

THE IMAGE OF CHIANG MAI: THE MAKING OF A BEAUTIFUL CITY

Chiang Mai conjures up images of pretty girls, flowers, pleasing customs, striking scenery, and gracious manners. Thais from elsewhere in the country popularly contend that the local language spoken in Chiang Mai is more melodious than the national Thai language. To many in Thailand, Chiang Mai is all things good about Thai culture, the epitome of the Thai way of life.

So pervasively has Chiang Mai been extolled that persons around the world envision the city in the same way. Even such a presumably unromanticizable observer as the American Presbyterian missionary, Margaretta Wells, begins her 1963 guidebook to Chiang Mai with the statement that the city was “an altogether enchanting place”. [1963 p. 1] Later guidebooks were even more eloquent. One written in 1989 evoked visions of Shangrila.

northern Thailand retains a charm that is hard to express in words and indeed must be experienced first hand before one can understand the enthusiasm that the region engenders to its visitors. Is it the cool hazy air of sunny winter days or the happy countenance of its graceful people or perhaps that special feeling that places of an old an enduring culture impart upon the landscapes that make it such a special place? [Tettoni 1989, p. 9]

No less a forum than the Workshop on “AIDS Impact on Ageing Society” organized

by the Asia Training Centre on Ageing and Care International in Thailand and sponsored by the Australian International Development Assistance Bureau, could avoid such preconceptions. At its 1995 workshop, a handout entitled, “Useful Information About Chiang Mai”, told “Many lowland Thais regard the city . . . as being a national Shangrila thanks to beautiful women, distinctive festivals. . .”. [Asia Training Centre 1995, p. 6]

Such views contrast markedly with those of the nineteenth century, when Bangkok Thai disdained Chiang Mai. To the people of the capital, Chiang Mai was a place of homely women who smoked heavily, chewed betel to excess, and ate so much *pa ha* (fermented fish) that they fouled the air. Moreover, these women of high odor were, if the description in old central Thai classics like *Khun Chang Khun Phaen* of Chiang Mai’s lady, Nang Soi Fa, can be believed, were none too intelligent. Confident in this belief, some Bangkok parents of old lulled children to bed with airs mocking simpleminded Chiang Mai women.

Despite these preconceptions, relations between central Thai men and Chiang Mai women existed. Some northern women, even those of high rank, married men from in and around Bangkok. These had started at least as early as the 1770s when the sister of Kawila married one of King Taksin’s commanders sent

to help wrest Chiang Mai from the hold of Burmese overlords. [Penth 1992, p. 46] Nevertheless, the image of northern women remained negative at the end of the nineteenth century as the treatment accorded Princess Dara in the Bangkok palace attests.

Some early Western travellers to Chiang Mai held similarly negative attitudes. Daniel McGilvary, a Presbyterian missionary and among the first group of Americans to come to Chiang Mai, found the place dirty, "demon" ridden, and governed by arbitrary and often unjust rulers". [McGilvary 1912]

One daughter of Chiang Mai's ruler Prince Inthawichayanon, born to Princess Thipkeson in 1873, was named Dara Ratsami. After receiving an education in northern Thai and Siamese Thai, she accompanied her father to Bangkok in 1886 where he paid obeisance to King Chulalongkorn. On meeting the King, she was invited, at the young age of fifteen, to become one of his wives. Quite a few of his wives were daughters of important regional leaders and heads of tributary states over whom the Bangkok government wanted to maintain control. Having a daughter among the wives was seen as an effective way of controlling her home state. From this time on until 1911 when the king died, Prince Dara lived in Bangkok as one his wives.

Initially she stayed in the Grand Palace but later the king had the Suan Farang Kangsai Palace built for her (close to present-day Chitralada Palace). She served as a proponent of northern Thai customs by always wearing northern style dresses and costumes and speaking the Chiang Mai language. She had northern foods served continually and chewed *miang* (fermented tea) as the finale to most meals. Such practices were resented by many in Bangkok's royal circles who denigrated her affection for this and other northern specialties such as *pa ha* as well as her propensity for smoking tobacco. As a result, her palace came to be known somewhat derisively as "*Tamnak Chao Lao*" (The Palace of the Lao Princess).

But she did take interest in the ways of Bangkok. She invited the noted blind musician, Choi Suntharawathin, to teach her and her palace staff central Thai music. She collected musical instruments from the north and central Thailand. She pursued other interests, some from overseas

such as photography, and some from Bangkok so that she came to understand different cultures while in the palace. [Nongyao 1990, pp. 47-49] Through this learning and subsequent adaptations made by her, she helped overcome the condescension with which many people in Bangkok viewed Chiang Mai.

