greater importance to kinship, especially patrilineal ones.

### **Patron - Clientship : An Entry Point of Chinese Influence**

Thai society has been described by entourage or patron-client relations. This concept is still being applied to describe Thailand as a society with a vague, shifting, unstable structure. However, bonds between patron and clients usually vary from one entourage to the next, and are strong and lasting as a matter of principle (Komin 1991).

Throughout the history of mainland Southeast Asia the need for manpower remained an important feature of society. This was illustrated by the events following each war between Thailand and her neighbors, the victorious side always carrying off large numbers of people from the conquered country. By the early Bangkok period the core of the Thai Kingdom was well endowed with fertile land, but its population remained small and relative mobile. Mobilization and control of manpower was the crucial problems in establishing a viable kingdom.

Manpower is needed not only to cultivate land but to fill the ranks of the military. Hence, the organizational system was developed which required everyone to register under a *nai* (master) who was a prince and noble man. Persons registered under a *nai* were known as *phrai*, who were mostly ordinary peasants. Later *phrai* were distinguished to two types, *phrai som* and *phrai luang*. *Phrai som* were part of the property of an individual *nai* and *phrai luang* belonged to the king in theory. *Phrai luang* were obliged to do corvee (the enforced and unpaid labour of a peasant for his feudal lord), called *ratchakan* (royal service), for six months of each year, and it was the responsibility of their *nai* to produce them for this purpose (Rabibhadana 1975, 96). A subset of *phrai luang* known as *phrai suai* supplied fixed amounts of products each year in lieu of corvee (Damrong 1959, 12).

In a patron-client relationship to please the superior and gain benefit, women had been used as commodities. A noble, rising high, normally gave at least one daughter to the king to serve in the royal palace or as a royal concubine. King Mongkut had remarked,

..... women given to the kings were so numerous that the king could remember neither the faces nor the names of the great majority. (Mongkut 1960-61, 125-127 as quoted by Rabibhadana, 1975:113)

Sons were also given to become royal pages, through the *thawai tua*, which means to give oneself to the king. Two classes of clientship can be observed, lower class clients are *phrai* (clients to a *nai*) and upper class clients are *nai* (clients to the king).

Besides formal clientship, informal clientship began to emerge during the reign of Rama III (1824-1851), due to increase in international trade, the influx of Chinese immigrants with its consequences for corvee and internal trade, and taxation reform.

Informal clientship also developed between different classes. If a *phrai luang* could not get along with his *nai* he would seek to become the client of another *nai* who was in higher rank than his established master. This could create a difficult position to his master. (Rabibhadana 1975). In both kinds of formal and informal patron-clientship the direct involvement is that of men and wives and families followed their patrons.

The existence of a 'patron client relationship' in Thailand has enabled Chinese immigrants to gradually gain higher status in society. A patron client relationship developed between Chinese immigrants and members of the *nai* class. This was associated with the form of tax farming that came into wide use during the reign of Rama III. Their business often involved Chinese tax collectors in litigation. For this reason they had to be made nobles, for only a person of *Sakdina* 400 (see table in page 36) and above could be represented in the courts of justice by another person (Damrong 1959:29-30 referred by Rabibhadana 1975:116). From minor positions as tax collectors with the rank of *khun* or *luang*, a number of Chinese became Thai and climbed up to such positions as township governors (Rabibhadana 1969, 136, 162-165; Skinner 1957, 148-154). Apart from paying the yearly contracted fee to the government, a tax farmer paid various sums each year to other high nobles and princes (Mongkut 1960-1961, 10-15 referred by Rabibhadana 1975, 117).

