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Women's Representations in Thai Communist Publications: The Reconstruction of Female Images

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Abstract

The primary purpose of this research is to explore the representations of women in print media published under the influence of leftist ideologies–Marxism, Socialism and Communism–and the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT). This study aims to examine the significance of left-wing publications as channels for disseminating revolutionary ideas, focusing on the promotion of gender equality and the reconstruction of female images. Despite facing anti-communist campaigns imposed by the right-wing authorities from the 1960s to the 1980s, several publications have been archived and thus they deserve further study. The materials examined in this paper include seven selected publications: Ekkarat (Independence), Chayo Tulachai (Victorious Octoberists), Thong Rop (Warrior Flag), Prachakhom (Community), Chu Thong Rop (Raising the Warrior Flag), Phu Bukboek (The Pioneers), and Mahachon (The Masses). A closer visual and narrative analysis employing the framework of socialist gender discourse on these publications reveals multiple attempts to reconstruct representations of women, as well as female images and voices that contest the prevailing social norms and myths perpetuated by patriarchy and capitalism. These representations highlight the emergence of women as revolutionary individuals and proletarian subjects. Therefore, this paper aims to shed light on a new perspective regarding women during these often-overlooked periods.

Keywords

Communist movement, Print media, Representations of women, Female images, Visual analysis

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Introduction

Against the backdrop of changing political landscapes in Siam/Thailand, the portrayal of women underwent substantial transformation over the span of four decades since the 1930s. These changes reflected the political contentions both domestically and from external influences. Women's bodies were perceived as sites where meanings and sentiments were constructed and manipulated by different factions to contest one another, both politically and ideologically. To understand this transformation, we first discuss the representation of women and female images in Siam/Thailand through the lens of the mainstream narrative and state-sponsored policy.

In the early 1930s, as absolutism was nearing its end, representations of women in print media experienced a significant transformation influenced by Western consumerism and capitalism. This period saw the emergence of several women's magazines that played a pivotal role in shaping contemporary images of modern women and redefining their identities within the context of the modern global movement toward women's liberation (Posrithong, 2019). As the public embraced new modern images of women, Thai authorities sought to define and shape gender norms that aligned with the national agenda. The late 1930s and early 1940s constituted a significant period in Thailand characterized by extreme nationalist sentiment under the rule of Major General, and then from 1941, Field Marshal, Phibunsongkhram, during which national agendas permeated every aspect of daily life. Efforts to create a modern and unified Thailand extended to influencing women's behavior and appearance. The representation of women was most visibly conveyed through idealized role models and characters from the elite class.

One of the policies on women endorsed by Phibun's regime was the construction of female images and gender norms centered on being a devoted wife and mother to both family and nation (Posrithong, 2020, p. 216). This imagery was exemplified by Lady La-iad Phibunsongkhram, the wife of Prime Minister Field Marshal Phibun, who embodied her roles as a faithful wife and responsible caretaker in the domestic sphere while actively promoting the nationalist agenda focused on redefining female images. Lady La-iad served as a member of the drafting committee for the Cultural Mandates, or *Rattaniyom*, public guidelines introduced between 1939 and 1942, which emphasized new images for Thai women (Posrithong, 2013, p. 145). These state-sponsored representations included public dress codes featuring skirts, hats, and accessories that echoed Western-normative images of respectable women (Peleggi, 2007, p. 74).

Consequently, nationalistic policies not only aimed to reform women's appearances and behaviors but also shaped idealized images by drawing on Lady La-iad's public persona and the metaphor of "flowers of the nation." Women, especially from the upper middle class, were envisioned as embodiments of beauty, valued more for their aesthetic and less for

functional roles, similar to flowers that are ornamental with little fulfilling purpose. This metaphor underscored the expected qualities of women—submissiveness, supportiveness, and delicacy—as highlighted by Posrithong (2013). The state's reinforcement of this symbolic portrayal entrenched the notion of women as floral icons in mainstream cultural representations. Public print media and the government created mainstream representations for nationalist agendas. This included portrayals like the Siamese Modern Girl and women as caretakers of the nation (see Posrithong, 2019 & 2020).

