



Woman mahouts, Wat Phumin, Nan

THAI WOMEN IN LATE AYUTTHAYA STYLE PAINTINGS¹

Aims and Methods

Aims

Our aim is very simple. It is to use historical temple paintings as evidence for gender relations or the position of women as they existed or developed in the past in Thailand (Siam). This is less simple to implement. However, to present and analyse what is shown of the life of Thai women in historical temple mural paintings is a necessary task on account of the lack of written evidence about women in Thai history.

To date, the writing of such an important task has been impossible because there is virtually no contemporary written evidence, the standard raw material for history, concerning the life and situation of Thai women prior to the late 19th Century. We concentrate here on murals of the Ayutthaya style as the earliest historical epoch for which relevant paintings have survived. We cover therefore from about 1660 to around 1800 and include Ayutthaya style paintings from times rather later than the actual end of the "political" Ayutthaya Period in 1767. Ours appears to be the first sustained attempt to use historical temple paintings as evidence for Thai social histories.

It is widely accepted that the position of women in Southeast Asian societies including Thailand² was relatively high. One forceful expression of this viewpoint runs:

Relations between the sexes represented one aspect of the social system in which a distinctive Southeast Asian pattern was especially evident. Even the gradual strengthening of the influence of Islam, Christianity, Buddhism and Confucianism in their respective spheres over the last four centuries has by no means eliminated a common pattern of relatively high female autonomy and economic importance.

(Reid, 1988: 146)

History and Women

It is a notorious fact that women are hidden from history. (And not just in Thailand) Not only have they been subject to the bias of male history writers, but like ordinary people in general, women figure little in the great chronicles of the captains and the kings. Where the high accounts deign to notice the short and simple annals of the poor, gender relations remain in the shadows. Moreover, tropical climates are notoriously unkind to documents and have destroyed countless numbers of them. The prevalence of public buildings made of wood rendered libraries more prone to damage or destruction by fire. To the effect of natural disasters has to be added destruction by humans whether deliberate or accidental. In these respects, Thailand perhaps suffered more than most. The centralisation of records in the City of Ayutthaya rendered them susceptible to a

once-and-for-all disaster that might affect all the official records. The great and terrible event there was the destruction of almost all the surviving documents when the city was captured and destroyed in 1767. Thus for Thailand, even the records of the high and mighty are scanty before the Rattanakosin period in 1782.

Fortunately, mounting dissatisfaction with the older documentation-based methodology that had tended to concentrate on the political deeds of elites has led to a search for other forms of evidence.

Ayutthaya, Social History and Women

For Ayutthaya, the chronicles, or the parts that have survived, covered little beyond presenting events that concerned the ruler or auspicious supernatural happenings. The observation by Van Vliet made in 1640 is usually accepted by historians today as indicative of the situation for many centuries,

Of the antiquities of their country they [the Siamese] have few descriptions, thus their principal descriptions consist in the laws of the country, the fundamentals of their religion, the lives, deeds and praise of some dead kings. . . , and these descriptions are mostly committed to the care of priests. . . . Thus amongst the nobility, the rich or civil populations, not many chronicles or historical records are known, with the exception of those which are reported verbally.

(Van Vliet, 1975: 99)

Even before the final destruction of Ayutthaya, there are accounts that fires had destroyed libraries. Furthermore, on occasion there was the deliberate destruction of certain records by rulers themselves as in the case of Khun Chinarat (Frankfurter, 1954: 98) and he was only one of several usurpers of the throne in the history of Ayutthaya. In short,

With the possible exception of the "*Luang Prasaoet* version", other non-fragmentary versions of the Ayutthaya chronicles were written in the Bangkok period. . . .

Since parts of the old chronicles were already missing since the 16th century, the Bangkok

period compilers would have to fill in the missing parts with hearsay and their imagination.

(Piriya, 1992: 39, 41)

Only about one tenth of the legal manuscripts survived the destruction of Ayutthaya and even many of these were destroyed after they had been consulted in the process of drawing up the new legal code early in the 19th century by Rama I (Wenk, 1968: 123). The Laws of the Three Seals themselves, as they are not an exercise in legal history but the result of an enterprise to set up new legal rules for the new state, cannot be taken as a reliable guide to the legal or social system of the Ayutthaya period. (Cf Lingat, 1954; Nidhi, 1978; Reid 1994; Reynolds, 1972; Vickery, 1984; Wyatt, 1982.)

Even the contents of the early Bangkok chronicles, which are extensive, provoke the comment from a notable writer,

. . . information about the general social life of the country is lacking. . . . One would like to know a great deal more: for example, one would be glad to have some information about economic, legal and social conditions of the population but the chroniclers show no interest.

(Wenk, 1968: 35)

A source of information are the observations made by foreign visitors to Ayutthaya. They often noted things that were so familiar to Thai observers that the latter did not trouble to mention them. Certainly, Chinese, Dutch, French, British and Persian commentators (cf Ma, 1451/1970: 103–104; De La Loubère, 1693/1985, 50, 76; Schouten, 1636/1969, 145; Hamilton, 1727/1930, 96; and Ibn Muhammed, 1685/1972, 119, 134) remarked on the comparative freedom that Thai women had, and recorded their opinions as to how industrious and skilled at business the women were. Nevertheless, valuable as they are, these remarks remain tantalisingly fragmentary.

