

## THE STUDIES OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN WOMEN IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Pakdeekul Ratana <sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

The studies of Southeast Asian women in historical context provides important data for the analysis of how Lan Na and Lan Sang women exploited their privileged positions in accordance with the prevalent social contexts and attitudes of the time. And it helps us to understand the social restrictions that Northern Thai and Lao women experience today as a result of global changes. Women are losing their unique identity. This study aims to show these aspects of women from another angle by investigating women in an earlier period and comparing them to those of today. This should hopefully be beneficial to further studies of women's issues in the context of gender and multiculturalism.

Keywords: women studies, gender, Lan Na, Lan Sang

### 1. INTRODUCTION

This study will take a historical view of the special functions of the women in these past societies and investigate how they were able to adopt and perform these functions with so little disharmony.

The hypothesis of this study is that the relationship between women and the four fundamental elements of shelter, clothing, food, and medicine gives women significant control over a society which expects them, in the role of the mother, to provide these elements. This responsibility cannot be denied, but must be accepted by the society. The woman is the foundation of the household, intellectually as well as materially. Intellectually, because she is responsible for instructing her offspring (and thereby is the source of the gender separation as a matter of custom). Materially, because she provides food and all the household

necessities. From weaving, to placing beaten shallots under pillows to relieve colds, to working in the fields, the woman is responsible for all the family's needs. Furthermore, she acts as the manager of the family, being in charge of the financial affairs and household regulations.

#### Historical background of Lan Na and Lan Sang Kingdoms

According to historical and archaeological evidences from the thirteenth century to the nineteenth century, this study examines the significant aspects of Lan Na and Lan Sang in four important periods:

1.1 The Period of Independence (1296-1558). During this period Lan Na was governed by the Mangrai Dynasty

---

<sup>1</sup> Pakdeekul Ratana is currently working as a lecturer in the Department of Educational Foundations and Development at Chiangmai University, Thailand. Her main interests include historical and philosophical foundations of education and gender studies, E-mail: pakdeekul.r@gmail.com

Received: July 1, 2019; Revised: July 20, 2019 Accepted: August 2, 2019

(1296-1551), while Lan Sang was under the reign of King Fa Ngum up to the reign of Phra Sumangalabodhisatta (1354-1575). Both Lan Na and Lan Sang were independent but they had diverse political and commercial ties through intermarriage, military campaigns, trade by land and a river mail system. In addition, there was a social relationship, created by the exchange and intermingling of the arts and of Buddhist and shamanist practices, and the two kingdoms have shared these cultural similarities up to the present day.

Nevertheless, this dissertation will centre particularly on the comparative study of Lan Na and Lan Sang in order to understand the social strategies employed in creating the social roles that interest us. We find that women in the upper classes played a significant role in the government of those kingdoms: women such as Queen Ciraphathewi (1545-1546) (Wyatt and Aroonrut, 1998: 114), the Queen of Lan Na, and Mahathewi (1428-1449), who was an influential figure behind the throne of Lan Sang (Maha Sila, 1997: 65-67).

1.2 The Period of Burmese Domination (1558-1775). Lan Na, with Chiang Mai as its capital, was overthrown and ruled over by Burma from 1558 to 1774. Under Burmese rule the status of semi-autonomous (mandala) state was done away with and Lan Na became an integral part of Burma. It had a female governor, Queen Wisutthathewi (1564-1578) (Wyatt and Aroonrut, 1998: 127), who was based in the capital Chiang Mai and whose main duties and functions were carried out there. Meanwhile, Lan Sang, after moving its capital from Chiang Thòng (Luang Phrabang) to Vientiane during the reign of King Setthathirat, was also dominated by Burma between 1574 and 1588 (Thòngsüp, 1985: 118). But despite being each separately ruled over by Burma, Lan Na and Lan Sang

maintained contact with each other. This was demonstrated, for example, when Burma invaded Lan Na in 1595 and the King of Lan Sang provided an armed force to Phraya Nan to repel the Burmese forces. Unfortunately, Phraya Nan was defeated and subsequently escaped to Lan Sang (Souneth, 2001: 6).