In contrast, left-wing and communist publications from the late 1940s, peaking in the 1970s, presented a different perspective on women. Influenced by leftist ideology, these publications critiqued dominant representations, challenged prevailing narratives, and contested established images of women. They engaged with socialist gender discourse, which criticized traditional gender norms and capitalism by depicting women as revolutionary subjects advocating for their own emancipation. Thus, to trace this genealogy, it is crucial to first explore the transnational flows of ideology and the historical context of leftist movements across borders.

The early phase of the revolutionary and communist movement in Thailand was primarily characterized by Chinese and Vietnamese men and women mobilizing against Japanese imperialism and advocating for the independence of their homelands. Employing a transnational strategy in operating and networking, the group officially established the Communist Party of Siam (CPS) in the 1930s and formed the first women's association affiliated with the Party in Bangkok. The initial members included 12 Chinese women residing in Bangkok who worked and were responsible for publication and dissemination of ideas and mobilized others through writing activism (Murashima, 1996, p. 104). This very first Women's Association and its publication was actively led by the chief supporter, Huang Zhesheng, the first wife of Party Secretary Li Hua, along with Chen Guihua and Shen Ying. These Chinese women published political essays in several newspapers, including *Senthang Kammakon* (The Laborer's Path), *Phuean* (The Comrades), *Saengfai* (The Light), and *Saengsawang* (The Light) (Murashima, 1996, pp. 105-112). Notably, the early phase of revolutionary and leftist movements until the 1960s affiliated with the Communist Party of Siam (CPS) primarily consisted of descendants of Chinese immigrants rather than native Thais.

Following the long struggle of overseas immigrants in Thailand and the exchange of ideas over time, the influence of leftist ideology among Thais became most prominent after the establishment of the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) in 1942. The Party continued to work closely with its patron, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), throughout the upcoming years in terms of resources and ideological exchanges. One of the ways to cultivate revolutionary subjects was through education, and from the 1950s the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) sent several female comrades to study and attain higher education at the

Marxist-Leninism History Institution in Peking. There, they engaged with Marxist-Leninist ideology, the history of the CCP, military theory, and the thoughts of Mao Zedong (Tesrien, 1987, p. 54). Consequently, discussion on women's questions followed the CCP line which emphasized women and gender equality, for example, in the “Ten Point Program,” a blueprint of the Party for each member to follow (Srinara, 2009, p. 39). The point concerning gender equality reads:

> *“Women and men are entitled to enjoy equal rights in political, economic, cultural, educational and working opportunities. Enhance the role of women in carrying out the revolution and production; guarantee the welfare of women and children.”*
>
> (“The Road to Victory”, 1978, p. 42)

As such ideological development continuously unfolded within the CPT, Thailand found itself in decades of prolonged authoritarian and right-wing political and cultural hegemony. Resistance to military rule grew throughout the 1970s, and simultaneously the CPT gained significant political influence among them. Around the time of the 6 October massacre at Thammasat University in 1976, organized groups of women participating in leftist movements flourished both during and after the incident. Women’s study groups emerged as part of the movement on university campuses as well as among women workers in the North (Haberkorn, 2011, p.12). Those who sought refuge in jungle bases or overseas contributed to the production of an alternative culture by producing left-wing publications, newspapers, and songs (Srinara, 2009, p. 39).

Since leftist ideologies have always been anathema in Thai society, previous scholarship related to the progressive movement, the CPT, and leftist and radical politics more broadly, is limited to certain areas. Most of the studies focus on the macro perspectives of the movement, cultural politics, and specifically on the student movement of the 1970s. However, topics related to gender and sexuality have received less attention; only a few studies on women’s and gender histories in connection to the leftist movement have been conducted (See Sudarat, 2011; Sinnott, 2014; Baird & Urai, 2021, 2022). This has resulted in the sidelining of women’s importance within the movement.

Going beyond previous scholarship on the leftist movement in Thailand, this study applies a gender lens to the historical production of symbols, icons, and discourse used within the leftist movement and in relation to the Communist Party of Thailand. It aims to draw correlations between the socialist regime, where gender equality and women’s roles are represented through visual culture, and the contested images found within mainstream narratives.

