



The Impact of the Inner Court's Internal Reform on Palace Women during the Reign of King Chulalongkorn

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Abstract

The internal reform that took place in the inner court of Siam during the reign of King Chulalongkorn was motivated by the increase in the number of palace women and rising criticisms of their restricted roles by Westerners. The inferior status of Siamese women as seen in accounts by Western visitors served as the inspiration for the Thai monarchs to transform the inner court. This article aims to demonstrate that the court of King Chulalongkorn's reign underwent a significant reform, which highlights newly defined roles of the inner court women and the emergence of both aristocratic and non-aristocratic women's public roles. Through the analyses of primary accounts, scholarly works, and relevant internet sources, this article argues that the transition of inner court women from the domestic sphere into the public sphere had begun by the end of the nineteenth century as the impact of the palace's new administrative reform. From the senior roles to the female guards, the doors were opened for the first time to inner court women of all classes. The findings demonstrate that palace women enjoyed a certain level of autonomy and had strengthened their training and skills, which contributed to the enhancement of women's status in the subsequent decades. This article emphasises the evidence of women's active roles in the absolutist years that is not represented in Thai official historiography and highlights the beginning of the rise of aristocratic women in the public sphere.

1. Introduction

Contemporary popular Thai history tends to reflect a stereotype of the inner court as merely a space of female domestic lives. The emphasis is placed on a harmonious image of the inner court, in which the space between genders is clearly divided. While previous mainstream publications (The Fine Arts Department, 1979; Pramoj, M.R., 1998; Santiratphakdi, 2004) portrayed the outer court as the male-dominated space and the centre of the administration, the inner court was a reserved domestic space for women and young children. In this domestic sphere, Siamese aristocratic women were restricted, not only from contact with the outside world but also from any male contacts other than the king. With such restricted access, the inner court is represented popular literature as a place of purity and harmony. *Si Phaendin* (Pramoj, M.R., 1998), a classic novel about an aristocratic woman who lived through the four reigns of Siam (Rama V to Rama VIII), is one of the popular novels that promotes this image of the life within the inner court. The novel depicts the lives of women in this domestic space to be equipped with skills and wisdom. Apart from *Si Phaendin*, which dominated the popular market of romantic period fiction when it was first published in the 1960s and 1970s, biographies of consorts in the form of cremation volumes authored by Prince Damrong demonstrate their loyalty to the king and domestic roles (Lysa, 1998). The cremation volume of *Chaochom* Thapthim, a royal consort of King Chulalongkorn, illustrates her qualities of a trained palace woman who possessed domestic skills and etiquette. In this biography, Damrong also praised Thapthim's ability to successfully raise all her three children and to uphold Buddhist moral standards throughout her life (Rajanubhab, H.R.H., 1938). This stereotype of the domestic lives of palace women, as seen in popular Thai fiction and Damrong's cremation volumes, served as part of the harmonious image of the inner court. This article aims to challenge the mainstream-patriarchal concept of the Siamese court by highlighting the overlooked roles of women and their pivotal roles in the administration. These roles will reveal that the transition of inner court women from the domestic sphere into the public sphere had begun already by the end of the nineteenth century as the impact of its administrative reform.

In order to understand the transition of women of the inner court of Bangkok, the physical organisation of the palace is first to be addressed here. The royal palace of Bangkok during the reign of King Chulalongkorn was organised into three major zones.

First, the outer court (*khet phra-ratchathan chan-nork*) housed offices of administration. Second, the central court (*khet phra-ratchathan chan-klang*) served as the residence of the king. Third, the inner court (*khet phra-ratchathan chan-nai*) or *fai nai* was the most restricted area of the royal palace and served as private quarters that housed palace women. The inner court, where queens, princesses, daughters of aristocrats, and other female workers resided, was also known as the Forbidden City, from the fact that no men were allowed inside its walls with the exception of the King and princes below the age of 13 (Santiratphakdi, 2004). While the outer court and central court were reserved spaces for men, the inner court was a space for aristocratic women and their retinues. The precise number of palace women (*nang nai*) who resided in this restricted area during the Fifth reign is unknown. It was estimated to be as high as 3,000 women during the reign of King Chulalongkorn (Loos, 2005, p. 883). Loos used the term 'city' to describe the function of this restricted quarters of the palace. Given the size and the autonomy that these palace women had within the area, which will be elaborated later in this article, I could not agree more with Loos that the term 'inner city' is another appropriate term to describe the function of this restricted area of the inner quarters. Therefore, I will refer to the *fai nai* variously as the 'inner city' and 'inner court' throughout this paper.

Inside the walls of the inner city, buildings and residences were grouped into three zones. Each zone comprised residences and buildings that housed different statuses of palace women. First, the nine northern buildings served as residences for queens, major royal concubines, and daughters of the king and his brothers. For example, the *Tuek* residence (*phra tamnak tuek*) housed Queen consort Sawangwatthana; the *Daeng* residence (*phra tamnak daeng*) housed Queen Sukhumanmarasi; and the *Dara* residence (*tamnak phra ratchachaya chao dararatsami*) was where Queen Dararatsami resided. All nine residences in this northern part of the inner court were renovated in Western style during the reign of King Chulalongkorn with the influence of British and Italian architects (Bunyasatit, 2009). Apart from the queens, the residences in this zone also housed Chulalongkorn's favourite concubines from important families such as *Chaochom* Phae, On, Iem, Oep, Ap, and Euan, of the members of the Bunnag family. This signified the king's intention to maintain a healthy relationship with these powerful families by keeping their presence close to him.