1.3 The Period of Siamese Overlordship (1778-1893). Two of Lan Na's local leaders, Phraya Ca Ban (Bun Ma) and Cao Kawila, made a request to the King of Thonburi (Taksin) to be incorporated into Siam, with the aim of securing an armed force to expel the Burmese from Lan Na. In 1775 they succeeded. Phraya Ca Ban was appointed by King Taksin as Phraya Luangwachirapakan Kamphaengphet, ruler of Chiang Mai, while Cao Kawila was consecrated as King Kawila, ruler of Lampang (Sarassawadee, 2005: 225). When Siam had a change of rule from the Thonburi Dynasty to the Chakri Dynasty, during the reign of King Rama I (King Phraphutthayòtfaçulalok), King Kawila took over the leadership of Chiang Mai from Phraya Ca Ban (1782). This marked the beginning of Lan Na's Cao Cet Ton Dynasty. Since then, Lan Na has been a part of Siam.

Subsequently, the kingdom of Lan Sang was divided into the three independent states of Lan Sang Luang Prabang, Lan Sang Vientiane and Lan Sang Champasak. But King Taksin was able to prevail over Burma and sent an army to conquer and burn Vientiane in 1778 (the "first victory"). He took the Image of the Emerald Buddha from Vientiane to Thonburi. At the same time, he brought a lot of Lao captives into Siam. This led the kings of the three states of Lan Sang to accept the status of "vassal states" of Siam. Up until the reign of King Rama I, King Taksin continued to demand an annual tribute to Siam from these vassal states, in accordance with Siamese tradition.

Lan Na's and Lan Sang's relationships to Siam as vassal states were maintained on a social and economic basis. One interesting aspect of this is how both communities used their women to develop these relationships. They established affiliations by offering their princesses as consorts to the kings of Siam, as was expected from tributary states. The Lan Na princess Cao Si Anocha (Sirirocana), for example, a sister of King Kawila of Chiang Mai, was given to Krom Phrarachawang Bòwònsathanmongkhon, who was granted the title of Front Palace in 1781 (Damrong Rachanuphap, 1983: 710). Similarly, Phra Ratchaya Cao Dararatsami, a daughter of King Intharawitchayanon, the seventh ruler of Chiang Mai, was offered to King Rama V (King Phra Culacòmklaocaoyuhua), while the King of Sisattanakhanahut (Lan Sang) offered to King Rama I one of his princesses: she became his concubine and gave birth to Cao Fa Kunthon Thiphayawadi (Thipakòrawong, 1988: 104).

1.4 The period of Western colonization (1893-1953). When Laos was colonized by France in 1899, the relationship between Lan Na and Laos cooled. This was partly due to the fact that Lan Na was incorporated into the kingdom of Thailand and the communities were forced apart, because Laos had to contact Lan Na through France while Lan Na had to contact Laos through Siam.

---

<sup>1</sup> The term *tamnan* (ตำนาน) and its counterpart's *phün* (พื้น) and *ratchawongpakòn* (ราชวงศ์ปกครอง or dynastic history) mean "history", the Lan Na language calls them "chronicles". Grabowsky (2008) states that *tamnan* in a narrower sense are also known by the genuinely Northern Thai term *phün*. Sarassawadee (2005) notes that *phün* and *tamnan* are often used interchangeably and are sometimes even combined, as in *Tamnan Phün Müang Chiang Mai* and *Tamnan Phün Müang Nan*; and some versions of *Tamnan Phün Müang*

## Lan Na and Lan Sang women in a historical context

Historically, Lan Na had long been on intimate terms with Lan Sang on political, economic and social levels. Since the main aim of this study is to understand the roles played and the status enjoyed by women regarding both the similarities and the differences between communities, Lan Na and Lan Sang provide excellent models for comparison. Historical evidence such as chronicles and annals, including specifically those of Lan Na and Lan Sang, give us a picture of the relationships between those two kingdoms. For example, the *tamnan*<sup>1</sup> sources, such as *Tamnan Ratchawongpakòn*, *Tamnan phün müang Chiang mai* (the Chiang Mai Chronicle), *Tamnan phün müang nan* (the Nan Chronicle), and others, tell of the building of the cities and the roles the rulers played in this, and highlight the ancestral relationships of Khun Cüang, or Phraya Cüang Dhammikarāja whom people of Lan Na and Lan Sang and tribal people along the Mekong River regarded as a cultural hero.<sup>2</sup> They also explain the ethnic and cultural unity of the two kingdoms. Politically and economically, Lan Na and Lan Sang shared bonds through marriage, immigration, commerce and even the deportation of people as captives from wars. They also enjoyed religious and cultural

*Chiang Mai* are given the name *Tamnan Ratchawongpakòn*.