Conceptual Framework

The study employs two main concepts: first, representations and images. Representation refers to the use of language and images to create meaning about the world (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001). It requires sign-makers to choose forms for expression of what one has in mind. The interest of the maker leads them to choose aspects of the object to be represented as being critical, for presenting what they want to represent and then choose the most plausible form for its representation (Kress & Leeuwen, 2006, p.13). In this sense, the maker's interests play a crucial role in shaping representations, thereby facilitating a deeper understanding of the world. This study adopts Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen's argument (2006) on how images or 'text-objects', as a form of representation, serve as effective instruments "for the articulation of ideological positions of complex and potent kinds" (p. 15). Thus, representation and its forms of expression serve as a conceptual framework for analyzing visual culture.

The second concept focuses on socialist visual culture. It represents a form of ideas, notably known to be revolutionary and radical, through visual representation, in some cases as something embedded in everyday life and a rich fabric of visual communication. In discussions of the socialist gaze and visual culture, these ideas prominently emphasize the construction of an egalitarian society (Skrodzka, 2020). Moreover, they help shape the worldview of the ruling parties, primarily the socialist and communist parties, providing viewers with both identification and emotional belonging in the envisioned socialist utopia (Norris, 2020).

In the context of gender and socialism, it is understood that socialism promotes and upholds gender equality. Socialists have consistently maintained that men and women are equal, and the role of the state or ruling party stands as a defining feature of all socialist regimes to varying degrees (Ghodsee and Mead, 2018). Intrinsic to socialism, critiques of capitalism and patriarchy are central to women's emancipation. These ideas were portrayed in various forms of visual and artistic expressions, including propaganda posters, films, and public artworks that illustrate women's participation in labor, politics, and social life. Socialist visual culture, sometimes referred to as communist visual culture for states formerly ruled under socialist and communist regimes (see Skrodzka et al., 2020), not only reflects the transformative ideals of socialism but also serves as a tool for reinforcing the narrative that women's emancipation is integral to the broader goals of the socialist and communist movement, ultimately fostering a sense of solidarity among both genders in the pursuit of a more just society.

Previous scholarship on gender and visual culture of the socialist and communist bloc is extensive. Different roles of women have been represented in print media across the Eastern bloc since the 1920s. It is evident that there was a significant shift in the new Soviet

regime's approach to the woman question, the strategies were woman-centered, often feminist inspired and the product of state-sponsored policy. For example, during the Stalin regime (1928-53), representations and images of women were constructed as a 'new Soviet woman', self-sacrificial, dedicated to the revolutionary cause, many were portrayed as Soviet heroines, *Traktoristka*, or tractor girls, as well as mothers (Ilič, 2001). After the fall of Stalinism, the Soviet Union continued to influence the representation of socialist gender equality internationally through its main print media incarnation: Soviet Woman. The 'Soviet Woman' appealed to people and sisterhood in the Third World to continue their independence and emancipation (Bier, 2004; Varga-Harris, 2019). In China during Mao's days, the gender discourse in China was generated as a top-down government sponsored project, which can be referred to as "state feminism" (Zheng, 2005). It can be summed up in Mao Zedong's famous motto: 'the times have changed, men and women are the same' (时代不同了, 男女都一样) that upheld men and women as equal in political consciousness and physical strength (Yang & Yan, 2017). Learned and adapted from the Soviet regime, the CCP also put women's issues in the forefront utilizing socialist visual culture and thereby introduced a broader idea and campaign of and on Homo Socialist and cosmopolitanism (Liu et al., 2022; Cheng, 2022). In discussion of pictorial aspects of gender discourse, these reflections can be seen through various representations and images of women in roles modified for epochal political and economic movements (Sun, 2011). For example, female workers were portrayed as national female-laborers (*laomo*), "irons girls" (*tie niangzi*), and "tractor girls" (Chen 2001; Manning 2006 & 2010; Hershatter, 2011; Zhang & Liu, 2015; Liu et al., 2022). To a certain extent, Chinese women in the Maoist era were also portrayed as militiawomen, and as Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution which later also influenced other revolutionary movements throughout the Third World (Chen, 2010; Noth, 2021; Sthapit & Doneys, 2017). Despite differences in the scale of the Chinese state's involvement in the socialist and communist movements within Thailand, there is a great deal of similarity in the levels of potential receptivity of socialist models of representation at least within the leftist movement and to a certain extent within the CPT.