Principally for that reason we turn to another form of evidence, namely visual evidence in the shape of temple murals.

Thai Murals and Women's History

The glories of Thai mural paintings in temples are well known. Their stunning beauty and

liveliness impress all who see them. Moreover, to their wonderful aesthetic qualities may be added the fact that they can be used as evidence on the history of ordinary people for over 300 years. Whilst this potential has been recognised frequently (e. g. Sone, 1986; Sombat, 1985) no sustained work on the subject appears to have been undertaken even concerning social history in general let alone women. This article explores that potential for composing a basis for the history women and gender relations in Thailand.

This is one field in which Thailand may rival the store of historical evidence in Europe as well as rivalling it in aesthetic quality. And that European legacy is rich indeed. One merely has to recollect illustrated manuscripts like the famous 15th century Book of Hours of the Duke of Berry with its marvellous pictures of men and women at work and play through the seasons. An excellent example of what might be done to use this type of Western visual historical evidence is the beautiful little collection by Fox (1985). This not only displays some of the riches of pictorial evidence but by its pictures of women in “unexpected” jobs serves to correct certain erroneous modern notions of gender division of labour in the past. The Thai mural counterparts of those European historical pictures are not mere daubs or graffiti. They are mature and sophisticated works of art. Although the first relevant paintings date back to the 17th Century their painters were heirs to a tradition stretching back at least 300 years earlier.

Evidence, not Illustration

We are looking for pictorial evidence that will form a basis for composing such a history. Here a distinction must be drawn between pictorial evidence and pictorial illustration. For example, take the interesting collection of pictures from the turn of the previous century in *Postcards of Old Siam*. (Davis, 1987) This does not offer evidence so much as it illustrates an existing history. The very term “Old Siam” implies that we already know “Old Siam” and what its history is. Yet, in our search there is no written history of Thai women to illustrate. Contemporary written evidence so far discovered has been inadequate to construct such a history. We are hoping to construct a scientific beginning by

using the murals as evidence. Clearly this is a different enterprise from assembling illustrations.

Our attempted concentration on scenes of people at work forms the main part of our search for evidence about the gender division of labour in Thailand’s past. However, we do not believe that mere presence at work is necessarily an indicator of status. As a pioneering study pointed out of Europe during the 19th century, “there was little relationship between women’s political rights and women’s work.” (Scott & Tilly, 1975)

In the current literature much is assumed about women’s work on the basis of remarkably little written evidence. This may explain why different currents in Thai women’s studies can hold totally opposing views about women’s work in the 19th century. One claims that women did all the fieldwork whilst the other finds that they did none! (respectively, Siriphon, 1985 and National Commission on Women’s Affairs, 1983) At least one of those viewpoints must be wrong. For our part, more modestly, we hope to identify a series of portrayals of what women actually did. Possibly, and more ambitiously, since the relevant pictures go back as far as the Ayutthaya period, we hope to identify changes over time. Gender relations, however, are not limited to the division of labour. Other daily life scenes showing men and women together not at work are also important. These most often are scenes of the street or market or fairground. It is perhaps fitting to quote some lines from the epic poem *Inao* where the author, King Rama II, presents a scene such as we are dealing with. In translation they run,

People wander about in groups with their children at the fair. Some carry a stool to be able to sit and watch the play. Good-looking girls behave attractively, chewing betel and applying wax to their lips, glancing at the young men out of the corner of their eyes. Young lads become courageous after a drink and begin to court the young ladies.

(*Wat Thong Thammachat*. 1982: 31–32)

Written some time after the Ayutthaya Period, those words apply to many scenes typical of Thai mural painting. In addition, we would

include more private scenes indoors and out, portraying often a one-to-one relationship between the sexes that cover courting and occasionally sexual relations.

Phap Kak (“Dregs”) as Autonomous Evidence

The term, *phap kak* or “the dregs”, is a technical term in description or criticism of Thai murals. (E.g. by Chulathart, No Na Paknam, Silpchai, and Wanippa). It refers to the *genre* part of the mural painting that contains portrayals of ordinary people and their lives as distinct from the scenes of deities and rulers. It is used by experts apparently without derogatory connotation towards ordinary people. However, it must be said that the word contains its own meaning. Dregs are after all found at the bottom. And this has never been a prestigious position. It is also the usual location of ordinary people in the paintings. Physically, the pictures of deities are usually at the top, royals in the middle and common people at the bottom. It is hard to avoid regarding this as symbolic of their status in society. Ironically, because the *phap kak* are located at the bottom of the picture, they suffer the worst damage from damp and flooding and vandalism.

Curiously, the term *phap kak* appears not to figure prominently if at all in the better known writings of foreign critics (e.g. Boisselier, Wenk, Wyatt, Lyons, Matiks or Ringis). Possibly this is because they are little interested in that portion of the paintings.