<sup>2</sup> See studies of the concept of culture heroes like Khun Cüang in the academic research papers of Prakhòng Nimmanheminda (1987), *An Analysis of the Thao Bacüang Epic*, and DOUNGDEUANE Boonyavong and Othòng Khaminchi (1991) in *Hit (ฮีต) and Khòng (คอง): Tradition in the Thao Hung Thao Cüang Epic*.

similarities. Theravāda Buddhism was the major religion, and a belief in spirits was widespread, so they had many customs and rituals in common.

Documents concerning Lan Na and Lan Sang women fairly scattered. They have not been systematically filed and archived or promoted. Nor is there any clear analytical study of the origin and development of their particular social roles, and none that sufficiently explains them by considering the historical conditions in the various social contexts. The present study attempts to re-evaluate and portray the privileged roles of Lan Na and Lan Sang women and to aid in the understanding of how the social roles of Northern Thai and Lao women changed in relation to the social context.

Studies of Lan Na and Lan Sang women have enjoyed a different popularity from each other and appear in varying quantities. Those from women's academic circles in Laos are, however, on an elementary level. Studies of Lao women from the past are rare because so many historical documents were lost or damaged following the periods of colonization in the nineteenth century and the national revolution in 1975. The study of women's issues is further inhibited by the education provided by the government, which generally promotes only those aspects of women that are associated with the revolution of 1975, such as the foundation of the Laos Women's Union and the empowerment of women in the social and political development of Laos. Private organizations and academics have tended to produce fewer studies on women than on other issues such as political history, economics, social change, etc.

Nevertheless, Lao academics are awakening to this subject more and

more, though the majority of their work still deals with the period after colonization rather than before it. Despite their increasing popularity, the studies of women from Lan Na and Northern Thailand are as yet not numerous enough for further study to give an adequate comprehension of women's conditions. It is therefore crucial that we research the history of women and other relevant aspects of Lan Na and Lan Sang for an insight into the contextual relationship of those women and their societies.

When historians research into Lan Na women they frequently centre on the women from Chiang Mai because that was the capital of the Lan Na kingdom. Consequently, we have great quantities of documents and data about this city. On the other hand, other important cities such as Lampang, Nan, Phayao and Phrae have left fewer archives and resources, and most of those were transliterated. Because most of those documents were initiated by the Government, the side of women that we see is usually that of the upper class. An example is to be found in *Khattiyani Si Lan Na (Lan Na royal women)* (2004), edited by Wongsak Na Chiang Mai, which deals with upper-class women from Chiang Mai in the Mangrai Dynasty. Queen Ciraphathewi and Queen Wisuthithewi exercised political influence in their positions as sovereigns of Chiang Mai. Similarly, the marriage of Princess Yòt Kham Thip of Chiang Mai to King Phothisarath of Lan Sang built up a stable relationship between the two kingdoms. This is seen explicitly in the example of their son, Prince Upayao, who later became King Setthathirat and governed both kingdoms.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, several upper-class women in the *Cao Cet Ton* Dynasty,

---

<sup>3</sup> King Setthathirat was King of Lan Na from 1546 to 1547 and King of Lan Sang from 1548 to 1571, after the death of his father.

such as Cao Si Anocha and Cao Thipkeson, played significant roles behind the throne from the beginning of the dynasty. Cao Ubonwanna had an important part to play in commerce and foreign affairs at that time. Also, Cao Dararatsami, the royal consort of King Rama V, developed the relationship between Lan Na and Siam during his reign. The most significant aspects that these studies present to us are of upper class Chiang Mai women who had close ties with politics. Because of this emphasis on the upper classes, studies of ordinary women tend to be mingled with records from folklore, such as courtship songs, nursery rhymes, and folktales.<sup>4</sup>

A further role that women from Northern Thailand filled came from a local belief in the “ancestral spirits”<sup>5</sup> which required that women should become mediums in offering tribute to the spirits and performing the necessary rituals in the family. When the medium died, the next female in line, preferably the eldest daughter, would take over. This spiritual role is a good example of the significance of women’s influence at the level of the family, (Adisorn, 1996: 44) and is evidence of a further facet of the power that they held.