From the afore-mentioned historical background of the post-1932 representation of women in Thailand and China and of their role in the radical movement in Thailand, we can see that women were actively involved throughout the period. Nevertheless, they have never been central to discussions in previous academic work. Based on the analysis of visual culture and socialist gender discourse, the roles of these women aimed to enhance women as revolutionary subjects in ways that had not been seen before. In response to this proletarian approach to gender discourse, the primary purpose of this article is to explore representations of women under the influence of leftist ideologies and to a certain extent in connection with the communist movement in Thailand. It aims to examine the importance of

communist publications as means of disseminating information and ideas to women using the afore-mentioned conceptual frameworks.

Methodology and Materials

The visual and textual approach in qualitative research is utilized to examine the narrative and women's representation in Thai Communist print media. The use of images is significant due to their explicitness and immediacy, which help capture and deliver a multisensory impact. Images can be read alongside written descriptions, resulting in multiple possible interpretations, as opposed to the restricted readings often imposed by mainstream media (Spencer, 2011), whereas writing or texts can also be seen as a form of visual communication (Kress & Leeuwen, 2005, p. 17). Furthermore, the approach to selecting materials involves choosing researcher-found imagery, with found images revealing much about the historical, political, and social values of the time (Prosser, 1998). As important as the combined method of visual and textual research is, a sense of intertextuality is essential for understanding pictorial historiography, as well as metaphorical and metonymic meanings across places and times.

In conducting this research, first, images and articles are closely studied and grouped under different codes. Then, the narrative analysis is carried out to search for themes and relationships between images and texts. The categories of collected data include fictional stories, case studies, and pictorial content.

With this analytical method, both the images and textual data are extracted and studied in order to support the argument based on the socialist gender discourse and representation. Like the aforementioned receptivity of socialist perceptions on gender, Thai women in the communist movement portrayed their struggles drawn from both class oppression and traditional values narratives. As a result, selected proletarian images of women will be analyzed to support the mentioned conceptual framework. By employing the described methodology, the previously neglected facets of women's roles and voices within the movement will enrich our understanding of this significant era in the progressive movement of modern Thai history.

This paper aims to acquire a non-mainstream perspective on women through the examination of selected issues from communist and left-wing publications dated between 1960 and 1980, sourced from various outlets. These publications include *Ekkarat* (Independence), *Chayo Tulachai* (Victorious Octobrists), *Thong Rop* (Warrior Flag), *Prachakhom* (Community), *Chu Thong Rop* (Raising the Warrior Flag), *Phu Bukboek* (The Pioneers), and *Mahachon* (The Masses). The means of circulation and the total number of these publications are unknown as it was underground in nature; indeed, the authors propose that some of these publications were produced and circulated underground or only within a closed group of audiences. Thus, in order to acquire communist and left-wing publications,

we requested Thammasat University Archives for the primary data and access to use the archive. Old journals and articles that cannot be found on online databases were drawn from the Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre Library (SAC). Relevant books and theses were identified and utilized from the SAC Library, Chulalongkorn Library, Thammasat University Library, and Mahidol University Library.

The next section of the paper examines how women are represented from socialist and communist perspectives, as reflected in various communist publications.

Research Findings

The findings demonstrate that, first, gender was significantly politicized in relation to class, with terms such as 'revolutionary women' and 'female farmer' being heavily used, and images of women portrayed accordingly within the framework of socialist gender discourse. Second, socialist visual culture depicts women as equal to men, as they are required to adjust their bodies to embody this equality. Lastly, the socialist representation of the celebration of International Women's Day prominently features women. It emphasizes the recognition of women's contributions to the revolutionary cause and underscores their vital role in the socialist vision of society.

Class, Gender, and the Revolutionary Spirit*:* Portrayals of Women in Leftwing Publications

Upon a close reading of the materials, the authors identified a fictional character that embodies the image of a proletarian woman within the context of the socialist call to revolution: Fatimah of Kao Ma-I Bu. This visual representation is part of a political short story that revolves around the aspiration of a young woman who wanted to liberate her country and people. The story of Fatimah and what she deemed to be heroic acts was first published in *Mahachon Weekly* by Intharayut (Atsani Phonlajan, or Nai Phi) in 1948 (See figure 1). From the title, it is clear that the protagonist is a Muslim woman. It is important to note that Nai Phi wrote this short story based on the background of Southern Thailand and the Malayan Communist Insurgents (MCIs), which potentially inspired and motivated many Thai Muslims in Communist movements to join the Communist Movements (Ladd, 1977, p. 374). Although a female character named Fatimah cannot be traced, Siriphatiwirat (2017) argued that the character was inspired by women in the Women's Associations of the Malayan Communist Party (p. 15).