Also helping to reverse the preconceptions of Chiang Mai were the many influences encountered by Thai leadership at the time. King Chulalongkorn, for example, travelled throughout Asia and then later to Europe where he learned much about the rest of the world. He and members of his entourages helped popularize much that was new to Thailand, some of which were to change the image of Chiang Mai.

He studied practical items, such as the telegraph, telephone, and railroads, as well as cultural artifacts such as regional and Western musical instruments, themes from Western stories and operas, new foods, law codes, and commercial practices. These often blended with Thai ways to create new cultural mixes and modified traditions.

This openness to different practices provided Princess Dara the chance to introduce some aspects of Chiang Mai culture in the capital. One example was the Thaiization of *miang* into *Miang Lao*, in which cabbage was substituted for tea leaves, which were hard to find in Bangkok. *Miang* then diversified into new forms such as *miang pla tu*, made with mackerel and *miang kung* (shrimp *miang*) until most Thais have forgotten the Chiang Mai connection [Liulalong Bunnag 1989]

These few changes were insufficient to reverse, the condescension given to things northern by the Bangkok elite. When Crown Prince Vajiravudh (the future King Rama VI) made a tour of the north in Chiang Mai in 1906, he suggested that the Lao had to be "tamed" (*fuk hai chuang*) in order to become good citizens "agreeable to the Thai" in the new Thai nation (*chat Thai*¹). Except for some references to flowers, however, he had nothing to say about anything beautiful in Chiang Mai.

The Bangkok Recension of Chiang Mai History

Attitudes such as these came to be incorporated in new histories of Thailand being written as

Bangkok took over Chiang Mai. Such writings came to replace accounts of the north written by the people of Lan Na.

Chiang Mai has a literary heritage of hundreds if not thousands of texts. From a so-called Golden Era in the fifteenth century when major historical and Buddhist texts were written, Lan Na literature ebbed following the takeover in 1558 by King Bayinnaung of Burma. Although a brief revival occurred in the early-nineteenth century, when some new writing occurred, including an updating of the major version of the Chiang Mai Chronicle around 1827, literature in Lan Na was in decline. Individual pockets of literary creativity have persisted but the inspiration to write major historical accounts was lost. No major history of Chiang Mai was to be written by a northern Thai for over a century and a half.

Into this void stepped central Thai authors. Among the first was Chaem Bunnag, member of a powerful family of Bangkok nobility, with the title Phraya Prachakitkorachak. Born in 1864, a member of several expeditions to the north in 1880s and 1890s, he had a modern education and became interested in Chiang Mai history. He and others of his generation were proud of the growing Thai kingdom expanding even in the face of Western imperialism. Their reports, poems, and songs became important determinants of the new image Chiang Mai was to assume for the central Thai.

To this literature he contributed *Phongsawadan Yonok*. First entitled *Prawat Lao Chiang* (History of the Lao Chiang)² it appeared in the journal of the Thai National Library, the *Vachirayan* from 1898-1899. Its final form as *Phongsawadan Yonok* (Chronicle of Yonok, (i.e. Chiang Mai and the region around it) appeared in 1907 and fell within the nationalistic writing of the formative Thai state. The introduction tells, "This account of Yonok, a chronicle of the Thai north, is thus relevant to the origins of the royal chronicles of Siam." [Prachakitkorachak 1935, p. 5]

The author used all the available sources he could in an effort to learn as much about Chiang Mai as he could. In his account, for example, of the takeover of Chiang Mai by Prince Kawila of Lampang in the 1770s following centuries of Burmese overlordship, the author largely adheres

to the telling of it in the Chiang Mai Chronicle which extols the efforts of Kawila.

Later central Thai accounts of Lan Na, however, downplay the importance of Kawila and his associates. Prince Damrong Rajanubhap's *Thai Rop Phama*, (Thai Wars with Burma), [Bangkok 1971] which details over 44 wars from 1538 until 1854. Regarding the period of time from 1771 until 1791 when Burmese overlords of Chiang Mai were expelled to be replaced by those from Bangkok, Damrong barely mentions Kawila and the other northern leaders. Instead, Damrong credits Chaophraya Chakri (later King Rama I), for directing the campaign.

Later accounts carried even fewer references to the city, its founding in 1296 by King Mang Rai, the flourishing of Buddhism and literature under later kings in the sixteenth century, or the kingdom's centuries-long and often successful struggles with Ayutthaya, Lao, and Burman kingdoms. When mentioned at all, Chiang Mai is discussed as one of the tributary states of Ayutthaya or the site where Ayutthayan kings, such as Naresuan, travelled to defend the kingdom.