The second zone of the inner court housed princesses and some of the royal concubines. Most of the palace women who resided in this area were of aristocratic backgrounds whose family positions were less significant than those who resided in the northern zone (Bunyasatit, 2009). In addition, this zone also housed concubines of the previous King Mongkut, such as, *Chaochom Wat*, who served as Head of Personnel (*thao worachan*) of the inner city in the reign of King Chulalongkorn.

While the two above-mentioned zones of the inner city were reserved for wives of the king and other aristocratic women, the lower area of the private quarters housed the commoner women who worked as clerks, labourers, and female security guards or *khlon*. The long row of two-storey buildings (*teng*), located in the southern tip of the palace, served as a landmark of the commoners-only zone of the court of Siam. This was the area that offered the maximum freedom of movement to the palace women when compared to the other parts of the inner city. These women had the right to get married and to have families, and to reside outside the inner city. Men were still strictly prohibited from entering this area without permission (Santiratphakdi, 2004).

2. Reasons for Internal Reform: The Expansion of *Fai Nai* (Inner City) and Western Criticisms of Siamese Women's Restricted Roles

The internal reform that took place in the inner court of Siam during the reign of King Chulalongkorn was motivated by the increase in the number of palace women and rising criticisms of their restricted roles by Westerners. By the time of the reign of King Mongkut (r. 1851-1868), the number of women who resided within the Siamese palace in Bangkok had expanded because of the popular practice of polygynous politics that was used as a way to strengthen the monarch's centralised power. The polygynous practice of King Chulalongkorn was essential to his manipulation of power over the influential aristocratic families such as the Bunnags and the Amatyakuls, which had been highly influential since the Ayutthaya period (Bunarakhet, 1997). Through the means of the traditional exchange of women or 'gifting', the Bangkok monarchs sought to establish political alliances (Bunarakhet, 1997; Loos, 2005). It was in this period that women became part of the core function of 'Siam's political culture' by acting as the mediators who linked their lineage kin to the monarchs (Loos, 2005). As a result, the Bangkok court expanded

enormously during the reigns of King Mongkut (Rama IV) and King Chulalongkorn (Rama V). The total numbers of King Mongkut's 44 consorts and 43 daughters, and King Chulalongkorn's 152 consorts and 44 daughters were recorded (Bunyasatit, 2010). The statistics demonstrated that the political culture of polygyny had immensely expanded the size of the inner court of Bangkok in the nineteenth century.

While the number of kings' consorts increased in the reigns of King Rama IV and King Rama V, the number of female clerks and labourers also rose. As the inner court was a restricted area reserved only for women, the recruitment of a female workforce was required by the expansion of its size. One major consort's retinue was estimated to include from 200 to 300 women, which included young women from noble families who learned the etiquette of the court and servants (Loos, 2005, p. 883). Apart from each consort's retinue, general female labourers (*khlon*) also served as a majority group of palace women. Altogether, the number of women in these private quarters was estimated to be as high as 3,000 (Loos, 2005, p. 883). These women of the working class are a group of palace women that have not been sufficiently represented in previous studies. Although the king intended to keep the inner court as private quarters, the women who resided in this area were active within their own sphere. Indeed, these palace women had roles that contributed to the increase in their participation in the public sphere by the end of King Chulalongkorn's reign. The acting authority that Queen Saowapha had while serving as the king's regent in 1897 highlights the transition of elite women from the private space into the royal public sphere that was previously dominated by men.

As the size of the inner court was expanding, Westerners' negative criticisms about the Siamese monarchs' practice of polygamy also increased. Western accounts on the Siamese King's 'harem', such as by Leonowens (1870, 1873), initially had minimal impact on the monarch's political culture. Instead, the monarchs continued with the polygynous practice until the reign of King Vajiravudh (Rama VI) in 1910, when the inner court began to decline. Nevertheless, Western criticisms served as an impetus for Siamese monarchs to reform representations of these women by bringing them out into the public sphere. Western criticisms of the inferior status of Siamese women became the monarch's concern by the end of the nineteenth century. The inferior status of Siamese women is seen in accounts by Western visitors, in particular the missionaries. The accounts by Anna Leonowens, who served as a Western teacher for princes and princesses at the

Siamese court from 1862 to 1868, although fictionalised, seem to be the most popular Western criticisms of the Siamese palace women. Her two major works, *The English Governess at the Siamese Court*, (Leonowens, 1870) and *Romance of the Harem* (Leonowens, 1873), portrayed the brutality of the treatment of women as well as slavery within Siam. Another missionary, Rev. Noah A. McDonald, who spent 26 years in Siam between 1860 and 1886, also recounted the inferior status of Siamese women in his account. His memoir criticises the polygamous practice of the Siamese nobility that it was “one of the curses of the land” (McDonald, 1999, p 123). Apart from the Christian missionaries, Ekaterina Ivanova Denitsky (born 1888, died 1960), Russian wife of the Siamese Prince Chakrabongse (born 1883, died 1920), also described the inferior status of Siamese women.