For an analytical study of Lan Na women’s status we can also consider early laws, such as in the *Mangraisat*, which provided considerable protection to women, especially those who cared for their parents, and ensured that they would profit in their inheritance more than other offspring. To illustrate, where a deceased person left three sons and a daughter the endowments would be divided as follows: “Two parts to the one

who worked for a lord. Two parts to the one who was a trader. Five parts to the one who entered a monastery. Six parts to the daughter who ministered to her parents.”

Alternatively, according to the laws of the division of property, properties other than those obtained after a couple’s marriage would be divided into three parts, two for the wife and one for the husband, if the wife was caring for any offspring. However, if the husband misbehaved, abused his wife, or showed a lack of respect for his wife’s parents, he would be expelled from the house and all his property would be expropriated, even that obtained after the marriage (Lamun, 1993).

The above examples show that, even in this male-dominated society, Lan Na women enjoyed a high degree of protection from the law. In *A Study of Women's Status in Ancient Lan Na Law* (Atcharaporn, 2005). Atcharaporn Cansawang points out that the status of Lan Na women in the law of that time was very high compared with women in neighbouring kingdoms such as Ayutthaya. Studies of this subject among Lao academics are unfortunately not systematic, and a program of promotion and support to encourage further studies would be desirable. This would also aid in the fostering of women’s rights.

Present day studies of Lan Sang and Lao women are rare, and do not distinguish between ordinary women and the upper class, but rather treat the subject holistically. The seminal study *Lao Women: Yesterday and Today* by Mayoury Ngaosyvathn (Mayoury, 1993: 120) looks at the inequalities of women

---

<sup>4</sup> Of interest here are *The archives of Lan Na local tales* (1984); *A Comparative Study of “Kham u bao u sao Lan Na” and “Phaya kiao isarn”* (Songsak 1989); *Simplicity Teaches the World: an Analysis of Lan Na Didactic Literature* (Prakhong 1991); *Lan Na Folktales* (Thitinatda and Warapha 2004); etc.

<sup>5</sup> For further information on how Lan Na shamanism influenced northern Thai women’s roles and status, see Chalatchai Ramitanon (2002) and *Spirit Cults and the Position of Women in Northern Thailand* (1984).

and men from a political, economic, social and cultural point of view: men are given rights and opportunities and unqualified power, while women have become “the second sex”, treated as a product to be used for reproduction. An interesting aspect of this work is expressed in the idea that the establishment of Buddhism in the Lan Sang polity resulted in the role of women being reduced from their previous powerful position to that of a social mainstay.<sup>6</sup>

Especially now, in these times of change around the globe, this has led Lao women to adhere strictly to new expectations from a government policy which has been endorsing women’s social development since 1975. The Laos Women’s Union was founded to encourage its members to participate in the country’s development, in observation of the new policy. However, women were still expected, because of social norms, to uphold conventional customs as mothers and wives whose duty it was to look after their families. Practically, women have always been disadvantaged in relation to men in the

area of career advancement. In her study the writer offers ideas as to how national policy could help in Lao women’s social development, in the expansion of educational opportunities to women in rural areas, and in the support of studies which might enhance our understanding of the women of Laos.

A wider review of the sources dealing with the women of Lan Na and Lan Sang brings some very interesting features to light. Many tend to consist of portrayals of women through female characters in literature and are chiefly concerned with feminine beauty and women’s place in the social order. A remarkable feature of this literature is that most of it is derived from stories of the earlier incarnations of Buddha in the Non-Canonical Jātaka and treats similar themes to those in, for example, the stories of *Sang Sin Sai*<sup>7</sup>, *Cao suwat*<sup>8</sup>, *Campa si ton*<sup>9</sup>, *Canthakha*<sup>10</sup> and *Hong hin*<sup>11</sup>.