In using the paintings for social history precedents exist. The paintings have been widely utilised to identify styles of Thai architecture in certain periods. It is a commonplace to ascertain past styles of clothing by reference to murals. Ceremonies both courtly and common are studied as they are shown in the murals. And even today professional dancers are taught correct postures for classical dancing by reference to the historical portrayals. Consequently, our endeavour though new in itself follows a well established path.

Nevertheless, if we believe that the murals and everything in them express immanently religious meaning and instruction, we must still remember there are different ways of interpreting that statement. For example, some writers, in insisting that even the scenes of daily life must

have a religious meaning, take a functionalist position. For them, by definition everything in the painting equally serves religion. This definition denies the possibility for autonomy of the parts of the picture or that they may differ from each other in intent or may even contradict each other. According to this view, representations of daily life can have no function or meaning other than to display some aspect (usually unspecified) of religious teaching. Now if this were true, our attempt to use the pictures of daily life as direct evidence would fail because they could not display independently real life at all since they are utterly controlled by and subservient to the painting’s overall ideological message of religious and/or political morality. In that case a picture of, say, a couple making love ought to have a deeper significance according to this approach and its real meaning transcends what the eye can see.

The last example is possible in specific cases but in general the approach has to be rejected. In the first place, it is based solely on assumptions then develops merely through assertions derived from those assumptions. There is no room for argument or reasoning. Everything depends on the functionalist assumption that every part of the whole, in this case a painting, must serve to benefit and support the functioning of the whole. Secondly, this approach can be advanced without even seeing the painting! It exists with superior status outside the painting. (Or even before the picture was painted). Accordingly we know the meaning of a painting before we see it since we know in advance what it must be. This has to be considered an erroneous and indeed a ridiculous approach.

However, it still seems reasonable to suppose that a painting will convey the ideological message of the time to a greater or lesser extent. If the portrayals of women portrayed women as they were supposed to be according to then current male dominated social prescriptions rather than as they were—then they may not form a basis for real direct evidence. The weight of ideology cannot easily be avoided given the teaching, moralising intent of murals. Moreover, since precepts about proper behaviour involve social conduct there is inevitably an infusion of ruling class ideology. In many cases the figures

in the celestial and princely scenes are meant to be associated with the actual rulers.

And, of course, the dregs are portrayed as their “betters” think fit. The main characters are of royalty or the nobility and are shown in incidents of appropriate behaviour to each other in the princely sphere as well as receiving the respect, deference, adoration, services and tribute from their followers and from the common people. Social and political hierarchy is well displayed and supported. The idealistic “princely” scenes seek to show what is proper and what the ruling ideology thinks ought to be rather than what might actually have been the case. This does not render them invalid as evidence. However, it introduces a layer of mediation which, if present in the daily life scenes, would create problems for our project to use them as direct evidence. This is one reason why we rarely refer to the princely scenes. We argue that the daily life scenes lie mainly outside the ideological spheres of the celestial and princely portions. We remain confident that the scenes with which we are dealing, such as two farmers courting or a woman drawing water or a peasant smoking do not form part of the panoply of power. It might be argued that they form the sugar coating to the pill of elite ideology to help ordinary people swallow the claims of the power holders made elsewhere in the murals. Even so, they remain distinct and separate in their identity. The function as well as the actual personnel of the daily life scenes reduces their ideological content. Earlier, we deliberately used the phrase “more or less ideological”. The daily life scenes are where the “less ideological” applies. There is no religious reason for their being there at all. They were meant to entertain rather than to instruct or to moralise. This does perform a role in relation to the message of the whole. The daily life scenes provide a relief from the serious, solemn, dignified, sometime terrifying and possibly occasionally boring scenes elsewhere in the mural. After all many of the real life scenes are funny indeed. This induced relaxation on the part of the viewer which may help the eye more easily to return to the serious parts. However, the process it permits requires that the high ideal norms be relaxed or neglected in the sphere of the real life parts. Boisselier

appears to have conceded this when he remarked that, the artistic rules,

require that no divine being, no prince should conduct himself/herself like the ordinary beings. . . . In the last analysis, for everyone a clear class distinction holds. Some obey a whole ensemble of very strict rules of conduct, the others [ordinary people] show themselves according to their true nature.

(Boisselier, 1976: 74)

Reference to the paintings themselves, the obvious but too often neglected procedure, should clarify matters. Let us consider a bay in Wat Chong Nonsi (17th century). It illustrates an episode from the Vidhurapandita Jataka where the virtuous sage Vidhura is bidding farewell to his family as the ogre Punnaka dismounts to drag him off. Here, the emphasis is not on the supposed theme at all. Not merely do we have a rice pounding/crude courting scene with “dregs” prominent in the left lower foreground, we also see in the upper foreground what might well be described as to be a small sex orgy. The bay will be discussed below but it seems to us clear that these two activities constitute the real theme of the picture which has nothing to do with the moral lesson.