They are not educated at all and from early childhood are taught to regard a man as a superior being. Polygamy, which I find disgusting, is widespread. Sometimes one man will have ten wives or more. There is a favourite wife and all the others are practically servants, who have to crawl before their master and are afraid to utter a word. This arouses my indignation (Eileen & Chakrabongse, 1994, p. 70).

With all these Western criticisms in mind, King Chulalongkorn responded by employing high-ranking palace women to be in charge of the administration of the palace in order to demonstrate to the West that Siamese women were equal subjects to men. As the result of this internal reform, the roles and class structure of the palace women became more organised, as will be discussed in the following part of this article.

3. Palace Women: Class and Roles

Palace women can be classified into three class categories. The simplest way of calling them can be: the high class (*chan-sung*), middle class (*chan-klang*), and low class (*chan-tam*). Each of these classes had different statuses and opportunities to education and etiquette training (Rajanubhab, H.R.H., 1938, p. 14).

Although the inner court served as a restricted zone for women where men were not allowed, it was a shared area between young boys and girls of the elite class. Princes, princesses, and children of aristocrats attended their first schooling in this part of the royal palace. The employment of female missionaries as teachers in the inner court had begun in the reign of King Mongkut, when coeducation was offered (Osatharom, 1981). This evidence shows that, although the inner court was seen mainly as a reserved space for women, it nonetheless also played a significant role in the raising of the children of the elite class. While boys had to leave the inner court after they turned 13 years of age, girls continued to reside within this restricted zone, and were enrolled in different residences for training as ladies-in-waiting, and they would ultimately become adult *phuying chao wang* (palace women) who took up different roles within the inner city. Although the inner city was not a shared space for adult men and women, it was a common area for women of different classes and family backgrounds. In the opening statement above, Prince Damrong indicates that there were three major classes of inner court women. The first class was the most prestigious class of queens, royal consorts, concubines, and princesses who were born and raised within the inner court. The second class included the aristocratic women or daughters of wealthy non-noble families who were not born in the palace but had established family connections with the royal palace. These middle-class women enrolled in residences within the inner city as ladies-in-waiting (*kha-luang*). The lowest class of palace women were the women of commoner backgrounds who performed labouring tasks in the inner city. These women either worked as security guards or as general labourers at different residences. This lowest class of palace women was also known as *khlon*, and the same term was used to name the security department of the inner city founded in the early 1900s (Rajanubhab, H.R.H., 1938). Before exploring in more detail the roles of each of the above classes, it is necessary to understand the different titles and terms (table 1) used in defining these inner city women.

3.1 Defining Palace Women (*phuying chao-wang*)

Table 1

Titles of Women of the Inner Court

Backgrounds	Titles (in Thai)	Equivalent titles in English
Wives of the kings	<i>Phra mahesi</i>	Queen Consort (chief queens)
	<i>Phra akkharachaya</i>	Royal Consort
	<i>Chaochom</i>	Royal Concubine
Daughters of the kings	<i>Phra ratchathida</i>	Her Royal Highness Princess
Daughters of princes	<i>Momchao-ying</i>	Her Serene Highness Princess
Royal Servants	<i>Kha-luang</i>	Ladies-in-waiting
	<i>Khlon</i>	Guardswomen, female labourers

As the inner city was comprised of women of all three classes, different titles gave specific social status and expected roles. Among the women of the inner city, the most powerful were the wives of the king. There is no absolute certainty about the numbers of queens, concubines, and other consorts of either King Mongkut (Rama IV) or King Chulalongkorn (Rama V). The most detailed records show that King Mongkut had approximately 44 wives during his reign, while King Chulalongkorn's number of wives was as high as 152 (Bunyasatit, 2009, pp. 286-315). Three major titles were employed to classify different rankings of the king's wives. First, *phra mahesi* was the title equivalent to the queen consort, given to the wives who were the daughters of the previous king. Four queen consorts were presented in the reign of King Chulalongkorn. They were Queen Sunantha (born 1860, died 1880), Queen Sukhumanmarasi (born 1861, died 1927), Queen Sawangwatthana (born 1862, died 1955), and Queen Saowapha (born 1863, died 1919), all of whom were daughters of King Mongkut and were each granted the title of *phra mahesi* by King Chulalongkorn (Bunyasatit, 2009, pp. 286-315). With the exception of Queen Sunantha, who passed away in a tragic accident at Bang Pa-in in 1880, the queen consorts of King Chulalongkorn played most significant roles in the inner city. For example, Queen Saowapha served as the regent of court administration during King Chulalongkorn's visit to Europe in 1897, and Queen Sukhumanmarasi was the head of the court's kitchen and often was in charge of organising formal receptions and royal