หน้า ๖ หนังสือพิมพ์ "มหาชน" รายสัปดาห์

นิทานการเมือง

ฟาตีมะห์ แห่งเกามอีบู

"อินทรายุธ"

นามของผู้เขียนเป็นที่รู้จักกันดีอยู่แล้วในหมู่นักอ่านทั่ว ๆ ไป ครั้งนี้เขาเอื้อเฟื้อเขียนให้ "มหาชน" เป็นพิเศษ และฝากแนวคิดอันหนักอึ้งของการเมืองที่เคล้าด้วยความรักให้แก่ผู้อ่านอย่างสมใจ และ———ท่านจะจบเรื่องของเขาลงด้วยความคิด———

Figure 1 The first publication of the political love story titled
'Fatima of Kao Ma I-Bu' in *Mahachon*.
Source: An excerpt from *Mahachon* cited in Siriphatiwirat, 2017, p.15.

The story takes place in the deep south of Thailand, specifically in Pattani, the province where Fatima is from. In the 1940s, the people in the southern provinces of Thailand experienced a sense of alienation as tensions increased in these areas due to Phibun's policy of national assimilation and cultural hegemonization aimed at eradicating Malay-Muslim culture (Tsukamoto, 2020, p. 71). Consequently, discontent and resentment arose amongst the Muslim community. Into this situation, Fatimah of Kao Ma-I Bu comes on the scene. The story is narrated by a male protagonist named Gulit Inthusak, a government attorney from a respectable class and decent family. He meets Fatimah in Pattani and learns the meaning of true love. From what he describes, Fatimah is a beautiful young woman who sees love in a different light. She rejects the conventional notions of love and marriage, believing that human beings are responsible for one another; in other words, she sees a greater purpose in the collective rather than focusing solely on oneself. Hence, one must give up everything, including love, for the sake of the people's liberation and for humanity. With the tense situation in the deep south, she bids farewell to Gulit and joins with the Darussalam Movement to liberate the Malays from imperialism and the fascist government.

The political love story between Fatimah and Gulit continues to be seen in other short stories of Intharayut (Atsani Phonlajan) who now used a different pen name, Gulit

Inthusak. In the *Darussalam Movement*, published in *Siam Nikon* on 25 October in 1949, the story reflects Fatimah's view and interpretation of the issue of love. The character of Fatimah is a representation of a balanced individual and a role-model of a revolutionary woman. On one hand, she is guided by her ideology and takes pride in her political commitment. On the other hand, she is also driven by a pragmatic approach in achieving her goals. Fatimah expresses solidarity with the Southern people who endure suffering; as a result, she made a selfless decision to part ways with her lover. Her quality manifests vividly in Nai Phi's literary collection during the conversation with Gulit Inthusak when she dismisses his proposal:

> Fatimah: *"You are too overwhelmed with love. It is natural that human beings would love and be loved but they might not end up in marriage. Gulit, please believe me that our love is just a mere part of our lives in this world. There are much more important things that are yet to come"*
>
> Gulit: *"Fatimah, if love is not the answer, then what is?"*
>
> Fatimah: *"What is beyond our love is our duty. Yet that duty is a duty to love. Not the romantic relationship I would say, it is the love of your social class. This is the only true and pure love I believe in."* (2014, p. 145-146)

Fatimah's interpretation of love as a duty to the collective compels her to depart and join the Darussalam Movement, with her actions embodying the revolutionary spirit that prioritizes communal struggle over personal desire. On the day of her journey, she promises Gulit that she will return to him only if the liberation and freedom of her homeland and people are achieved. Furthermore, after a year of waiting without hearing any news from Fatimah, Gulit resigns from his position as a government attorney. He then comes to understand the struggle of the oppressed and sets out to find Fatimah (Phonlajan, 2014, p. 188). The story concludes as he arrives in Java and hears the revolutionary song from afar. Thus, we witness the notion of love from a socialist perspective, recognizing its transformative power in creating a just society. Fatimah of Kao Ma-I Bu can be seen as a set of intertextual stories aimed at presenting Nai Phi's ideas towards revolutionary subjects. According to Siriphatiwirat (2017), the story of Fatimah has been praised and retold throughout the time within the leftist movement and several other stories also used her as the main protagonist with the same essence and aspiration, that is, to liberate her homeland and people. (p. 19). In addition, this visual communication also reflects the role of women from a socialist gender and class perspective. First, it highlights the rejection of traditional marriage, which often isolated women and relegated them to the private sphere of family duties. Second, gender can be understood along class lines as a revolutionary category that treats women and men