Whilst we may accept that the overall intent of the individual mural or series around the temple walls is religious, we must be aware that paintings ostensibly religious are not necessarily so. Here it may not strain comparison too much if we recall in Western Europe the supposedly religious art form of the Book of Hours also strayed from the path of worship. The manuscript illustrations are the most outstanding of this genre but the head Curator of the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris says,

. . . they relegate the pious original of the Books of Hours to a very secondary role . . . even further removed from the spiritual tranquillity which they are supposed to inspire. One is moved deeply and intensely but not with religious emotion as such. The sentiment aroused by this work is essentially one of aesthetic enjoyment. . . . Here, despite the nature of the subject-matter the reader can scarcely escape the conclusion that God was the last thing the artists were thinking about.

(E. Pognon, 1987: 10)

It seems unwise to neglect the opinion of King Rama V when considering the choices for the murals to be painted in Wat Benchamabophit,

... one is a drawing that includes principles of Dharma... The other kind will be based on Jataka... This kind of drawing tends to be beautifully artistic but fruitless and unrealistic... Of these two kinds of drawings, please choose the latter and focus on how to make it beautiful rather than convey the principles of Dharma.

(in Plainoi 1985: 1–2)

In summary, the parts of a painting are conceived of as a whole by the artists and basically this is designed to present instruction concerning morality according to certain conventions. However, this does not exclude the possibility that the parts of the painting may make different or contradictory contributions to the whole. In other words, the artistic rules of composition of the parts (celestial, princely and dregs) are different from and autonomous from each other.

We conclude this section with a judgement on the matter by a famous expert,

Thai art, therefore, has two distinct styles: one corresponding to the aesthetic inspired by religion and the other style corresponds to the inward feelings of the people.

(Silpa Birasri, 1960: 13)

Classification and Analysis of the Murals

Gender Division of Labour

We identified 31 work tasks in the paintings. Women are depicted as doing 18 of them and men doing 25 (or 23 not counting non-Thai men). Women only are shown doing 6 tasks (or 8 if men who are not Thai are discounted) whilst tasks performed only by men numbered as many as 13. Tasks done by either sex numbered 13 (or 11 discounting non-Thai men). Only two tasks (dancing and rice pounding) were shown being done by man and woman together. Most work tasks portrayed are being performed in or around the household. Only, boating, digging, fishing, hunting, vending and wagon driving are definitely work outside the household. Four are shown to be done exclusively by males (climbing fruit trees is marginal in this respect

for it might easily have been done in a house garden or in a distant orchard or forest.)

Unexpected tasks

Mahout of Elephant

Amongst initial surprises perhaps, are the women shown as mahouts, elephant drivers, a task that is generally regarded as an exclusive male task and nowadays is such. The close retinue of queens or princesses at times had to be composed of females and consequently female mahouts here should not be entirely unexpected. However, in other pictures men are also shown as mahouts to princesses. While murals such as a panel in Wat Ko Kaeo (Phetchaburi) has woman driver, the most clearly visible evidence of women mahout is to be found in the *khoi* manuscript paintings. One volume has no fewer than six paintings with female mahouts including one dated to the reign of King Prasat Thong (1629–1656 AD). (Somphop, 1977) Other *samut khoi* examples of Ayutthaya



Female mahout, at bottom, Wat Ko Kaeo, 1670/1730

female mahouts are illustrated in the standard work on Ayutthaya paintings (Wannipa, 1993: 4)

Given the number of war and working elephants as distinct from "court" elephants that must have existed, it may be supposed that being a mahout was predominantly a male task. Nevertheless, the presence of female mahouts in the paintings is important. From their postures in the pictures they appear to have been drawn from life and show that women could undertake the task. When excluded from the task the cause is not women's biological make up or their inability, mental or otherwise. Rather that task inclusion/exclusion is gender determined.

This may indicate less clearly defined gender roles amongst the lower classes. In the murals the rice pounders are ordinary people in the *phap kak*. Princely characters do not work, they perform functions. These functions are distinguished well enough between male and female roles. However, where there is work that has to be done the dregs seem less concerned about gender division of labour than their betters.

Rice pounding . . . plus!

An intriguing mystery in a complex painting is the picture of a man pounding rice with a woman c1670. Whilst this is normally regarded as a female task, (as shown in the Wat Chong Nonsi sequence), similar pictures of joint labour in



Rice pounding, a scene from Vidhura Pandita Jataka, Wat Chong Nonsi, 1670

this task also occur frequently in murals after the Ayutthaya Period. Is this evidence that gender roles were less fixed than usually thought or in this case misrepresented by modern writers? This need not necessarily be so on the sole basis of this picture because this scene seems to be as much a humorous courting scene as a portrayal of work. The man has to pound the rice in order to approach this woman. But he is about to get a nasty shock when the mischievous boy snares his genitals in a noose! Nevertheless, the man looks as if he has pounded rice before. Also, there is another Ayutthaya period rice pounding scene showing a couple working together without dalliance on the lacquered wall of Wang Suan Pakkat which would reinforce the view that men undertook this task fairly regularly.

Pottery

Another interesting picture of work is of a woman potter. True, the story line requires Sujata to be reborn in this situation as a punishment. (She was penalised for not helping her princely mistress when work had to be done.) Nevertheless, the painting is obviously drawn from life and indicates that around the end of the 18th century there were women potters, an activity not always associated with females in Thailand but common enough elsewhere in Southeast Asia.