banquets. The second group of consorts was called *phra akkharachaya*. They were still regarded as queens but with lower rank than the previous group, whose father was King Mongkut. These wives of the king held aristocratic titles as daughters of princes or the equivalent even before their marriages. For example, *phra akkharachaya* Saowapaknarirat (born 1854, died 1887) was the daughter of Prince Ladawan, a son of King Rama III. However, one exception was the case of Princess Dararatsami (born 1873, died 1933), daughter of *Chao* Inthawitchayanon, the ruler of Chiangmai. Given that Chiangmai was seen as Siam's vassal state, the king had regarded *Chao* Inthawitchayanon as part of the kin in this polygynous politics and also granted the title of *phra akkharachaya* to Dararatsami as an equivalent to other daughters of Siamese princes. The third category of the wives of the king was the *chaochom* or royal concubines. The concubines with the title of *chaochom* were the largest group of the king's wives, which estimated to be as many as 143 women (Bunyasatit, 2009, p. 31). Some of the concubines of King Mongkut also held important positions in the inner city as senior *chaochom* in the reign of King Chulalongkorn. For example, *Chaochom* Wat (born 1841, died 1939) occupied the position of the chief of concubines and female royal servants (*thao worachan*) from 1886 to 1927 (Phruetthiyakon, 1967). Many other *chaochom* were also renowned for their specific skills, such as *Chaochom* Sadap (born 1890, died 1983) who was a vocalist of the royal music ensemble (*Biography of Chaochom Sadap Ladawan*, 1983).

Apart from the wives of the king, the second generation of palace women, which included daughters of the king with the title *phra ratchathida*, also played major roles within the inner city. The number of the princesses of this title was 43 in the reign of King Mongkut and 44 in the reign of King Chulalongkorn (Bunyasatit, 2009, pp. 318-338). Similar to what happened to *chaochom*, some of the senior daughters of King Mongkut who lived through the reign of King Chulalongkorn also took important positions in the administration of the inner city. For example, Princess Naphaphonprapha (born 1864, died 1958) served as the General Secretary of the Inner City (*Somdet Athibodi*) (P. Diskul, H.S.H., 1990). Although the number of *chaochom* and *phra ratchathida* dramatically declined in the reign of King Vajiravudh, Princess Walai-alongkon (born 1884, died 1938), a daughter of King Chulalongkorn and Queen Sawangwatthana, still played a role as a liaison for foreign monarchs and guests in formal receptions. Other princesses, with the rank of *momchao-ying* (daughters of princes), also worked as teachers in the first female

school, Sunanthalai Girl's School, founded within the inner city in the late nineteenth century (P. Diskul, H.S.H., 1990).

Another title of the women of the inner city was *kha-luang* (ladies-in-waiting). These women served in residences of the king's consorts and princesses. The ladies-in-waiting in the inner court of Siam took advantage of "the prestige of palace training" while also seeking ways to help "their fathers in obtaining noble ranks" (Jones, 1971, p. 138). By gaining such skills of the palace women and expanding political networks for their families, these ladies-in-waiting had a better opportunity to marry men of the noble class. Others could also reside within the inner court and became ladies-in-waiting in different residences.

Figure 1

Khlon or guardswomen during King Mongkut's reign



Note. From "108 Envelopes of Questions [108 song khamtham]," 2015,
(<http://sarakadee.com/108/108thai/index.htm>)

The last and lowest title of palace women to be discussed here is *khlon* (figure 1). Initially, this was the title of the commoner women who worked in the inner city, which included various roles from clerks, the security guards, to general labourers. With the growth in the size of the inner city during the reign of King Chulalongkorn, *khlon* became the name of the newly established department of *krom khlon* (Female Police Department of the Inner City) in the 1890s, which took responsibility for the safety and order of the inner city (Phruetthiyakon, 1967, p. 30). The title of *khlon*, by the end of nineteenth century

Siam, referred to the female police (*polit*) who guarded the palace gates, leading to the inner court. Her Serene Highness Princess (*momchao-ying*) Phunphitsamai Diskul recorded,

Narrow buildings and streets built with stones resemble the city of Venice...there were also the female police [*polit*], who were known as *khlon*, stationed in this city-like part of the palace

(P. Diskul, H.S.H., 1990, p. 218).

In her memoir, the princess used the English word 'police' [*polit*] to describe the guardswomen of the inner city, as they were responsible for the safety of palace women and also carried out orders and regulations. In addition to their tasks within the palace, *khlon* women were also allowed to get married and reside outside the palace walls with their families. In other words, these women could be seen as the early generation of female government servants, in which they could commute between the palace and outside, unlike the king's consorts and princesses, who had restricted access to the outside world from this forbidden city.

3.1.1 High-class Palace Women (*chan sung*)

The most powerful roles of the inner city belonged the highest class of palace women, which included the queen consorts and royal consorts (both ranks of *phra mahesi* and *phra akkharachaya*), the aristocratic concubines (*chaochom*), and princesses (*phra ratchathida*). According to Prince Damrong, these women performed different tasks within the inner city, which can be listed in four major categories of work. First, they worked as teachers for younger palace women. Princess Phunphitsamai Diskul (born 1895, died 1990), daughter of Prince Damrong, recorded in her memoirs that the inner city was the first "college" for her (P. Diskul, H.S.H., 1990, p. 213). Her first teacher who taught her domestic skills (*wicha kunlasatri*) was Her Royal Highness Princess Niphanopphadon (born 1885, died 1935), one of King Chulalongkorn's favourite daughters (P. Diskul, H.S.H., 1990). Queen Consort Sukhumanmarasi was also known for her poetic skills. Her skills were passed on to many of the younger learners who resided at her residence, such as Princess Chongchithanom (born 1886, died 1978), the oldest daughter of Prince Damrong, who later became a renowned female writer. The second common role for high-class palace women was administration jobs in the king's office, where they had the chance