Chinese immigrants were desirable clients because, as successful traders, they could afford large gifts. *Phrai* by contrast, found it difficult to accumulate wealth. Restrictions on their movement meant that they could not engage in trade. And a *phrai* could not labour for wages without the consent of his *nai*. Thus, these two occupations were left open to the Chinese immigrants, who were exempted from corvee and from obligation to register under a *nai* (Skinner 1957, 96-97). After accumulating a certain amount of wealth, they then sought a patron in the upper class, often as a step toward eventual status as Thai nobles. There was expansion of inter-regional trade and by 1850 the Chinese were found to have gained almost complete control of this trade (Ingram, 1971, 19). It could be observed that control of manpower brought not only wealth but also political power. It is interesting to note that even after the abolition of

the corvee system, Chinese and other non-Thai ethnic groups dominated the Thai economy. Very few Thai seem to have taken advantage of opportunities in the expanding economy; most of them increased their involvement in agriculture. The reason behind it may be as assumed by Kirsch (1975, that Thai people were rarely attracted to the roles of businessman or merchant, or even to wage labour, hence non-Thai, particularly Chinese carried out these economic functions (Kirsch 1975, 173).

### Yot, Status, and Sakdina

		Sakdina
King		Infinite
Upparat	Chao (prince)	100,000
Chaola (royal sibling)		
with krom rank	Chao	50,000
Chaola (royal offspring) with krom rank	Chao	40,000
Somdetchaophraya	Khunnang (noble)	30,000
Chaola (royal sibling) without krom rank	Chao	20,000
Chaola (royal offspring) without krom rank	Chao	15,000
Phra-ongchao (royal sibling or offspring) with krom rank	Chao	15,000
Phra-ongchao (royal nephew/niece or grandchild) with krom rank	Chao	11,000
Chaophraya	Khunnang	3,000-10,000
Phraya	Khunnage	1,000-10,000
Phra-ongchao without krom rank	Chao	4,000-7,000
Phra	Khunnang	1,000-5,000
Luang	Khunnang	800-3,000
Momchao	Chao	1,500
Mom (achieved rank for royal relative)	(Chao)	800-1,000
Khun	Khunnang or phrai (commoner)	200-1,000
Much	Khunnang or phrai	200-800
Momratchawong	(Chao)	500
Phan	Khunnang or phrai	100-400
Petty official in the provinces	Phrai	100-300
Commoner with family	Phrai	20-25
Unmarried commoner	Phrai	15
Destitute commoner	Phrai	5
Slave	That	5

Source: Rabibhadana 1975, 124

The pattern of foreign involvement in the Thai economy was not really accidental, rather, it was actually promoted by official Thai policy; though Thai were not discouraged from new economic opportunities, Chinese involvement in the economy was encouraged (Ingram 1971). However, throughout the twentieth century official Thai policy underwent changes, legislation was aimed at limiting foreign influence or foreign control and the increasing Thai-ification of the economy took its course.

### **Hinduism and Indian Influence** **Legitimization of Sovereignty and Aristocracy as Guidelines** **from Hinduism**

From the seventh to the tenth century the Mons had constituted the ruling classes of the Hinduized Indianized kingdom of Dvaravati in Central Siam. At that time Theravada Buddhism was predominant in Central Siam though Brahminical cults lent their luster to royalty (Griswold and Nagara 1975, 34). The Mon aristocracy had been highly influenced by Khmer culture. The Khmers were gradually encroaching the territory of the eastern Mons and by the year 1000 much of the Dvaravati kingdom fell into the hands of the Khmers. The Khmers population grew and the tendency of Khmerization increased. The Khmers of present Cambodia, especially from its capital Angkor were predominantly influenced by Brahminical religion.

In the Angkor period a modified version of the Indian caste system prevailed among the Khmers. *Brahmans and katriyas* formed the aristocracy, and the king was worshipped as a god. There was a highly centralized bureaucracy, princes held high posts and collected taxes, and there existed a corvee system. There was no fixed body of civil law; the king decided each case on its own merits, using the Hindu *Dharmasastra* as a general guide (Lingat 1950, 1951 as referred by Griswold and Nagara 1975, 35). According to traditional belief, the *Dharma*, the natural law of the universe was revealed to Manu, who revealed it to other sages. Then *Dharmasastra* was created as an abridged version of this *Dharma*. It was a duty of kings to study the dharmasastra and rule accordingly, which was followed by Indian or Khmer kings, which made Manu the sole legislator. In terms of gender relations the teaching of Manu has obviously made women's status inferior.