Other

The palanquins of the princely characters had to be carried by someone. Women are shown carrying that of Prince Siddhattha's bride-to-be. Such a job is considered to be "heavy" work and indicates their ability to do it although it is not a particularly desirable task. It hints at the probability that Thai women did a lot of heavy jobs that have not been readily associated with them.

This role that does not leap at one immediately on viewing a painting. It tends to emerge after reflection. It becomes clear that in organising hospitality in the household women play an important role. In preparing for a feast the individuals have their roles but their organisation and their efforts are shown to be undertaken by women. Other tasks of management are undertaken by men. Both types of management are found in the one painting on

the walls of what had been the private residence of Rama I before assuming the throne. Here the managing of the building is undertaken by a man and the management of the women of the household by his wife to provide meals for the workers exist side by side.

Expected Tasks

Vending

Vending in the street, market or other open spot, principally of foodstuffs, has long been a woman's task in Thailand. Occasionally in the pictures, a man appears as a vendor but they are Chinese men and their presence is not indicative of Thai gender relations. Their equipment seems more elaborate than that of the Thai women vendors and may indicate a higher level of prosperity. These pictures are lively and merge imperceptibly with illustrations of our categories of child minding, women in public and personal relations.

One of the most striking is from the second half of the 17th century at Wat Ko Kaeo and shows one woman vendor in a boat whilst another on land is sitting by one of the city

gates with her child and is attending to a woman customer. These are still common scenes today.

Pictures later in date show women selling bananas to Chinese men. In another, a male Chinese vendor molested by a dog is getting help from the vendors' male children who are being looked after by their mothers (or sisters). Some children are at work too after a fashion, herding a disorderly flock of goats whilst playing.

Musicians and Dancers

Women figure prominently as court musicians in some of the most beautiful pictures of all. The presence of all-female orchestras is well known. Men are shown playing the same instruments in some cases. A women's group and a men's are artistically paired on opposite sides of a monarch in one painting in Buddhaisawan throne room. They are supposed to be angels or minor deities but are clearly representations of actual people. There seems to be a tendency for men to play percussion instruments. Dancing for religious or for entertainment purposes has been associated with women the world over. There is a beautiful and



Female musicians, Wat Khongkharam. 1780

idealistic rendering of such an entertainment for a prince. Another picture from Wat Ko Kaeo shows male and female actors on the stage as well as male dancers and male (but not female) acrobats.

Childcare and Midwifery

This was (and remains) primarily a female task. Beautiful renderings of this whilst mourning the death of Lord Buddha are shown. However, childcare is shown in the murals with some male participation. As noted above women frequently combine childcare with their other tasks particularly food vending as may be seen in several illustrations. This still can be seen in the streets of Bangkok and other towns in Thailand today.

Midwifery has historically been regarded as a woman's task. Thai painters use the historical birth of Buddha to compose a whole narrative around the birth itself. It is a comment on the realism of the painters that since the Buddha's birth is supposed to have been semi-miraculous, artists have frequently painted in loving details that would have accompanied a birth in a noble family.

Cooking and Food Preparation

We may distinguish between cooking in the household and cooking away from the household. The first is either a family chore or as the majority of murals portray a royal task. (Buddha's last meal in this world is a favourite theme.) This is shown exclusively as a woman's set of tasks with male lookers-on.

Meals outside the household are different and less common. Perhaps a more marginal case is the preparation and delivery of a meal by women to men who are constructing a pavilion for the use of travellers. Whilst this site is undoubtedly physically outside the household/palace compound, the man/woman power is from the same household. Minor wives and servants prepare food under the supervision of the principal wife/princess whilst the pavilion is being built by male slaves and followers under the instructions of the prince. (The story is of Makhmanop) Only men undertake the construction whilst only women are preparing the meal. Given the number of food preparation tasks and the number of servants carrying them

out, supervision really goes well beyond mere cooking and attains the role of management.

Men at Work

A discussion of the work roles of women calls for mention of tasks done by men. Other than the possible exceptions of rice pounding and child care, the male tasks found fall into the category of the "expected" and call for little further comment. These pictures of the following tasks show men only undertaking them and may be taken as reasonable proof that they were indeed male preserves except possibly in circumstances when no adult females were around. Pictures of men at work showed acrobats, caravan drivers, a cattle herder, dancers, fishermen, men digging and tree climbers. Male house builders are also seen in a most detailed and lively scene that displays skills and male division of labour.

The great set piece of Victory over Mara usually to be found on the east wall of *bot* or *wihan*³ facing the image always displays men soldiering in battle and often in a most realistic fashion that is in keeping with our aims.

Missing Tasks and Urban Bias

A distortion of the distribution of tasks is that the murals show "urban bias"! Most of the scenes of princes or of ordinary people take place in or around city or palace streets or gates as determined by the story. Thus Thai rural people, by far the greater part of the population, who live neither in the jungle nor in the city are not well represented. Precisely there our research provided one major irony. We had hoped to be able to settle the argument about whether women did all the field work or none of it. To judge from the murals, it seems no one did any fieldwork at all! This observation would appear to apply to Rattanakosin murals too. We may reasonably believe that they did so work but the murals offer neither support nor opposition to our beliefs. In our experience only one picture of rice planting exists—an excellent one showing gender division of labour beautifully. This is in a Lan Na style painting of around 1890 in Wat Pa Daet, Mae Chaem District, Chiang Mai. It is true that this represents King Suddhodana, the father of the Buddha, conducting the royal ploughing

ceremony but it is a realistic portrayal of an actual ploughing.