to familiarise themselves with public roles in the male quarters (*fai na*). Many of the literate princesses and consorts served as administration clerks. For example, both Princess Niphanopphadon, and Queen Sukhumanmarasi worked closely in the office with Queen Saowapha when she was serving as the king's regent in 1897 (Chantharangsue, 1989). Damrong stated that most of palace women who took this administrative role were the older ones with work experience, rather than the younger ones (Rajanubhab, H.R.H., 1938, p. 19). Third, high-class palace women also served as personal assistants to the king. Different tasks related to the king's personal routine were available for the younger palace women, usually young consorts, such as looking after his clothing and accoutrements and meals. These younger consorts were often supervised by older and higher-ranking consorts of the king. For example, *Chaochom* Wat supervised the king's change of clothes and Royal Consort Saisawaliphirom was the head of the kitchen of King Chulalongkorn (C. Diskul, H.S.H., 2007). The fourth common role of the high-class palace women was that of court entertainers. Dance, music, and acting were seen as the requisite skills of high-class palace women. *Chaochom* Sadap entered the palace at the age of eleven as a lady-in-waiting and became the lead vocalist of the royal music ensemble. Her voice impressed King Chulalongkorn and that led *Chaochom* Sadap to earn the title of *chaochom* in 1906 (*Biography of Chaochom Sadap Ladawan*, 1983). Many dancers also used their skills to impress the king and earn the title of *chaochom* as well, such as *Chaochom* Yam and *Chaochom* Lukchan. Both were dancers of the inner court's plays (*lakhon nai*), which were performed only by women of the inner city as part of the traditional rituals rather than for entertainment (Rajanubhab, H.R.H., 1938).

All four roles of high-class palace women listed by Prince Damrong underline the influence these women had on the male monarchs as well as highlighting their superior position to the lower ranks of palace women. This perspective challenges the Western idea in popular accounts of the Siamese 'harem' as a place where women were oppressed and uneducated. In fact, these women held significant autonomy, especially those who assisted in the King's office during Queen Saowapha's regency, which will be explored in the latter part of this article.

3.1.2 Middle-class Palace Women (chan-klang)

The middle-class women included daughters of aristocrats or wealthy non-nobility who were not necessarily born within the inner city (*kha-luang*) and who often served as ladies-in-waiting. As mentioned in the earlier part of this article, because the inner city served as the first school for children of the elite class, aristocratic parents often sought ways through family connections to send their daughters into the palace for the best available education at the time. These women often started their life in the palace as apprentices at residences of the senior princesses and consorts. The roles of the ladies-in-waiting were dependent on the skills they obtained during their time in these residences. For example, women who resided at the residence of Royal Consort Saisawalphirom often helped in the king's dining room, as the queen was the head of the kitchen at the time (Werasinchai, 2008). In the memoirs of Her Serene Highness Princess Diskul, she illustrated her early career as a palace woman. Diskul entered the palace as a lady-in-waiting at Queen Sukhumanmarasi's residence at the age of eight. Because of the queen's role in the king's office, Diskul became a full-time clerk at the age of 15. She recorded in her memoirs, "In 1901, my father informed the king of his will to put me to work at the king's office. The king then spoke to me in person that *your father wants you to be an office clerk*" (C. Diskul, H.S.H., 2007, p. 27, emphasis in original). This evidence demonstrates that the role of the middle-class palace women depended on the family connections they had with the royal court. In this case, Diskul was a daughter of Prince Damrong, one of King Chulalongkorn's favourite brothers, who had one of the most influential roles in his reign. While some of these students remained within the inner city throughout their lives, many of these aristocratic women were allowed to quit their positions and leave the palace when they got married.

Another group of middle-class palace women were those of the slightly lower status to the mentioned ladies-in-waiting. These women were commoners who had already been working within the inner city, but were able to enhance their status through promotion to achieve positions such as chief of the *khlon* (Female Police) or headmistresses of the royal residences. These women were the senior women with experience in working within the inner city. This group of women also showed the social dynamic of class between the low and the middle classes in the inner city. The roles and class of women within the inner city was not necessarily determined by birth. Even the low-class women had the ability to move up the social hierarchy of the inner city based on their experience and merit.

3.1.3 Low-class Palace Women (chan-tam)

The lowest class of palace women was the *khlon*. As explained earlier, *khlon* were the labourers of the inner city. They were sometimes employed as servants at different residences of the royal consorts but one of the major jobs of these women was to guard the palace gates and act as the inner court police. These female guards became even more essential to the regulation of the palace when Saowapha served as state regent. As a result, a reform was carried out to regulate these women and organise them into the newly established Female Police Department (circa 1890) with Princess Naphaphonprapha as the head of the department, in order to increase regulation of the inner city. One of the major concerns among palace women was gambling, and evidence showed that *khlon* took a role in prohibiting this activity in the inner court (Phruetthiyakon, 1967). Moreover, *khlon* also guarded male access to the inner city. As men, except for the king and princes under the age of 13, were generally not allowed in the inner city without permission, these female police strictly guarded the palace gates. Male doctors or any men who had the permission to enter the area for a specific purpose had to be escorted by *khlon* (Santiratphakdi, 2004, p. 6).