Manu's Dharmasastra is the standard and most authoritative work on Hindu law and presents the normal form of Hindu society and civilization. In Manu's view women should be always dependent on men, and they should be kept safe and looked after with utmost care and vigilance. Manu's conception of woman as a weaker sex who can be lured, looked in different point of view by Bhargava suggests that it ultimately reflects the evil of man, his ability of sexual exploitation and authoritarianism (Bhargava 1989, 54). Manu did say that woman is complementary to man and he is incomplete without woman and cannot perform any religious rites and practices without the wife. However, he regards woman to be morally low creature, who is not eligible to study Vedas nor use the Mantras in performing her sacraments, except marriage; he has grouped women with idiots, invalids, animals, barbarians and very aged men (Bhargava 1989, 57).

Sukhodaya (Sukothai) before 1250 and Ayudhya (Ayuthaya) in 1351 were founded by Tai lords, who assumed supremacy over territories which were previously controlled by the Khmer. These had introduced their own Indianizing cultures there, much of which were adopted by the Tai. However, Sukhodaya being a distant outpost of the Khmer empire remained conspicuously Tai, and in Ayudhya Tai heritage was weakened where Khmer and Mon institutions had long been solidly implanted.

A certain element of Hinduism still remains in the Thai society. Kings of Siam have followed kings of Angkor as model, since the fifteenth century adhering to a Brahministic set of rituals. These rituals are observed even in the modern period, with King Chulalongkorn having resurrected a number of those which had previously all but disappeared (Wales 1931 as referred by Keyes 1989, 31). Some of the rituals are followed even by the present monarch, Rama IX (since 1946). These rituals were meaningful to the kings and those closely associated with their courts. However, the legitimacy of monarchs rested on Theravada Buddhist conception of kingship.

Though Theravada Buddhism has been basic to the understanding of life by Thai people, it is found that some elements of Hinduism have been blended into Thai society. This influence of Hinduism and Indianization has been further enabled to retain and blend with the Indians immigrating to Thailand. Since the mid-nineteenth to the outbreak of the second world war, at the same time as the Chinese, some Indians came into this country. Most of them found jobs in trades, especially textile trade and have settled in urban centers like Bangkok and Chiangmai. However, all those immigrants were not Hindus, some were Sikh and Muslims.



### Adoption of Theravada Buddhism

The Tai people who first came to settle in Thailand followed animistic religion and believed in spirits (*phi*) of various types and soul (*khwan*). These Tai came to know about other religious ideas through contacts with Mon and Khmer. The Buddhism of Mon and Hinduism of Khmer were based on Indian cosmology, according to which the world needs to be attuned and harmonized with the cosmic order, for the satisfaction of people. Hence, in medieval civilization of Southeast Asia, kings erected monumental edifices representing the cosmos to bring harmony with the cosmic order.

The idea of Hindu-Buddhist cosmology was adopted by Tai people from their neighbours, when they developed their own independent states. During the Sukhothai period the rulers assumed patronage of the *sangha*, the Buddhist clergy and also the Brahmins (Keyes, 1989). At the same time there was a religious revolution, resulting fundamental changes in the religious traditions of mainland Southeast Asia. From the thirteenth to the fifteenth century Theravada Buddhism became predominant. 'Thera' in Pali and Thai means "elders" and Theravada means "the way of elders", which is different in several aspects from 'Mahayana' which means "the great vehicle". Mahayana Buddhism recognizes *bodhisattvas* (Buddhas-to-be) but Theravada gives little attention to it. Theravada has attempted to reproduce teachings of Buddha, *dhamma* (way of salvation) from generation to generation ever since the elders recited them. The center of Theravada Buddhism is in Sri Lanka, where some monks visited and upon their return brought major changes. They converted kings and their courtiers and established the Buddhist order, '*sangha*' throughout the area as well.

Tai people continued their belief in Hindu-Buddhist cosmology, but also started accepting the Theravadian idea that the cosmos is subject to change. However, the Tai came to make the human actor rather than cosmic order the central focus of religious thought (Keyes 1989). They believed that individual's positive action would bring "merit" (*bun*) in life and the reverse would bring 'demerit' (*bap*).