When he took the throne in 1910, King Vajiravudh felt that establishing schools would bring the northern Thai into the formative Thai nation. [Vachara 1988, pp. 9596] The new history being written for use in these schools projected a unified Thai state far back into time despite the lack of historical data supporting such a past. According to the "Nanchao Theory" which seems to have been first proposed by Europeans, the Thai race was said to have originated in Nanchao, a kingdom seated in what is now Dali in Yunnan Province of China. According to this theory, a Mongol invasion of 1253 defeated Nanchao resulting in a mass migration of the Thai southward where the kingdom of Sukhothai soon became preminent. Afterwards, according to the history based on this theory, the chief Thai kingdoms were Ayutthaya until 1767, Thonburi until 1782, and Bangkok until the present.

In 1940, at the height of Thai nationalistic spirit during the premiership of Field Marshall Pibul Songkhram, another prominent Thai leader, the future premier, Pridi Banomyong, expressed the extreme patriotic spirit of the time

in his romantic novel, *The King of the White Elephant*. Even though Pridi's political orientation was more leftist than that of Pibul, they shared the Thai nationalism common to many modern Thais. In the excerpt below, Pridi extols the glories of Sukhothai's past to the exclusion of that of Chiang Mai.

The Kingdom of the "Free People" is what The Kingdom of The "Thai" means. They had migrated, these keen apostles of individual and national liberty, from the far off mountains of Yunnan, driven, probably, by the Chinese invasions which spread gradually from North to South. They remained for a century at Sukhoday, then advanced again towards the Gulf of Thailand which forms the southern border of the Indo-China Peninsula. [Pridi, 1940, p. 5]

Similarly, a history of Sukhothai written in 1945 by a national historical commission headed by the esteemed scholar, Phraya Anuman Rajadhon, makes scant reference to Chiang Mai and the other Lan Na states in the main text. [Thai National Historical Commission 1955] More sophisticated was a history of Thai diplomacy written at that time [Thailand Office of the Prime Minister 1945] which tells that the alliance between the king of Sukhothai, Mang Rai of Chiang Mai, and Ngam Muang of Phayao was bonded by shared Thainess which enabled Sukhothai to control the north.

Such centerist historiographies are found in other Southeast Asian countries where the ethnic group dominating a capital city directs the national culture of neo-colonial states. Javanese, Burman, and Kinh ("ethnic Vietnamese") culture all dominate their particular countries. Scholars studying Indonesia have in particular examined how the postcolonial state has introduced conceptions of hierarchy and potency into its national administration but it is no less present in other states. [Anderson 1972, Dove 1985] Taylor's *The State in Burma* [1987], focusing on the center, and Hickey's writings dealing with the Central Highlanders of Vietnam [1982a and 1982b] demonstrate how in different settings a single culture came to be pre-eminent.

In Thailand, leaders of the reformulated bureaucratic state of late-nineteenth century Thailand decided that the country must appear

unified culturally in order to escape being colonized. To justify Thai sovereignty, Prince Damrong and the other architects of the new Thai history agreed that it had to emphasize national unity. Old centers of power such as Chiang Mai, Vientiane, and Nakhon Si Thammarat, were peripheral to this purpose and accounts of them were omitted.

Although this new Thai history emphasized ethnic unity, the rulers of the country had to deal with a variety of different groups in their domain. Even among the ethnic Tai, there were many subdivisions. Seidenfaden's *The Thai Peoples*, written decades later, [1967] lists as many Tai (which he calls Thai) groups, such as Thai Siamese ("Thais of the Menam Plains"), Thai Yuan, Thai Khorat, Laos Kao, Laos Wieng, and Laos Song Dam (Black Thai) in the country as the non-Thais which included Khmers, Chinese, Malays, and the different hilltribes. Maintaining control over these groups and keeping them from falling to the French or British was so difficult that Thai kings sometimes resorted to exceptional techniques, including the forcible tattooing of Kayahs living in the border province of Mae Hong Son in about 1890.³

While the history of Chiang Mai's accession by Bangkok has been amply recorded, the social implications arising from it have not.

Through astute administration and a fortuitous geographical position between French Indochina and British Burma, Thailand was able to retain much of its territory, with the notable exception of the present-day Lao PDR the bulk of which the French took in 1893. When local rebellions in Thailand occurred, such as the 1902 Shan Rebellion in Phrae, they were quickly suppressed. Even the memory of some has been lost. There was another uprising in Mae Chaem (then called Sut Chaem) District of Chiang Mai that resulted in one or two district officials being killed. In this little-known incident, six ringleaders were captured, brought to Chiang Mai, incarcerated in a makeshift jail at the palace of Chao Burirat, and executed. [Thailand Department of Corrections. 1982, pp. 310-311]. Nonetheless, such rebellions were few; when they arose they were quickly suppressed.