Female characters in these kinds of work fall into two groups. The first comprises those who are virtuous: they tend to suffer at the beginning but overcome their suffering through

---

<sup>6</sup> Lao academic, Dr. Mayoury Ngaosyvathn expressed her opinions on Buddhism and women: Buddhism treats women as inferior to men in that women are forbidden entry to monasteries for a Buddhist education; in a Buddhist temple it is obligatory for women to stay behind the boundary markers of an *ubosot* (ordination hall) where monks perform religious rituals; and women are not permitted to participate in religious activities to the same extent as men. Consequently, women act merely as contributors in giving offerings or services to monks.

<sup>7</sup> This is an oral traditional folktale which relates to the story of Buddha. It is the story of Sang Sin Xai, who becomes the Buddha. It centres on good and bad behaviour in the main characters and the impact of their actions.

<sup>8</sup> This is also an oral traditional folktale whose main plot is the story of Buddha. The character here who becomes the Buddha is Cao Suwat. He falls in love with Nang Buakham and their story is like a game of hide and seek, as they become separated from each other and are later reunited.

<sup>9</sup> *Campa si ton* is an early literary work found in various versions both in Lan Na and in Lan Sang. The story, by an anonymous author, is based on that of the Buddha in the Jātaka. Four princes, who are persecuted by their step-mother, try to avenge themselves.

<sup>10</sup> *Canthakhat chadok* is an early work based on the Buddhist Jātaka. It is a didactic tale popular in Lan Na. People employ it as an instructional guide for their offspring on morals and gratitude.

<sup>11</sup> The story of *Hong hin* is influenced by the Buddhist Jātaka. The main plot concerns a prince who is persecuted by his father’s second wife and her sons. In the end, he defeats them and replaces his father as King.

tolerance and honesty, and eventually attain happiness and prosperity. The others are those who are wicked: they tend to be jealous and malicious, and are defeated in the end. These concepts reflect society's ideological expectations of women to be rational rather than emotional, exercise wisdom and courtesy, exhibit beauty of body and mind, preserve their virginity and remain faithful to their husbands and care for them, just as the literary heroines do. These heroines provide the role model of the upright woman, and offer a contrast to the depraved woman, who is vengeful, envious, idle and promiscuous and wholly unsuitable for marriage.

In *Valuable Images of Female Characters in Lan Sang Literature* (Amphònlak, 1998). Amphornlak Inthawong describes three characteristics of the Lao female character. The first is a national characteristic: women exhibit beauty and preserve customs and traditions. The second is a universal characteristic: women display courage, generosity and honesty. Finally, in a historical characteristic, women are benevolent, tolerant and courteous as well as being the upholders of the customs and traditions of respectability. Lao women in the feudal society before the national revolution nevertheless had to tolerate an inferior status to men. Women were the weak sex; they were basically servants and lacked any liberty within the family. They were even treated as a gift or a tribute, "an extraordinary present for a lord", as exemplified in the case of Phraya Müang Kasi, the father of Nang Butyadi. He gave his daughter to Thao Suriyakhat for successfully treating her for a poisonous snakebite. Since the revolution, women have had equal or superior roles and status to men in every aspect including marriage. Additionally, the Government was made acutely aware of women's issues by the foundation of the Laos

Women's Union, which has since become part of the political system.

An article on Lao women in literature "A Study of Lao Women's Status in Early Lao Society through Literature" by Douangdeuane Boonyavong (2004: 349-371) analyzes the roles of Lao female characters in three stories: *The Epic of Thao Hung, or Thao Cüang*, *The Story of Wetsandòn* (a previous incarnation of the Buddha) and *The Story of Sang Sin Xai*. The article argues that, when comparing the social positions and freedoms of Lao women in literature with those in reality from the past to the present, one finds that women are actually well placed socially. They also form part of the cultural dynamic, as evidenced, for example, in the freedom Lao women enjoy in marriage (witness the *long khuang* (ลองขวาง) courtship tradition) or in the collecting of forest flowers to decorate temples in the Thai New Year Festival (*songkran*). The situation changed when Hinduism and Buddhism became more influential in the lifestyles of Lao people. That resulted in the decline of women's roles and their decision-making within marriage, as well as their political significance, as we see in the character of Nang Ngòm Muan in the *Epic of Thao Hung, or Thao Cüang*. This work was presumably written during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, before Hinduism and Buddhism were fully introduced into Lao society (Doungdeuane, 2004: 252). In it, Nang Ngòm is able, on the one hand, to openly make contact with and display her relationship to Thao Cüang, and, on the other, to send an armed force to assist him in battle.