Buddhism had emerged as an alternative to Brahminism for spiritual salvation and spiritual protest against hierarchic system of Confucianism. In Thailand Buddhism was introduced in form of Theravada Buddhism during the Sukhothai period. Buddhism remained the important religion during the Ayudhaya period, too, though the ruling class had adopted Brahminism to legitimize their power. Buddhism in the Bangkok era

has become very influential and has even become identical with nation and monarch. This religion, assumed to have been egalitarian, still has placed women in lower position.

There is a widely held assumption among western as well as Thai scholars that Buddhism is an egalitarian religion. This assumption can be seen in the writings of different authors, for example Buddhism provides significant spiritual freedom for women compared with Brahminism (Boonsue, 1989).

Looking at the socio-political fact we understand that Buddha was born into a Hindu society, where his consciousness and philosophy was formed. The society he was born in was gender oppressive. In his teaching he has transformed some social elements of gender discrimination, which may have been unconsciously expressed. Buddha himself gave rise to hierarchy (Boonsue, 1989). According to the religious achievement, women were ranked in the lowest level as prevailing in the Hindu social institutions. The view of female component as imperfect and male component as sacredness is made explicit in the dialogue between Buddha and Ananda:

Ananda: How are we to behave towards women?  
 Buddha: Do not look at them.  
 Ananda: But if we have to see them, what shall we do?  
 Buddha: Do not talk to them.  
 Ananda: But if they speak to us, what shall we do then?  
 Buddha: Keep wide awake.

(Digha Nikaya, 2:141 quoted by Pavinder, 1980, as quoted by Boonsue, 1989:41).

In the earlier development of Buddhism both men and women could be ordained. However *Bhikkhuni* (female Buddhist monk) had to adhere to 311 rules of disciplines, whereas *Bhikku* (male Buddhist monk) had to observe only 227; under the eight chief rules a *Bhikkhuni* of hundred years standing must salute a *Bhikku* even if the latter was ordained the day before (Vinaya vol.2, 255-256 as quoted by Talim 1972: 17). In Thai society, *Bhikkhuni* do not exist and women can become *mae chi* (Buddhist nun) only. Their role in a monastery is subservient, and they perform mainly the household chores (Boonsue 1989).

Gradually, Tai became adherents of Theravada Buddhism, but they did not abandon their belief in spirits and cosmic order. However, these beliefs became subordinated to the Theravadian doctrine.

It is important to discuss the *sangha* here, since the *sangha* became the central religious institution in Buddhism. The members of the *sangha* committed themselves to the study and use of the texts that contained the Buddhist *dhamma*. The members of the *sangha* were not drawn only from nobility, most of them rather came from rural villages. In Theravada Buddhism only men became member of the *sangha* and the ideal was that every male should spend a period of time as a member of the *sangha*. Until this modern day, the practice of boys becoming novices (*nen*) for a period of time is prevalent. Novices learnt to read and write Buddhist texts, which made for a high rate of male literacy, especially during pre-modern days when compulsory education had not been introduced yet. The time spent as novice or monk is given high recognition. To instill moral sense, the Thai government today permits male government civil servants to take leave for a lenten period of three months with full pay if they are ordained and spend the time in the monkhood (Keyes 1989). It is rather surprising that men can get three months full-pay leave to be ordained for individual merit, albeit only once in a lifetime, whereas women get only 45 days full pay maternity leave for the procreation of future human power for society and the state itself.

### **Status of Thai Women in Different Periods of Thai History**

#### **Sukothai Period (1250-1350)**

Some recorded events during the different periods have been analyzed to see the Tai women's position and gender relations in the Tai society. Sukhodhayan society was dominated by an aristocracy as in Khmer society but there was closer contact between aristocrats and people. King Ramkhamhaeng of Sukothai taught *dharma* which was not of the *Dharmasastra* but of the Theravada doctrine as a whole. He had never regarded himself as God, which is evident from his inscriptions. However, he probably had a body of Brahmans as advisors attached to his court like most Southeast Asian monarchs, whether Hindu or Buddhist.

King Lodaiya, King Ramkhamhaeng's son and successor was a fervent Buddhist and also a patron of the Hindu cults, and the Brahminical tradition at

Sukhodaya seems to have been strengthened during his reign by influences from South India (Filliozat 1965:241ff. as referred by Griswold and Nagara 1975:49). These items of evidence show that there was Indian influence to some extent during the Sukothai era also. Manu's teaching had influenced Angkorian Khmer culture which had penetrated to some extent in to the Sukothai period, too.