Prince Damrong recorded that the conscription of *khlon* had been modernised with open recruitment in the reign of King Chulalongkorn (Rajanubhab, H.R.H., 1938, p. 38). This granted commoner women of Bangkok access to the royal palace and opportunities to enhance their social position within the inner city. As previously discussed, women who worked as *khlon* could move up in status to become chiefs and women who worked as domestic servants could get promoted to become the headmistresses of the residences.

4. The New Administration of the Inner Court: Rules and Regulations

In response to a growing number of cases of transgression of rules, a new order was launched in the inner city. The internal reform of the inner city during the reign of King Chulalongkorn aimed to tighten the rules and regulations of palace women. This directly impacted the structure of the administration of the inner city, which became more organised than before. This part of the article explores the role of the Female Police Department of the Inner City, and the key administrative titles and positions of palace women as part of the inner city's internal reform.

One of the monarch's concerns about palace women was adultery. As a result, male access to the inner court was heavily restricted, as previously mentioned. Nonetheless, Pavinee Bunnag stated that there were 22 adultery cases among palace women recorded during the reign of King Chulalongkorn (Bunnag, 2011, p. 90). Among these cases, many of the women belonged to the middle-class serving ladies-in-waiting for the princesses. One of the members of Princess Phraphaphanphilai's retinue, Chaem, a 27-year-old who had been working in the palace for over 10 years, ran away from the palace to marry a commoner (Bunnag, 2011, p. 93). Apart from the middle-class palace women, evidence also demonstrates the transgression of rules among the higher ranked princesses. One of the most scandalous adultery cases was committed between a Buddhist monk, To, and Princess Yingyaowalak (born 1852, died 1886) (Figure 2), a daughter of King Mongkut. Although men were forbidden from the inner quarters, Buddhist monks were occasionally allowed to enter the Inner City to perform religious rituals. After the first encounter between To and the princess while he was still a monk, he continued to sneak into the inner city in disguise as a female to have an unsanctioned affair with the princess, until she became pregnant. With the assistance of the princess' servant (*khlon*), adultery was committed. The truth was revealed only when the princess gave birth to the baby. When the news reached the King, capital punishment was immediately ordered for the princess, the monk, and the servant (Bunarakhet, 1997, p. 17; Phaithayawat, 2019, p. 147). While To was executed later on, the punishment for the princess was reduced to the annulment of her royal title and she was imprisoned until she passed away in 1886 (Bunarakhet, 1997; Phaithayawat, 2019).

Figure 2*Princess Yingyaowalak*

Note. From *Siamese Women [ying chao sayam]* by A. Nawigamune, 1999.

Another trace of possible adultery occurred in 1906. One of King Chulalongkorn's memorandums to Princess Naphaphonprapha demonstrated the evidence of an unknown unwanted child. The two-month-old male infant was found dead in the palace. The King wrote to Princess Naphaphonprapha with concern, "It is very unusual if the real mother would have abandoned her child like that. The person who did this must not be one of the *phudi*" (Chulalongkorn, His Majesty King, 1954). The word *phudi* in this letter refers to the palace women of aristocratic and good upbringing and background. The king further mentioned that the child might have belonged to *khlon* because he believed that elite palace women would not commit such an action (Bunarakhet, 1997). Although the result of the investigation is unknown, this case serves as evidence that the inner city was not an ethically flawless place as it has been represented in popular Thai literature. The death of the unwanted infant could have been connected to another unknown case of adultery within the palace that could have been committed either by the low-class women (*khlon*) or the aristocratic women (*phudi*) of the Siamese court.

In addition to heterosexual crime, homosexuality among the palace women was also strictly prohibited. Evidence of homosexual practice (*len phuean*) within the inner court dates back to the reign of King Nangklao, Rama III (1824–1851), as in the poem

about the case of *mom* Sut and *mom* Kham (Bunarakhet, 1997, p. 54). Both were aristocratic women who were known for their homosexuality. Although there was no evidence that these two women were punished, *len pheuan* became a strictly prohibited act in the reigns of King Mongkut and King Chulalongkorn as the inner court had expanded. In this period, palace women who were involved in same-sex *len pheuan* relationships would be tattooed on their foreheads and expelled from the inner city. The tattoo also served as a permanent ban upon these women to prohibit them from re-entering the palace (Bunarakhet, 1997).

As Thai literary sources rarely mention cases in the royal palace where rules were broken, the desire to search for a more realistic picture of the place is rather restricted by the scarceness of the historical evidence. Nevertheless, the existence of an inner court prison and *khlon* or 'polit' (police) serves as evidence that rules were broken and charges were carried out in this restricted area. In addition to the above-mentioned misbehaviours, another inappropriate activity, which seemed to be common among palace women (of the lower ranks), was gambling. *Chaochom* Wat, recorded that the prohibition against gambling was tightened especially in the late 1890s, when Queen Saowapha served as the King's regent (Phruetthiyakon, 1967, p. 30). Princess Naphaphonprapha, who headed the Female Police Department, also earned the reputation of a strict rule keeper during this particular time. Her role will be the focus of the following part on the inner city's regulations and the structure of administration.