In assuming direct political control over the various ethnic groups in the country, the rulers

of Bangkok assumed some attributes of the imperial rulers they sought to escape. From the perspective of the Chiang Mai people, they viewed their new Thai rulers as often domineering and insensitive to local ways. Many would have agreed with the observation of Gayatri Spivak, a Third World scholar, who stated “pluralist aesthetes of the First World are, willy-nilly, participants in the production of an exploitative society.” [1987, p. 179]

Not quite lost in the oral traditions of Chiang Mai are accounts of unscrupulous central officials seeking to take advantage of the people of the north. A famous story of the young women named Buaban, deceived by a flirtatious central Thai, and who then jumped to her death off a waterfall on Doi Suthep is still told in song.

Through this process of exerting control over the north and changing its image, the leaders in Bangkok took on many of the attributes of First World colonial administrators as they dealt with areas outside of central Thailand. Their perception of Chiang Mai and its people began to change, especially once the threat of rebellion by the northerners had disappeared.

As the northerners lost control of their kingdom and the writing of its history they became both politically harmless and culturally intriguing. Their image in the eyes of the people of Bangkok changed from one of uncouth people from the kingdom’s fringe to one having quaint and picturesque customs as well as beautiful women. What the people of Bangkok saw as a land of potential dangerous renegades came to be viewed as a place of harmless beauty.

Chiang Mai’s *Madame Butterfly*

This process had been underway since before the turn of the century even before the trip of Vajiravudh to the north. The historian, Nidhi Aeusrivongse, suggests [1986, pp. 4245] that a Thai version of the opera *Madame Butterfly* was soon to be playing a major role in redefining Chiang Mai’s image.

According to Nidhi, one of King Chulalongkorn’s half-brothers, Prince Naradhip Praphanpong, a prolific playwright and director in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, heard of *Madame Butterfly* from the king after he had seen it in Paris in 1907. Prince

Naradhip, who had already written a historical drama set in the north with his adaptation of the Thai classic, *Phra Law*, was intrigued by *Madame Butterfly*.

Prince Naradhip’s conception of the north may well already have been influenced by *Lilit Phongsawadan Nua* (Poetic Account of the Chronicle of the North), written in 1880 by one of his uncles, Prince Pawaret Wariyalongkon. Although not dealing with Lan Na specifically, Prince Pawaret’s poem describes northern areas such as Chiang Saen, located to the northeast of Chiang Mai on the Mekong. The poem admires the area’s forests while the peoples there were neither disparaged nor made to look inferior. [Pawaret 1967]

Yet another influence on Prince Naradhip was the incorporation of many peoples into the Thai state. Together with other forward-looking members of royalty who were influenced by Western learning⁴, he was intrigued by the diverse lands and groups surrounding the Chao Phraya basin.

The Prince may well have also been affected by the emerging field of ethnography which studied and classified small ethnic groups. Not part of the outlook by chroniclers of Southeast Asian kingdoms⁵, interest in small groups opened new vistas to the young outward-looking modern generation of Thai royalty.

The customs, ways of life, and music of diverse peoples inspired many of the new dramas then being written at a time when old *Lakhon Nai* (Court Drama) were being performed outside the palace for the first time. Thai music thus developed Lao (referring to both the northern Thai and those peoples living in the lowlands of what is now northeastern Thailand and Laos), Khmer, and other musical styles.

These groups were encountered by the Bangkok officials who began travelling north increasingly starting in 1884 after the Anglo-Thai Second Chiang Mai Treaty that resulted in Bangkok gaining more control over Chiang Mai. With the posting of a viceroy (*kha luang*) from Bangkok in Chiang Mai, many members of Bangkok royalty and their assistants going to Chiang Mai came to appreciate the life there. They seemed to have been caught up in the exuberance of a growing state, the bringing of “progress” to formerly remote areas, and the

integration of the old kingdom of Chiang Mai into Thailand.

Not only did Prince Naradhip and his royal and playwright contemporaries gain inspiration from the peoples of the periphery, but they intended that their plays reach a wider audience. In order to appeal to those not familiar with court drama, which the writers apparently felt many would find too restrained, they devised a sung dance drama, known as *Lakhon Rong*. Prince Naradhip pioneered the use of realistic costumes, makeup, and set design, often receiving ideas from opera. [Mattani 1993, pp. 102, 144–145, 234–237]

King Chulalongkorn was strongly impressed by Puccini's opera⁶, *Madame Butterfly*, which he saw on a 1907 visit to Paris [Chulalongkorn 1973 II, pp. 642–646]. After returning to Thailand, he told the story of the opera to Prince Naradhip who then wrote up a Thai version of the story. Instead of Cho Cho San being Japanese, she becomes Sao Khrua Fa, ("Heavenly Girl"). The American naval officer, Lieutenant Pinkerton, was made to be the young Bangkok man Sub-lieutenant Phrom.

Sub-Lieutenant Prom is posted to Chiang Mai where he finds the lovely Sao Khrua Fa. She falls in love with him and while he is attracted to her, he sees their relationship as only a temporary romance. Broken-hearted when he leaves her behind, Sao Khrua Fa commits suicide.