The history of Thai women can be traced back to the Sukothai period (1250-1350). However, there are not many studies on women in the past to know their actual status then. Some believe that this period is supposed to have has enlightened attitudes towards women in Thai society, when women were very well respected. According to Suvannathat (1989) the roles of women and men were distinct but complementary and wives were treated as real companions to their husbands (Suvannathat 1989:285).

There is a belief that the status of women in the Sukothai era was not inferior to men, as women played a greater role in the family in terms of authority and control over property of the family. There are other views which contradict such assumption.

The first woman whose name had been recorded in the history is "Nang Serng" whose name was mentioned by King Ramkhamhaeng. She was his mother and the wife of King Indraditya, founder of the first Thai state. Griswold and Nagara (1975) have quoted King Ramkhamhaeng, however, they had not made women's status explicit. In his inscription of 1292, King Ramkhamhaeng had the following stated:

..... I served my father and I served my mother. When I caught any game or fish I brought them to my father. When I picked any acid or sweet fruits that were delicious and good to eat, I brought them to my father. (Ramkhamhaeng 1292 as quoted by Griswold and Nagara 1975:43).

The very fact that he gave everything he found to his father, as a show of respect, shows some lower priority position of women. The above quote also reflects the bestowing of authority on the father, which is an indication of a patriarchal society. Again, it is difficult to generalize by a single case of evidence, yet there are no other pieces of recorded evidence to discuss in more detail about the situation.

Women's inferior role in gender relations can be traced in some of the chronicles. Griswold and Nagara (1975) wrote that the aristocracy in Sukhodaya lived in a much less rarefied atmosphere and in closer contact with the people than in the following Ayudhaya era. The king prided himself of the prosperity of his land, on the large degree of liberty he granted his subjects, and on their freedom from unjust taxes and arbitrary confiscations. King Ramkhamhaeng had related in an inscription that

..... whoever wants to trade in horses, does so; whoever wants to trade in silver or gold, does so. When any commoner or man of rank dies, his estate-his elephants, wives, children, granaries, rice, retainers, and groves of areca and betel-is left in its entirety to his heirs. (Griswold and Nagara 1971, 205-207).

It shows that the liberty granted by the king is mainly to men as his subjects. Men have been regarded to have authority. The above quotation shows women and children being grouped together with granaries, rice, retainers, groves of areca and betel, which clearly indicates women's weak position in gender relations. They had been treated as commodities. Hence, it is rather difficult to accept the view that the Sukothai period was very gender egalitarian. The patriarchal system was very influential during that period also.

#### **Ayudhaya Period (1350-1767)**

Compared to Sukothai, Ayudhaya is less Tai. As discussed earlier, since the time of Dvaravati, Mons had been predominant and Tai had been a minor population. It was ruled by Khmer viceroys and independent kings, who also were highly influenced by the Khmer. *Brahman* were more influential, and the Hindu cults shared the general honour without being rival to Theravada Buddhism. According to Griswold and Nagara (1975), probably the social organization of Ayudhaya in the fourteenth century was similar to that of the seventeenth century.

There is a general belief that the status of Thai women declined during the Ayudhaya period (1350-1767). During this period a law was enacted to prohibit Thai women from marrying foreigners. The practice of polygamy was legalized, and wives were divided into different categories, according to a law enacted in 1361 about "Husbands and Wives" (National Council of Women in Thailand 1974, 104).

Husbands were also given power to inflict corporal punishment on their wives (Suvannathat 1989, 285). It shows that women were treated as sex objects, and the primary role of women was to entertain and give pleasure to men.

*Sakdina* was already in effect during this period. Everyone in the kingdom had a specified number of "dignity marks" depending on his rank and on his position, if any, in the government (Griswold and Nagara 1975, 71). Here it would be useful to discuss about *Sakdina*. The *sakdina* system was a common standard developed for ranking all the people within the kingdom, conceptualized during the Ayudhaya period under King Trailok. Literally the Thai term '*na*' means 'rice field' and '*sakdi*' is Sanskrit derived term '*sakti*' which means 'power' or 'energy' especially of a female deity. The Siamese phrase, *sakdina*, has typically been translated as:

... degrees of dignity or rank expressed by numbers, giving the right to rule over certain grants of land. (McFarland 1944, 792).