Other Gender Relations

Women in Public (City Gate/Sala Scenes)

Foreign visitors to Ayutthaya often noted the comparative freedom of movement and behaviour that Thai women had in public. These observations are amply confirmed by the Ayutthaya murals and constitute indigenous evidence of the relatively unconfined position of Thai women of that period. The public thoroughfare in historical Ayutthaya as in historical Bangkok was not so much a road or street as in Europe or China but a waterway and its footpath. In the murals the favourite public scene setting was the outside of the gate(s) in the city wall and leading to the canal or stream and almost always showing a sala that may be variously occupied by vendors, doctors, passers-by or male loungers. The obvious freedom of women to move around needs no comment. The illustrations show them strolling or at work, accompanied or unaccompanied, on the look out for fun and always dressed comfortably. (Or “without their veils or any modesty” as one

prudish Persian from his country’s Embassy put it. (Ibn Muhammed, 119) Some Europeans claimed to be equally shocked “. . . the women here are not ashamed to go naked to the middle, where with a fine transparent cobweb-lawn they are so covered, that by a base device is made to open as they go. . .” . Herbert, 1638/1968: 317)

In fact these City Gate/Sala scenes are the richest in everyday life settings and provide sketches of buying and selling ashore and afloat, childcare, courting, goat herding, medical care, and theatrical performances whilst horses and elephants move by. Such images demonstrate the freedom out of doors enjoyed by Thai women of high and low degree in the Ayutthaya Period.

The illustration from Wat Ko Kaeo, Phetchaburi, dated around 1670 or the early 18th century, shows female vendors, passers-by male and female, on foot, in palanquins and in boats outside the city wall. The close-up shows elephants, exiting from a special elephant gate for a bath with their male mahouts, passing by the female vendor. From yet another gate a male horseman (possibly Persian) rides out and will pass the vendors who clearly occupy a strategic position for their business. Later pictures, from Wat Maithepniwit, shows a varied



Flirting, Wat Wang, 1780

scene set between the palace wall and outer walls. Streets and houses are filled with activities. The close up shows a (faded) scene where a woman vendor falls down (or is knocked over) in partial undress. Females and one male look on whilst another male acts but whether to help her up or knock her over cannot now be ascertained.

There are very fine portrayals of women walking about the street. One (from Wat Dusidaram) shows a Chinese man and Thai woman talking together and an elderly lady with her young daughters and/or servants out for a stroll. The young ones are taking the opportunity to flirt with young men. Likewise, in the second scene (from Wat Wang, Phatthalung) two young women on their way to offer food to Lord Buddha stop for a chat with the male attendant of a young nobleman. The others show the lively activities taking place in and around the sala at the city gates.

One indistinct scenes appears to show one woman (possibly a medical specialist) massaging another.

Love and Sex

Affection

Affection need not always be displayed by love making. And sexual intercourse may or may not be a sign of affection. However, they can be distinguished and there are murals where affection is uppermost. One is striking in that the couple, who are members of the evil Mara's hosts being swept away by the flood that engulfs all, are nevertheless still clinging to each other and helping each other to stay afloat. Amongst the other figures of terror, ferocity and despair they are strikingly human in their tenderness. (Wat Khongkharam) Another mural in the same wat shows a couple at home affectionately caressing. True, the woman is Mon not a Thai but is part of Ayutthaya society. Other pictures show a couple embracing and another couple strolling intimately hand-in-hand.

Sex and the Erotic

While Bhasit's article entitled, "Sex—the Lifeblood of Art and Culture." (1990: 96) does not specifically refer to murals but to song, dance, poetry and drama. Its message would

seem to apply to the murals too for there as in real life, sexual relations are presented as natural and recurrent events. They appear as scenes of everyday life, most often though not always humorous, in portrayals of erotic scenes but seem rarely if ever pornographic. The sexual scenes are not always in accordance with the solemn episode that is the ostensible theme of the picture. They harmonise unaffectedly as a fitting part of the life scene, usually in the *phap kak* but not also in the princely scenes too and even in the Victory over Mara and the Traibhumi (The Three Words). Indeed, as in the paintings of many other countries, sexual relations appear as so fitting a part of the scene no more emphasis is given than if it were say, cooking.

Yet some authorities on murals avoid such simple treatment. The massive and magnificent tome by Wenk covers everything else in great detail with barely a mention of sex. Ringis concentrates largely on the exclusively theoretical, religious aspects. Boisselier in his otherwise fine book dismisses their presence by claiming that an erotic scene in one Rattanakosin painting at Wat Na Phra That (Pak Thong Chai, Nakhon Ratchasima) is "a very uncommon eroticism, because Thai art and literature do not bring up problems dealing with sexuality except in a most discreet manner." (Boisselier, op cit: 114). We wonder where he has been looking.