Another feature of the play was its reference to ethnic groups in the north. He refers to a variety of Lao groups (different Tai-speaking peoples), Khmer, Vietnamese, Khaek (in this case probably Indian), hilltribes, as well as "red-faced farang."⁷

Furthermore, the flowers and elegant customs associated with Japan in the opera were transferred by Prince Naradhip to Chiang Mai, a shift that began to evoke a new conception of Chiang Mai among the people who viewed the play. Among the most interested observers was Princess Dara, with whom Prince Naradhip had consulted in writing the story.

The great popularity of the play spread this new image of Chiang Mai throughout Bangkok and beyond. King Chulalongkorn commented to Princess Dara that people preferred this play to all others. He so enjoyed watching one actress

portray Sao Khrua Fa that he rewarded her the very substantial sum at that time of 100 baht for how she acted the scene in which she slit her throat in the finale. [Mattani 1993, p. 141]

Members of royalty sponsored theatrical troupes that competed for popularity. Themes introduced through these plays, such as the beauty of Chiang Mai, spread quickly because of the performances' wide appeal. In their own way, these plays were the popular media of their time, the shapers of social values that inspired the younger generation of the time.

One such person was a younger son of King Chulalongkorn, Prince Penphatanaphong who belonged to the country's intelligentsia. Having just returned from England where he had studied agricultural science, the 21-year old prince (Phraong Chao) became the Director of the Sericulture Department, in the Ministry of Agriculture. His work often took him from Bangkok to the northeastern provinces of Khorat and Buriram where, with Japanese experts and old Thai weavers, he endeavored to improve the quality of Thai silk and make it an exportable item.

One can only speculate what influence *Sao Khrua Fa* had over him, but he was to be smitten during a trip to Chiang Mai in about 1890 in a way that eventually led to a new expression of northern beauty in Thailand's mass media.

Lao Duang Duan of Chiang Mai and Other Influences

The source of his infatuation was a lass with a round white face, a traditional mark of beauty to the Thai of Bangkok. He immediately fell for the fair-skinned 16-year-old Lamphun princess, Chao Chomchun, doubtless delighting in the sight of her fair cheeks which reddened when she blushed. The poise she no doubt had developed from having welcomed other princes from Bangkok also must have impressed him⁸. The fact that she had been to Bangkok as well where she had learned to speak central Thai added to her allure for the Prince who could not speak the language of Chiang Mai. [Prani 1963 1: pp. 126-135]

On the next day, the Prince asked the Thai viceroy in Chiang Mai to request permission to marry Chao Chomchun. Chao Ratsamphan-

thawong did not object outright but said that since the princess was so young, the Prince should wait until she was 18 when she knew more about what she wanted in life. He also said that King Chulalongkorn should be consulted. Chao Inthaworot surely knew that the King had in 1874 issued an edict forbidding officials from Bangkok marrying northern women [Rujaya 1988, p. 92] and he remembered cases of other Bangkok princes taking northern princess for wives but leaving them later on. To all of this Prince Penphatanaphong had no recourse but to return to Bangkok where he found that the King forbade the prince from wedding Chao Chomchun.

The King had issued this edict because he was aware of the antagonism caused in the north by central Thai officials taking northern women as minor wives or temporary lovers. [*Phraratcha Bannayat Samrap Khaluang Chamra Khiram Hua Muang* (Laws for Special Judges in the Provinces) 29 November 1874, p. 1] Although this stricture was relaxed after Princess Dara became one of King Chulalongkorn's wives in 1887, the king nevertheless believed that if the prince took the teenage Chao Chomchun as a wife, rulers in the north would be offended.

When it became clear that he would never be able to live with Chao Chomchun, the prince sought to forget his troubles in music. He frequented concerts and composed his own music. Of all his songs, the best known is now called *Lao Duangduan*, which he composed not long before his untimely death at the age of 27 in 1909. As for Chao Chomchun, she married a distant cousin, gave birth to one son, and then also died early, at the age of 23.

The song shows the love of Prince Penphatanaphong for the fair-skinned round faced Chao Chomchun. Comparing the face of a young girl to the full moon (*duangduan*) is a popular means of praising the girl's beauty. [translation from Seni Pramroj 1973 p.71]

O-la-nor, pale moon-light, here to show my love
of

Pray thee guide me to my only love

As dawn draws nigh, so I must leave.

Great is my grief, oh pale moon above.

O-la-nor, my moon god.

I love thee a thousand-fold, a thousand-fold.
Ah me that I must soon depart,
Leaving my heart, but my heart with they
Oh fare thee well, my love, oh my love.