There has been a controversy about the concept of *sakdina*. Some scholars recognized this system as 'feudal' and later on, others identified the concept as the manifestation of 'authoritarian rule' and 'exploitative relations of production'. Nevertheless, ideologically, *sakdina* implies the power in the hands of the monarch (Keyes 1983, 31). *Sakdina* was given to others but only by an act of the king. *Na* was granted to a particular person (lord) and his descendants, yet it remained a portion of the total land of the kingdom. Hence, the king alone became the ultimate owner (*chao*). Kings were entitled to the surplus product of *phrai* and had the right to levy demands for taxes and corvee or conscripted labour.

Unlike the practice of the historical Tai, the systematic distribution of land to the general population had been discontinued. However, the number of dignity marks still corresponded to the number of *rai* of land a person was theoretically entitled to (see Table above). The number of *rai* of land ranged from 5 for the humblest citizen to 10,000 for the highest officials and 20,000 for the highest princes (Griswold and Nagara 1975, 71). Fines and punishments were proportional to the status of the individual involved (Wyatt 1984, 73). It is interesting to note how the land had been entitled to women.

A major wife was considered to have half the number her husband had; a minor wife, one-quarter; and a slave who bore him children, one-eighth. (Griswold and Nagara 1975, 72).

It can be observed that entitlement of land for women starts from half the amount of men. In the stratified positions of women the entitlement decreases according to the status. This is clear evidence, which shows women's weak position during this period. In terms of gender relations it reflects women's dependency on men. Women's weak position did prevail during this period, however, due to the corvée system under which men were recruited for annual service to the king, women took over both work at their household and in the field, making women's role in the economy strong.

There are records of evidence that women of the royal family played a military role, which implies that they were not restricted to traditional roles. Women from the aristocracy and high classes were not involved in economic activities, which was regarded as a privilege, whereas women from poor families were actively involved in production. Hence, women had different status according to stratification of their hierarchical position. Women's economic involvement was attached with lower status. Women, once having assumed higher status, did not have any economic responsibility.

#### **Ratanakosin Period (since 1782)**

In 1767, the Burmese invaded Siam, and made the state fall into turmoil for one decade. In 1776 Taksin, a half-Chinese former general reunited the kingdom. He made Thonburi his capital. Taksin claimed himself to be *bodhisattava*, whereupon a group of officials staged coup and placed a military leader, *Chakri* on the throne in 1782, who founded the *Chakri* dynasty. He moved his capital to Bangkok. This era up to the present is known as the *Ratanakosin* period the era of the Emerald Buddha.

During this period there have been changes in attitude towards women which led to some reforms. However, in the early *Ratanakosin* period women's status was not improved. Women were regarded as cattle or the property of their husbands and could be sold at any time according to the three seal law (*tra sam duang*) of 1805 (Tanchainan 1985, 33). This law was introduced by Rama I (1782-1809). Manudharmasatva was

revived as the basic legal code called the three seal law. Furthermore, women had to be under the protection of men at every stage of their life.

The practice of selling wives by husbands was abolished by King Rama IV (King Mongkut). Women were also given opportunities to make their choice for marriage (Suvannathat 1989, 286). Suvannathat provided just a brief description showing the positive aspect or reform of this period. However, though reforms were introduced they did not seem to be effective in practice. During the reign of King Mongkut, according to Wyatt (1984) the ministries and departments of government were probably less subject to royal authority than they had been a half-century earlier (Wyatt 1984, 187). King Mongkut was well aware of the limits of his power; he tried though with limited success to ameliorate the condition of slaves and allow women some choice in marriage (Wyatt 1984, 187). Although the reforms were hardly effective, they initiated some changes later on and facilitated the changing of the status of women. King Rama IV (1851-1868) was of the opinion that the status of women reflects the prosperity of the country.