Nang Matsi, however, in *The Story of Wetsandòn*, a Lan Sang poetic work written in 1504 in the reign of King Visun (when Buddhism was on the rise and exerting considerable influence on the lives of Lao people), was not in a position to make decisions in important matters. Her role was restricted to that of

the faithful and desirable wife and mother providing for her family for seven months in the woods. Nevertheless, although Lao and Southeast Asian women's status is lower now than it was in the past, it is still considerably higher than that of Indian women (Hall, 1968: 35).

## 2. CONCLUSION

The premise of this study is that women in thirteenth to nineteenth century Lan Na and Lan Sang enjoyed a higher status and played a more prominent role in the economy and politics of their society than they do today. This was the result of a social process that allowed women in Lan Na and Lan Sang to adopt appropriate functions and to participate with the men in the society in a harmonious way. The privileges that Lan Na and Lan Sang women enjoyed were an indication of their position of authority. They were able to work in many areas: for example, in politics they might rise to the throne and govern states or regions; in the area of jurisprudence they might become judges; in medicine they might work as midwives. In addition, they were granted benefits in the form of property and land following divorce. Interestingly, the methods women adopted to create these privileged roles for themselves had some form of social paradigm behind them, that is, they had a vision of what they desired and made a conscious effort to achieve it.

As a consequence of investigating the women's roles of these past communities used to enhance their social status, this study should be of benefit to any studies concerning women today and help create policies for women's development in the future. I expect this study to enhance the knowledge and understanding of the background to those women's efforts, who created their roles spontaneously

and without disrupting the holistic societies they belonged to. The cultures of Lan Na and Lan Sang were very similar, and their comparison in terms of the economy, society and politics should throw light on the social processes that enabled the coexistence of, and the development of equal power structures between the sexes.

It should also aid in promoting women's self-esteem as well as their general social development, since a common appreciation of women's values and natural rights and the role they have to play will further the cultivation of women's policies in all cultures. Further to this, it should reinforce those strategies employed in the past, and necessary now and in the future for attaining those goals

## REFERENCES

- Adisòn Saksung. 1996. Women in the Chiang Mai society in the period of the Chüa Cao Cet Ton Dynasty. M.A. thesis, Bangkok: Sinlapakorn University.
- Amphònlak Inthavong. Images of women characters in Lan Sang literature. B.A. thesis, Vientiane: National University of Laos.
- Atcharaporn Cansawang. 2005. A Study of Women's Status in Ancient Lan Na Law. M.A. thesis, Chiang Mai: Chiang Mai University.
- Damrong Rachanuphap. Prince. 1983. The Royal Chronicles of Rattanakosin: King Rama II.
- Douangdeuane Boonyavong. 2004. The identity of Lao women in literature. Chiang Mai: Woman's studies, Chiang Mai University.
- Hall, D.G.E. 1968. A History of South East Asia. London: Macmillan.
- Lamun Canhòm. 1993. Lan Na Women in the ancient time: a study from



law. Chiang Mai: Rajabhat Institute.

Maha Sila Viravong. 1996. [History of Laos. Bangkok: Matichon.

Mayoury and Pheuipanh Ngosyvathn.1988. Cao Anu: an old story but a new problem. In Sinlapa-watthanatham [Art and Culture], Vol. 9, No. 11, (September), pp. 3-4.

Sarassawadee Ongsakul. 2005. History of Lan Na. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books.

Souneth Phothisane. 2001. "The relations between Lan Na and Lan Sang: from a historical perspective". In The relations between Lan Na- Lan Sang: a case study of the art work in Chiang Mai and Luang Prabang. Cirasak Wongdetya (editor). Chiang Mai: Social Research Institute, Chiang Mai University.

Thipakòrawong, Cao Phraya. 1988. The Royal Chronicles of Rattanakosin: King Rama I.

Thòngsüp Suphamak. 1985. The Chronicle of Laos. Bangkok: Khurusapha.

Wyatt, David K. and Aroonrut Wichienkeo. 1998. The Chiang Mai Chronicle, Second edition. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books.