4.1 Female Police Department of the Inner City: *Khlon*

One of the most significant changes in the administration of the inner city was the formation of the Female Police Department (*krom khlon*). The *khlon*, referred to the general female labourers who worked in the inner quarters from the early Bangkok period, but they were not organised into a department until the reign of King Chulalongkorn. Together with the newly founded department, a new position of General Secretary (*Somdet Athibodi*) was also created, which was granted to Princess Naphaphonprapha (figure 3), who served in this position until 1932.

Figure 3

Princess Naphaphonprapha, General Secretary of the Inner City (*Somdet Athibodi*) and Head of the Female Police Department from 1897 to 1932.



Note. From “History: Princess Naphaphonprapha,” by auddy228, 2009, (<http://www.baanmaha.com/community/thread28500.html>).

The General Secretary became the most important administrative position of the inner city, which reported directly to the king instead of the Ministry of Interior (*krom wang*), which resulted in the high level of power the princess had over the administration. Moreover, the department was also responsible for the general security of the inner court, including the palace’s gates and general access into the inner city. The employment of *khlon* as female police also became more systematic as their roles became important to the administration of the inner city. It was in this period that rules became more strict for the palace women. Gambling, for example, was one of the activities that became strictly prohibited by the department that reported directly to the monarch (Phruetthiyakon, 1967). In addition, the *khlon* guardswomen also highlight the dynamic of the inner court women outside the palace in the urban Bangkok society. As these women were allowed to have families outside the palace and commuted freely to and from the inner city, they represented themselves as palace employees. Hence, the inner city offered the commoner women a space to perform work outside their domestic sphere of the family households. This stimulated the commoner women of urban Bangkok to see themselves in the public sphere as they became employees of the inner city.

4.2 Key Titles and Positions of the Inner-City Administration

Prior to 1897, the inner court of Siam followed the traditional pattern that had been laid down since the Ayutthaya period. The important titles of the female administrators, such as Head of Personnel (*thao worachan*), Storage Manager (*thao songkandan*), Head of Security/palace's key holder (*thao sisatcha*), and Senior Female Escort (*nang-thaokae*) existed from the Ayutthaya period to early in the reign of King Rama the Fifth of Bangkok (Miphonkit, 2008, pp. 104-107). It was only in 1897 that these key titles adopted from the Ayutthaya period were reorganised within the new administrative reform of the inner city.

While many of the above-mentioned titles were reduced in their power, *thao worachan* still maintained a role within the inner city in the Bangkok period and became more influential in the administration of the inner court during Queen Saowapha's regency in 1897. Traditionally, the position was the highest in the inner court. *Thao worachan* became the equivalent of the head of personnel (palace women) in the reign of King Chulalongkorn. As this was a traditional position, the person who held this title was supposed to be a senior and well-respected woman among the consorts and princesses. The title was granted to *Chaochom Wat* (born 1841, died 1939), a royal consort of King Mongkut, in 1886 when she was 45 years old (Phruetthiyakon, 1967). The task of *thao worachan* involved the general welfare and logistics of consorts and concubines of all rankings. The general wellbeing of the palace women was the major concern of the head of personnel, especially with the arrangements for court doctors and their access in and out of the inner city. Moreover, the logistics of these palace women were also organised by *thao worachan*. She had to arrange for *nang-thaokae* (senior female escort) to escort the consorts and princesses when they had to travel outside the inner city, as contact with men was strictly prohibited (Phruetthiyakon, 1967, p. 19). This traditional position went hand-in-hand with the newly appointed position of *Somdet Athibodi* (General Secretary) of the inner city. Although the General Secretary tended to have more administrative power than the *thao worachan*, the latter had more contact with the palace women as she had to deal with their personal matters. In other words, the modernisation of the administrative reform of the inner city improved its organisation but it did not completely change traditional practices. The system of seniority still served as the core structuring principle of the inner city. Nevertheless, this reform granted the aristocratic women the mobility to enter the male-dominated public sphere. They began to learn skills and enjoy power that did not previously exist.

5. Aristocratic Women in Action: The Emergence of Siamese Women in the Public Sphere

Queen Saowapha and Princess Naphaphonprapha are two palace women who made their first appearances in the public sphere as a consequence of the internal reforms of the inner city. Darani Sihathai analysed in her thesis that during Saowapha's regency "the queen had to represent the power of the king for the governing of the population and the Kingdom of Siam, as well as being part of the *siwilai* image for the progress of the nation" (Sihathai, 2008, p 36). From this statement, Darani meant to convey the message that although Queen Saowapha took such a significant role as the king's regent, her power was still limited under the king's shadow and his aim to promote *siwilai*, which was sometimes equivalent to the English term 'progress' as well as 'civilised'. The promotion of the ideas of 'civilisation' and 'progress' served as one of the push factors to the appointment of Queen Saowapha as the king's regent in 1897. To counter Western criticisms on the king's practice of polygyny and oppression of women, Queen Saowapha became the most suitable candidate for his regency. As Queen Saowapha had the king's acting authority, the king hoped that Siam's status would be improved in outsiders' eyes. As a consequence, the queen crossed over to the royal public male sphere (*fai na*) from the private domestic sphere of women (*fai nai*) for the first time. Foreign media published images of King Chulalongkorn and Queen Saowapha together, i.e. in *Le Petit Parisien* (Sihathai, 2008, p. 159). This was a way to respond to Western criticisms. Although the promotion of Queen Saowapha's role as the king's regent in the royal public sphere was still subjected to his majesty's authority, Queen Saowapha stimulated and enhanced the autonomy of the inner city during her regency more than any Siamese woman had done before.