Abolition of slavery by Rama V King Chulalongkorn (1868-1910) is thought to have improved the status of women as well. During the reign of Rama V, Buddhism as state religion was used intensively for national integration. He introduced the Sangha Administration Act in 1902, which incorporated all monks into a national structure. The monks were bestowed with hierarchical power. The monks also adhered to the law of the *sangha*, state and local custom, which made sangha come under control of the state. In 1962, a new Sangha Administration Act was promulgated which made the *sangha* highly centralized and made the supreme patriarch powerful. The important role played by the *sangha* in the Thai socio-political system itself reflects the gender discrimination in society, since women cannot become members of the sangha.

Rama VI King Vajiravudh (1910-1925) introduced compulsory education regardless of sex; and the King himself set an example of monogamy instead of the traditional practice of polygamy (Suvannathat 1989, 286). Monogamy was legalized by King Rama VII (1925-1935) in 1935 A.D. by introducing the law of monogamy.

After the country changed its form of government to constitutional monarchy in 1932, both men and women were granted equal rights to vote as stated in first



election law enacted in 1932. The Thai constitution of 1974 (in section 28) explicitly states that men and women have equal rights; as a result, several laws discriminating against women have been repealed, such as the Ministry of Interior Regulations prohibiting women from becoming public prosecutors, and the Ministry of Justice Regulations prohibiting women from becoming judges (Jamnarnvej 1974).

In spite of all these reforms, there are still laws barring women from attaining certain rights. According to Suvannathat, one of the more controversial issues in recent years has been abortion, which is regarded to be illegal. There are laws barring women from some civil service and political positions, from entering military and police academies, and from divorcing their husbands on grounds of adultery, even though men may claim divorce on these grounds (Thomson 1990, 5). Exploitation of women seems to continue due to laxity of enforcement of laws pertaining to employment and prostitution (Thomson et al. 1988).

Though Thai women have typically managed the household budget, they were expected to be submissive to men; in Thailand's ever-modernizing society these expectations conflict with the emerging opportunities for women in higher-level government positions and the wider economy (Richter 1992, 98). At present, since most or all household income is earned outside of the family, the household has ceased to be the primary unit of production, which has eroded women's power within the household.

At present, due to land scarcity daughters are provided with education as an inheritance rather than house and land, which was traditional practice, particularly for the youngest daughter. However, many times young women may leave school early if they find attractive jobs in industries or service sectors, but it is unclear whether these jobs provide sufficient support for lifetime. This also indicates a change in the matrilineal system.

### **Women in the Thai Economy**

There has always been some degree of active involvement of Thai people in the economy, and since the nineteenth century there is recorded evidence, though according to Kirsch (1975) the Thai were not generally attracted to business oriented entrepreneurial or commercial roles. Notably those who do get involved nowadays in

such activities are, to a disproportionately large extent, women. There had been, in historical times occasional references by foreign visitors to the role of Thai women being involved in the economy, which indicates that this pattern has a long history. Some of the observations made by different writers at different times, according to Kirsch, include references by La Loubere 1693:50, Gervaise 1690:37, 52 and Benedict 1952:3.

Skinner reworked the census statistics of 1947 and the 1952 registration statistics and presented a model of stratification in Bangkok which indicates "the Chinese preference for commerce and finance, and industrial and artisan occupations" (Skinner 1957, 302, as referred by Kirsch 1975, 175). The census recorded numerous Thai men and women involved in a wide variety of occupations as well, which showed that as many as three times more women than men were large business owners and managers, market sellers in stalls, hawkers and petty market sellers, and market gardeners (Kirsch 1975, 175). This data supports the observations of early visitors to Siam that Thai women are economically more active than Thai men. Though this data reflected the situation of Ayudhaya and Bangkok, women's active involvement in business has not been confined to urban areas. In rural villages women carry out the bulk of the petty marketing chores and are commonly the controllers of a household's purse strings (de Young 1963, 24, 103 f. as referred by Kirsch 1975, 175).