Besides being a love song, *Lao Duangduan* shows that members of the Bangkok elite were now intrigued by the attractions of Chiang Mai and their changing image of the city. Chiang Mai in this way took on a romantic appeal to many in Bangkok as Tahiti and the South Seas did for many in France.

It was not just the association of broken love with Chiang Mai that gave the city a its new appeal. Because of Chiang Mai's somewhat cooler climate, the flora of its different environment brought new flowers to the attention of the people in Bangkok.

Important in changing the image of Chiang Mai among the people of Bangkok was Princess Dara. As the consort of King Chulalongkorn she had been exposed to influences from the rest of Thailand and overseas as she witnessed the impact of the West on the court. Fascinated, she introduced new themes to the arts of Chiang Mai where she returned after King Chulalongkorn's death. Through these she was to influence the image of Chiang Mai in ways no one could have guessed.

Princess Dara in Chiang Mai

After studying with Thai musical masters, such as Choi, Princess Dara became an accomplished musician who organized a string ensemble in her Bangkok palace. On her return to Chiang Mai she used her musical talent to transform the performing arts of Chiang Mai.

Not only did she introduce central Thai plays such as *Sao Khrua Fa* and *Phra Law* to the north, but she brought Thai musical instruments which led to the pioneering of new musical arrangements, and dance choreography in the troupes she maintained in her Chiang Mai palaces. On special occasions she organized musical presentations. When King Rama VII, Chulalongkorn's son, visited Chiang Mai in 1927, Princess Dara entertained the king with a dance program portraying the presentation of a white elephant to an early Thai king. [Pra-phaihat & Narongsak 1995, pp. 81-86]

The princess also contributed to the association of Chiang Mai with flowers. She introduced a fragrant rose to the north that the king may have taken back to Thailand from France. Having a large bloom and no thorns this rose was then given the name "Chulalongkorn" when she brought it to Chiang Mai. [Suthon 1993, p. 23]⁹

Not surprisingly the news of this rose in the capital added to the positive image of Chiang Mai.

Yet another cultural import from Bangkok she promoted was brocaded silk¹⁰. Called *yok dok* (raised pattern), this warp fibers of this material is raised into design over the flat weft, a technique that actually has Chinese and English antecedents. Princess Dara taught the technique at her palace in Chiang Mai where the tradition endures to this day with new designs created continually. One difference between the northern and Bangkok brocade was that the former came to include indigenous patterns that gave it a distinctive yet familiar (and all the more popular) style to the people of both northern and central Thailand. Ironically, thus, this example of "northern tradition" was not only an overseas import but has been modified through new designs to the present day. The production of silk and cotton textiles was, nonetheless, to become one of the "characteristics" of early-twentieth century northern Thai life.

The Movement North

Princess Dara was not the only person heading north in the early-twentieth century to make an impact on Chiang Mai. Others were of Chinese ancestry. From the 1840s on, economic opportunity in the Bangkok area attracted many from southern coastal regions of China such as Swatow to work in Thailand as laborers. Although many earned enough money to return to home and buy land, quite a few settled in Thailand where as soon as possible they went into business themselves.

From the time of Bangkok's taking greater control of Chiang Mai with the two Chiang Mai treaties in the late-nineteenth century, would-be Chinese merchants moved to the city en masse. They flair for trade and industriousness as well as their ties with other Chinese merchants in the

rest of Thailand enabled them to set up shops and start forming regional commercial networks. As they did so, since were most young men, they married into Chiang Mai society. They often linked up with women entrepreneurs who had controlled much of Chiang Mai's market centers until this time. Their Thaiized descendants built these advantages into control over much of Chiang Mai's economy. Ownership of the city's central market for example was reportedly lost by the Chiang Mai royal family in an evening of gambling.

Muslims came, both from Yunnan in China and from Bengal (there are four mosques in Chiang Mai city). Yunnan merchants had been plying trade routes from distant points on the Silk Road from Central Asia to Yunnan. When the British traveller and official Dr. D. Richardson first came to Chiang Mai in 1829, he learned much from the Muslim merchants.

Thai policy also brought a new military presence in Chiang Mai. Troops from Bangkok were initially posted at the *Krom Thahan* (Military Department) base (now Kawila Camp) on the east bank of the Ping just south of the Navarat Bridge. Later a new and much larger base was set up to the north of town along the base of Doi Suthep reaching all the way to Mae Rim. To the south of town, the Thai air force established an airbase including land on which the Chiang Mai International Airport is located. In both places, entire villages, their temples, and rice fields were displaced. One known as Wat Pa Kluai was replaced by an airport runway. [Sommai 1975, p. 12]

Stationed at these bases were soldiers mainly from elsewhere in the country. Together with central Thai civil servants posted in the north there now were more Thais from outside the region living in Chiang Mai than ever before.