The reformed administration of the inner city demonstrates the autonomy that palace women had in governing themselves under the great role model of Queen Saowapha. Unlike in the popular image, where palace women were seen as subjects of male representations, the women's direct involvement at the administrative level serves as evidence that palace women were more active in their own space than mainstream Thai literary and historical works have perceived. The administration of the inner court enjoyed a great level of autonomy, especially during Chulalongkorn's visit to Europe. Queen Saowapha, who served as the king's regent from April to December 1897, carried

out a major reform in the administration of the inner city (Sihathai, 2008). During Queen Saowapha's regency, the queen took charge in major administrative roles including chairing state meetings (with the all-male meeting board), approving official announcements, and keeping good international relations by hosting noble visitors from France, Britain, Japan, and Germany.

Princess Naphaphonprapha was another remarkable woman who marked her role in the public sphere through the mentioned title as *Somdet Athibodi* (General Secretary of the inner city). The collected correspondence between King Chulalongkorn and Princess Naphaphonprapha demonstrates the role and engagement of the princess in the public sphere. Apart from heading the Female Police Department (*krom khlon*) as previously discussed, Naphaphonprapha worked closely with King Chulalongkorn and took direct instructions from him. The General Secretary's responsibility went beyond the wellbeing of palace women. Naphaphonprapha also had to control the public image of the inner city. A letter from the king to Naphaphonprapha on 8 April 1908 requested the General Secretary to denounce the rumour about a spirit-revealed remedy for curing any diseases which commoners believed to have spread from the palace. The king expressed his concern about this fraud, published in the newspaper *Chin-no siam worasap*, as it claimed to have originated in the palace (Chulalongkorn, His Majesty King, 1954, p 52). This evidence demonstrates that Naphaphonprapha's role went beyond the walls of the inner city. She was also acting upon the king's request to publicly denounce the rumour about the inner city that affected the lives of commoners.

Another important responsibility that Naphaphonprapha had as the General Secretary of the Inner City was to organise royal ceremonies and formal receptions for foreign guests. Her job involved the organisation of seating charts, procedures, and security of these events (Chulalongkorn, His Majesty King, 1954). In addition to event organisation, Naphaphonprapha's priority was to maintain an appropriate image of palace women, especially when there were foreign visitors. During the visit of the Prussian Duke of Brunswick, King Chulalongkorn instructed Princess Naphaphonprapha in a letter of 21 December 1909 to control the movement of palace women (Chulalongkorn, His Majesty King, 1954, p. 66). Following the king's order, Naphaphonprapha issued a letter of warning on 23 January 1909 to control the appearances of palace women during the formal reception as the following,

It is not that women cannot be seen by foreigners [*farang*]. Palace women [*chao-wang*] can see the foreign monarchs but should always keep good manners and must not be intrusive

(Chulalongkorn, His Majesty King, 1954, pp. 67-68).

Maintaining the appropriate image of the inner court women was one of King Chulalongkorn's top concerns. By giving Naphaphonprapha the title of General Secretary of the inner city, the king demonstrated a great level of trust in her. As a result of Naphaphonprapha's respectable reputation, she kept her title from 1897 to the dissolution of the inner court in 1932 as a consequence of the revolution. These examples of the emerging royal public roles of aristocratic women of Chulalongkorn's reign demonstrate that the internal reform of the inner city ultimately had a major impact on women's participation in the male dominated royal public sphere.

5. Conclusion

Representations of the inner city and the palace women of Siam during the reign of King Chulalongkorn in official Thai history as a civilised harmonious place of domestic lives is challenged by the historical evidence of the internal reforms that were carried out which permitted women to occupy more roles in the public sphere. This article has demonstrated that due to the growing number of palace women in the inner city and Western criticisms of the inferior status of Siamese women, the internal reform of the inner city allowed palace women to step into the public sphere for the first time. The impact can be seen from the evidence of the explored roles that were taken by women of the inner city. From *khlon* (female labourers and later became female guards) to the Queen regent, Siamese palace women pushed the traditional boundary of the restricted inner court and encroached into the previously male-dominated sphere. The article demonstrates that both aristocratic and non-aristocratic women were granted specific roles in the administration, which were previously reserved only for men. The enhanced roles of women within the inner city were the result of the internal reform King Chulalongkorn carried out in parallel to state reform that focused on centralisation and the idea of *siwilai*, which were seen as the means to survive colonialism. Furthermore, this development in women's position serves as a foundation for the expanding public roles of women in the later period which deserves further study.

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