Skinner's statistics provided further evidence of the occupational specializations of Thai men, which showed their involvement in skilled crafts such as itinerant construction workers; the statistics also showed their overwhelming involvement in a variety of bureaucratic jobs and professional specialties. This clearly indicates that the business domain has been that of women, whereas the bureaucratic or political domain is that of men. This pattern still persists till the present day and is not a unique feature of Thai society. Taking recent data shows that women's participation in the Thai labor force has always been high. It recently comprised nearly half of the economically active employed population 11 years of age and above; also, there are more women than men engaged in commerce and services (Thomson 1990, i). While statistics reveal that Thai females are economically highly active, it is obvious that female workers were largely concentrated in agriculture, manufacturing, commerce and the service industry (Suvannathat 1989, 271).

### Conclusion

#### How Did Any Gender Specific Occupation Emerge in Thai Society?

It can be observed that the elements of Hinduism penetrated through the ruling aristocratic class and that of Confucianism through the business class in the Thai society, both of which legitimized the religious and political spheres to men.

The reason for this pattern to be historically consistent in Thailand may be attributed to Theravada Buddhism as one of the decisive factors, which has a long history and potent influence on the Thai social system since the Thirteenth Century. The symbolic structure of the religious system is understood as having an impact on organizing social activities. As Geertz (1966) puts it that religious systems, particularly in their symbolic and ritual aspects, may serve to induce predispositions and attitudes in religious contexts which influence activities in non-religious contexts as well (Geertz, 1966).

The general pattern displayed in Thai society may be due to the reason that the other-worldly focus of Buddhism generally discourages attempts at economic achievement (Ayal 1963 as referred by Kirsch 1975, 177). The religious factor has further enabled the social pattern of men's and women's specialization in different occupations, by making explicit the ideal that each Thai man should spend at least a portion of his life in the Buddhist monkhood. Hence, Thai men have also specialized in Buddhist ecclesiastical or "religious" roles, since women cannot become monks or members of the *sangha*. Economic roles generally are not popular and tend to be associated with Thai women. Therefore, it is found that Thai men specialize in the political and religious spheres, whereas women specialize in the economic sphere.

Upon ordination a man is elevated from the category of ordinary persons to the category of "mana-filled" monks; hence, any man can get ordained and attain the "mana-filled" class (Kirsch 1975). Thai men are encouraged to achieve the status of *ong* as a monk. However, some Thai men enter the monkhood for a brief period only, and some never do but are still influenced by religious considerations and attracted toward achievement in the "*ong* direction". The *one* category includes not only monks but Buddha images, high-ranking princes and kings (Kirsch 1975, 188). According to Kirsch, the association of the political hierarchy with "*ongness*" invests it with positive effects, which attracts men toward it.

The Buddhist world view emphasizes achievement within a framework of hierarchical differences in moral status. In this context Kirsch provided two very interesting analytical reasons why Thai men specialize in the political sphere and avoid to involve themselves in the economic sphere. First, attitudes and orientations acquired on the basis of differences in religious contexts may induce Thai men to seek out spheres of activity in which "hierarchy" plays a particularly prominent role such as bureaucratic and political positions (Kirsch 1975, 187). Secondly, the general hierarchical element in Buddhist belief may discourage Thai men from taking up economic roles. Participation in market activities, at least marketing which follows western models, would involve a degree of formal status equality between buyer and seller which is not characteristic of Thai social roles. Thai women are left with such economic roles because in religious belief, in the structure of religious roles and rituals, and in popular thought, they are deemed to be more deeply rooted in worldly activities and secular concern than are men (Kirsch 1975, 189). The existence of a hierarchic system and religion in Thai society has been discussed elaborately by Boonsue (for further detail see Boonsue, "Buddhism and Gender Bias: An Analysis of the Jataka Tale" 1989). According to Boonsue (1989) the Thai ethos appears to be highly instrumental in dealing with moral power and hierarchic power where patronage and dependence are in line with the Thai ethos (Boonsue 1989, 47).

It is evident that the pattern of existing gender occupation specialization in Thai society has some historical background, deeply rooted in religion and ideology.

#### Note

1 'Tai' is a cultural and linguistic term used to denote the various Tai people in general sharing a common linguistic and cultural identity which in historic times has gained large number of separate identities. The modern Thai may or may not be descended by blood from the Tai (Wyatt 1984, 1).

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