Other works on Ayutthaya (Santi & Kamol; Wannippa) straightforwardly show sexual scenes in their illustrations but do so without comment. This, unfortunately, does not correct the earlier misrepresentation. One paper (Sone, 1971) does discuss the erotic as such but is quite short and in a non-scholarly publication.

The distorted representation of the erotic or sex is important for not merely does it obscure different types of sexual relations such as flirting, courting, and having sex, but it prevents identification of the stigma applied to certain forms of sex that entail discriminatory attitudes towards and punishment for women. Whilst many of those scenes are tucked in corners, others are conspicuous such as large pictures of women in the residence of the then Supreme Patriarch at Wat Buddhaisawan, Ayutthaya.

Let us consider the prominent example in the Ayutthaya murals at Wat Chong Nonsi referred to earlier. Although the ostensible main



Sexual activity, also from Vidhura Pandita Jataka. Wat Chong Nonsi. 1670

theme is of Vidurapandita being taken away by the ogre Punnaka, at least equal prominence is given to two sexual scenes. The lower part of the scene, where the rice pounding by man and woman together is a courting preliminary and is a very funny portrayal. The fun is earthy but it shows the budding sexual relationship as joyful and affectionate even though outside forces are about to disrupt it in humorous fashion. The scene above is different in tone. Sex there has no joy. It may be showing the end of a small sex orgy. Assorted couples appear to be still at it, resting or looking on whilst one woman, exhausted and downcast, staggers partly clad and dishevelled from another room. Two neatly dressed women are pointing at her in disapproval. There is no sign of her male bedfellow(s).

One richly illustrated publication on Wat Chong Nonsi discusses this scene largely as a contribution to our understanding of Ayutthayan architecture. It only minimally and reluctantly concedes the existence of erotic scenes in a rather shamefaced fashion. (The front cover excludes both erotic scenes while another picture dismembers the upper scene. [p.75]) It then hastens to say (1) that other countries do it too, and (2) that it is so common as to need no further comment! (*Wat Chong Nonsi*, 1982: 30, 73, 74). If the subject is ignored or suppressed, however the consequences of certain sexual acts

cannot be recognised and what appears to be institutionalised victimisation of women in the Ayutthaya Period will be overlooked.

Discrimination and Punishment

Discrimination against women in terms of disparity of punishment of sexual misdemeanours is well established as a fact. Hence a curious painting at Wat Khongkharam (partly re-painted later) merits close attention. Ostensibly the scene is part of the Mahosadha Jataka, and if so would flow on from the famous episode of the attack on the city by King Culani. The foreground, though much deteriorated or removed, probably does follow on as it seems to be the remains of the scene where the family of Culani are in the tunnel. By far the greater part of the scene, however, appears to have no connection with this.

We see a narrative of two, or possibly more court ladies (but not princesses) who are eventually hoisted up in the air in a basket. We cannot accept the interpretation in No Na Paknam's remarkably brief commentary in the large and well illustrated volume on the wat which finds that "two soldiers are teasing court ladies" and that they are "drawing some ladies out of the palace" (No Na Paknam, 1994: 3) Instead, the sequence in four stages in the painting is clearly:

- (1) Four soldiers are forcibly carrying off ladies from the palace. The ladies are unwilling.



Abduction of court ladies. Wat Kongkharam

- (2) In a quiet corner by the city wall, the abduction is being followed up by sexual intercourse involving two ladies and four soldiers. This scene is quite explicit. Although not mentioned by No Na Paknam, visitors to or inmates of the wat have marked it carefully by trying to scrape off parts of this particular scene where offending sexual organs were painted.
- (3) Then the two ladies are led off by armed soldiers and
- (4) Finally, the two ladies are hoisted in the air in a basket (or *chak sarak*) attached to the roof of the palace.



Chak Sarak, a punishment for woman's sexual transgression. Wat Khongkhararam

The above would seem to be an example of *chak sarak*, an old punishment for disgraced women found to be offending against sexual mores. It applies to women but not to their male partners in sexual "crime". The phrase, *chak sarak* forms part of an old saying that lingered until recently in the vocabulary of abuse of some court ladies. Its latter day connotation is a refined insult to a lazy woman who acts (or

rather fails to do anything) as if she were hoisted up in a basket well out of the way of the world of work below. (Oral information from the late Khun Sawing Pradithsamai.) It may be traced back to the earlier function of the actual hoisting in a basket for shameful public display. This form of discrimination is shown in the mural for it is the male partners who are actually carrying out the punishment on the women. The monk who was the authors' guide when viewing the murals explained that this was a scene showing the punishments awaiting those who had transgressed sexually. This seems a fully appropriate and indeed obvious answer. Such a scene of punishment might even be considered to be necessary by some in order restore a propriety and (male) morality that might otherwise be undermined by the fact that this wat's murals are particularly rich in sexual innuendoes, often humorous. They are too numerous for us to illustrate but the reader may find some of them displayed (without comment) in the aforementioned publication by No Na Paknam (1994: 47,75, 83, 87). There is no disguising the fact that some writers' squeamishness results in avoiding implications of the erotic in the murals. This creates an inability to realise and analyse a discriminatory social stigma against women resulting in reproach and disgrace that is clearly apparent in some of the paintings.