Tourism

Together with this movement north and the changing image of Chiang Mai, tourism to the north grew. It was not until after 1920 when the rail line to Chiang Mai was completed that this became feasible on a popular level.

Chiang Mai was advocated as a tourist attraction starting in the 1920s. As in England and North America during the previous decades,

railways were the first promoters of tourism in the country. Following the State Railways completion of the line to Chiang Mai on 2 January 1920 and the starting of express service the following year [State Railway of Thailand 1932, pp. 12-13], the railway set up a publicity department to provide receptions for visitors and facilities for their travel arrangements. Where there had been sleeping quarters along the routes for use primarily by officials, resthouses for tourists were soon built “for the greater comfort for passengers during their travel” on the northern line in Lampang and Chiang Mai.

Railway policymakers observed that in Chiang Mai “the scenery was beautiful, many important sites existed, there were a variety of delightful ancient traditions, the population was polite and mild-mannered, all of which made the place appropriate for tourists to visit”. Soon thereafter the Chiang Mai resthouse was made into a hotel. [State Railway of Thailand, 1964, p. 23]

Thai officials also recognized that motion pictures could promote tourism. The first feature film made in Thailand was produced by Hollywood’s Universal Company in 1923–1924. Directed by the American, Henry Macray, the story, *Nangsao Suwan* (or *Suvarna of Siam*¹¹) portrayed the struggles of a young couple to succeed. In the melodramatic closing, the (presumably attractive) heroine rides by train from Hua Hin (where there was another Railway Hotel) to Chiang Mai to save the hero from execution. Enroute, many sites of the country were shown as well as various ceremonies and customs in an effort to attract tourists. [Mattani 1993: p. 186]

Tourist promotion continued into the 1930s. As in Europe and North America, railroads encouraged tourism. Railway executives publicized various destinations to increase revenue, with Chiang Mai among the most supported. In 1933, the railway organized a promotional tour of the Songkran festival¹². According to the railway, “The city of Chiang Mai is one of the most beautiful and compelling cities to visit in the Kingdom of Siam: the city has a beautiful natural environment, ancient ruins, and girls. Everything about it is beautiful.” Even simple earthenware water jugs were praised as elegant. [Khloi 1933, pp. 1206–1207]

During this trip, the author’s group visited Lamphun and probably Pa Sang, where they met

“chatty”, “sweet-eyed” girls in the shops. On the way to Doi Suthep, they visited Princess Dara in her lush flower and orchid garden. They saw dancing at the Chedi Luang Monastery to music that caused his “heart to beat faster”. [Khloi 1933].

The railway published a guidebook to Bangkok with information on the rest of Siam in 1932. Chiang Mai’s attractions were described as including temples, forests, and hilltribes. [Seidenfaden 1932, pp. 286-287] A few years later, an English-language guidebook to Chiang Mai was compiled by Reginald le May.

Within the decade, however, reports similar to the Thailanguage accounts of beautiful Chiang Mai were appearing in English language publications. Clearly showing the change in perception Bangkok people held towards Chiang Mai, Rabil Bunnag (in the same old noble family as the author of *Phongsawadan Yonok*), wrote, “To the dwellers of the flat central plain of Thailand, the North is a land of magic, poetry and romance.” [Rabil 1941, p. 11]

The Promotion of Tourism and Handicrafts

The romance of this land did not escape consumerism. Following World War II, in a gradual process beginning in the 1950s and 1960s, the attractions of the region were “developed” for the benefit of the tourist industry. This included modifying old festivals and traditional handicrafts as well as the emergence of different facilities.

Traditional ceremonies, such as Songkran were changed to encourage tourism. In about 1960, the provincial government introduced a procession on the first day of the Songkran festival whereby the revered Sihing image was taken around the town and followed by musical and other groups. The Loi Krathong festival was similarly modified. From a simple festival at the end of the rainy season during which small floats were released in waterways to atone for one’s wrongdoings, the festival became a two-day celebration. *Loi Krathong Yai* (the Big Loi Krathong), featuring a procession of large floats through town was added to the traditional day which became known as *Loi Krathong Lek* (Little Loi Krathong). A beauty contest was also introduced by central authorities at both Songkran and Loi Krathong.

Not only did these popularizing efforts secularize the traditional nature of the festival, but they injected a central Thai influence into the old northern events. While this was comparable to the mixed music and dance popularized by Princess Dara, the promoters of these new Chiang Mai "customs" were not from Chiang Mai and the activities were not developed for the benefit of the local people.

Chiang Mai handicrafts such as silk and cotton cloth, silverware, teak woodcarvings, lacquerware, umbrellas, and ceramics also were popularized. Although it would take decades for all of these items to gain popularity, the process was underway by the 1930s.