Women as Property of Men

An issue concerning gender morality and social relations that involve gender property rights is indirectly illustrated frequently in the murals although it must also be emphasised that this arises from the Jataka text itself rather than being an autonomous statement by the painting. In the last life of Lord Buddha related in the Vessantara Jataka before his historical life, Prince Vessantara gives away all his worldly possessions. When requested by the disreputable old Brahmin Chutchak, he gives away his children who are abused by Chutchak as servants. Then Vessantara gives away his wife Maddi to a passer-by. Fortunately, that personage is the god Indra in disguise making sure that Maddi will come to no harm and in the end virtue is rewarded and all are safely and happily re-united.

However, the point must be made that it displays women as property disposable by males. (Also children are shown as disposable property of the male head of the household although in this case the mother had a right to protest against their disposal.) Using this right of disposal is shown in both story and picture not merely as a fact but as a laudable example. The fact that it was repeated in the Ayutthaya period indicates that it was most likely accepted and practised as morality and custom in Ayutthaya society over two thousand years after the events of the composition of the story. It is of course true that the story remains popular even today. And it may be that the events in the story are now interpreted as showing how women too can accumulate merit by helping men or by subordinating their wishes to those of men. The ways by which a woman may gain merit are more limited than those open to a man and the story may show women how to make the best of their junior situation. However, this is beginning to go beyond what we can find out by using the murals themselves as evidence. Whether the giving away of Maddi is nowadays regarded as disposal of property or a painful personal sacrifice or in some other light falls outside our scope. The sole point we wish to make is that women as the property of men is shown in the painting as acceptable and current in Ayutthaya society.

This princely/religious morality finds a kind of plebeian counterpoint in the humorous subplot. The old Brahmin Chutchak is able to acquire a pretty young woman, Amitada, as a domestic and body servant or wife because of the indebtedness of her parents. Her parents sell her as a child rather than as a woman. It is Chutchak the "purchaser" who wants a woman and this is portrayed as apparently socially acceptable in Ayudhya. Would it have been the same if a woman had wanted to acquire a man this way?

Note, however, that Chutchak's male rights to Amitada's services are not unlimited. She is teased and bullied by the village women to change her too subservient behaviour. Not only is she mocked by the other village women for her sexual misfortune in being married to an old man but they object to her behaviour as an over-dutiful wife who is excessively compliant to her husband-owner according to their standards. They object to her doing too much work. This is

of course a favourite scene of Thai muralists and in the present example is a hilarious depiction of a near-riot when Amitada is drawing water from the village well. One lady is so vigorous in her protest against Amitada's anti-social behaviour that she is tumbling head first down the steps of the front porch. This village peer pressure makes Amitada go on strike from domestic work and she obliges Chutchak to get additional household help. This is how he becomes involved in the main plot as he requests and gets the children of Maddi and Vessantara free of charge. Amitada is saved thereby from doing chores that are ruled to be out of order by the mores and women power in that village. That lessens her burdens but does not alter her situation as the property of a male.

Conclusions

The research shows many aspects of the relationship between men and women in the Ayutthaya period. The pictures showed 31 tasks including 18 tasks done by Thai women, 23 by Thai men; women only did 8 tasks and Thai men only, 9 tasks; and 11 tasks done by either sex. This was in addition to illustrating important aspects of personal gender relations, and the activity of women in public. These should form the start of a data base on the historical position of women in Thailand.

The pictures cast some doubt on certain current stereotypes of what the gender relations "traditionally" have been. For example, the presence of female mahouts, although not a group of numerical importance, is unexpected and suggests that other surprises may exist and that a task normally thought to be physically impossible for a woman could expertly be carried out by one.

Rice pounding is generally considered to have been a female task and an important one. We found two surviving illustrations of man and woman pounding together. This suggests that the gender division of labour may have been less rigid than usually thought. Rice pounding is of course carried out by slaves, servants or *phap kak*. The flexibility of gender division of labour here possibly contrasts with a more rigid differentiation of roles amongst the upper classes. In other words more attention

should be paid to the class or status of the characters involved in the activities before conclusions are drawn. Of considerable interest is the presence of pictures depicting violence against women. No less interesting is the attempt to “cover up” these scenes by rubbing off the paint showing them.

Unfortunately, the number of mural paintings surviving from the Ayutthaya Period is not sufficient to draw conclusions about change in women’s status.

Paradoxically, one of our leading “findings” has been to raise new questions. For example, how to find out the real reasons why work in the field, e.g. rice growing, the main economic activity of most families, is so rarely shown in Thai murals, and not at all in the surviving Ayutthaya murals.

Finally, we are unable to avoid commenting on the desperate need for more conservation of the surviving Ayutthaya Period buildings and murals

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Notes

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² Thailand became the official name of the country formerly known as Siam in 1947. This paper uses Thailand throughout.

³ *bot*, from Pali *uposatha-ghara*, is the assembly hall for monks in a monastery, while *wihan* is the Thai pronunciation of Pali, *vihara*, which in Thailand is the structure of a monastery in which the Buddha images are located.