Pioneers such as Chiang Shinawatra in the development of cotton and silk-weaving, as well as Mrs. North in celadon manufacture were to adapt traditional crafts and modernize them for a new market. Much of this production was for people outside of Chiang Mai. New designs were created and new purposes for the goods produced were devised.

As Chiang Mai has become part of modern Thailand, the north has lost much that was its

own including control of its destiny. In recent years, however, the central Thai government has recognized the loss of local autonomy and culture that occurred in the early part of the twentieth century and sought to decentralize authority. Economically, Chiang Mai has grown as the regional center of the north. The airport in Chiang Mai has direct international connections, educational institutions attract tens of thousands, and the marketplace is the biggest in Thailand outside of Bangkok. Although the new histories of the north that have begun to be written have left many basic issues untouched, this still represents the beginnings of new ways of thinking.

Prominent Chiang Mai University social scientist and historian, Anan Ganjanapan, has often stated that Chiang Mai historians, instead of dealing with important issues, only write about the superficial. As the process of decentralization occurs, it remains to be seen to what extent local authorities can respond to the new opportunities for writing their own history and incorporating within it the voice of the Chiang Mai people that has been all but lost amid its romanticized beauty.

Notes

¹ *Chat* is derived from the Indic term, *jati*, meaning "birth." Although the term can be found in writing prior to the reign of King Vajiravudh, its use to mean "Thai nation" seems to date from this time. [Attachak 1993]

² Phraya Prachakitkorachak wrote that Lao Chiang was an early Tai group whose descendants comprised part of the Tais who founded Chiang Mai.

³ Names of 500 individuals, apparently representing household heads (and a total population of about 2,500) are in a register kept in the Thai National Archives records [1890] This list is incomplete; perhaps another 100 were tattooed.

⁴ In particular, Romanticism found nature and "primitive" peoples of special interest.

⁵ The first reference to Karens in English, 1759 by Captain George Baker [cited in Hamilton 1976, p. vii], seems to predate the earliest extant reference in central Thai (calling them "Yang", which was in about 1807. *Rangtra Thung Muang Chiang Mai Nam Song Phrasuphannabat Khun Pai Phraratchathan Phrachao Chiang Mai . . .* [Charter Sent to Chiang

Mai on the Bestowing of the Golden Seal to the Ruler of Chiang Mai]. In *Ruang Songtang Chao Prathetsarat Krung Rattanakosin Rachakan Thi 1* [On the Establishment of Tributary States by King Rama I] 1971. Bangkok: Office of the Prime Minister Committee for the Publication of Historical Documents], p. 38.

⁶ Puccini was not in fact the originator of the story which seems ultimately to have been based on Pierre Loti's novel written in 1871, *Madame Chrysanthème*, about his life with a Japanese entertainer. Also drawing inspiration from John Luther Long's *Madame Butterfly*, the theme of the two formed the basis for David Belasco's Broadway play, *Madame Butterfly* which opened on Broadway in 1900. Puccini's contribution was to make the story an opera which opened at La Scala in 1904. Although the opera initially flopped, Puccini revised it with the new version opening at the Brescia Theater to much acclaim. The theme of the story recently became the basis of the popular play *Miss Saigon*. [Boublil: 1993 rev ed., p. 5]

⁷ *Khaek* refers in Thai to peoples from the Middle East (including Jews and Christians there), South India, and the Malay regions of Southeast Asia. In a

general sense it correlate with “Moor” as *Farang* does to “Frank.”

⁸ There is a good chance that this princess was part Karen. Her brother, Chao Koson, later married a Karen himself and spent many years in the Karen village of Huai La in Ban Hong District of Lamphun. According to persons who lived in the old Lan Na courts [i.e. Buakham Singhanet], “many Karen girls” married to the *chao*, who were noted for their fair skin and round faces. Karen stories, supporting these accounts, recall Karen girls fleeing at the site of Chiang Mai royalty so as not to be taken to a lowland palace. Some Karens add that the Chiang Mai people are fair-skinned because of considerable intermarriage with the Karen. There were some sources in Lamphun in the mid-1970s who thought that Chao Koson’s mother was Karen which, if so, would mean Chao Chomchun was also half-Karen.

⁹ There were roses native to Chiang Mai, such as *Rosa gigantea*, that although growing at about 2,000 meters in elevation on Doi Inthanon, were known to the scientific community in the 1920s. [Garrett & Kerr 1952, p. 10] These may have heightened local consciousness about roses in Chiang Mai.

¹⁰ The term “brocade” refers generally to rich textiles. However, so many are the techniques for brocading, that specialists prefer to use the term as a verb rather than a noun.

¹¹ Efforts by Thai film aficionados to locate a copy of the film in the United States have so far failed.

¹² Songkran is the traditional Thai new year, on 12-14 April of each year, when the sun moves from the house of Pisces to the house of Aries.

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