as equals (Engels, 1884; Ehrenreich, 1976). Therefore, Fatimah's choice to prioritize her homeland over love exemplifies true emancipation.

Interestingly, when examining other socialist visual cultures in Thai left-wing publications, Thailand is often depicted as an agricultural-based country that has yet to industrialize. Consequently, women are frequently portrayed as revolutionary peasants and laborers, resembling but not entirely mirroring the Soviet and Chinese socialist models of "tractor girls." One example is the representation of a revolutionary working woman through the visual image and narrative of a character named Pimpayom, created by an undisclosed author in *Ekkarat* (1980). Like Fatimah, Pimpayom is a fictional character who embodies the roles and voices of women within the communist movement, fighting for her ideology and beliefs.

Figure 2 The picture of Pimpayom as a female peasant.
Source: Illustration from Ekkarat magazine, March 1980.

The story of 'Pimpayom: A Girl Who Holds the Gun' (see Figure 2) was first published in *Ekkarat* (1980), a newspaper affiliated with the Communist Movement (p. 40). Pimpayom is a peasant who grows up in a family that cultivates rice in the countryside of Thailand. Her beauty stems from her hard work, and her robust health is a result of her labor from dawn until dusk in the rice fields. According to the narrative, she is active, skillful, and distinctly different from other women in mainstream Thai society. Unlike urban girls who adorn their faces with makeup, Pimpayom possesses a pure and naturally beautiful visage. She is portrayed as a role model for revolutionary female peasants, inspiring many artists to create additional works featuring her character as the central figure.

Moreover, Pimpayom is also featured in a revolutionary song composed by an unknown artist, characterized by an Isan rhythm that narrates the journey of a young peasant girl working diligently and skillfully in the rice fields. Despite being born, raised, and laboring in a challenging environment, the song depicts her as having an indomitable spirit, free from

feudalism and class oppression. She ultimately joins the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT), venturing into the jungle to become one of the female comrades. Through this narrative, Pimpayom embodies the image of the working Thai peasant who successfully liberates herself and pursues the revolutionary cause with the support of the CPT.

The authors of this *Ekkarat* with the pennames of *Boonwahn* and *Mou Pa* suggest that although Pimpayom is seen as a humble female peasant, she represents an ordinary woman who is driven by a revolutionary aspiration (*Ekkarat*, 1980, p. 41).

Equality-as-Sameness?*:* From Imaginary to Reality of *'*Hmong*'* Women

When discussing women in relation to the leftist movement and the Thai Communist Movement, it is essential to also acknowledge the roles and voices of Hmong women. As the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) expanded its revolutionary bases into the jungle from the 1950s to the 1970s, a number of highland ethnic minorities increasingly became part of the movement. One of the notable upland ethnic groups that allied with the CPT was the Hmong. Ian G. Baird (2020) studied the Hmong minority in Thailand, noting that they are an ethnic group that has resided in Thailand since the 1800s, most having migrated through China, Laos, and Vietnam (p. 3). They settled in the highland areas along the northern border of Thailand and primarily grew opium as their main source of income (Baird, 2020). The Hmong people have frequently been targets of exploitation by lowlanders. After years of grievances regarding this exploitation by the central government, many Hmong individuals were receptive to joining the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT). In other words, the involvement of the Hmong ethnic group in the Thai communist movement during the 1960s resulted from the CPT's strategy of recruiting from and strengthening support in rural areas. Living in the northern and northeastern regions of Thailand, many became members of the CPT from the 1960s onwards. They were motivated by several concerns: (1) unfair taxation by the central government, (2) racial prejudice against the Hmong people, (3) the sexual abuse of Hmong women, (4) the exploitation of their daily subsistence and production by officials, (5) a lack of educational development, (6) concerns about their ineligibility for citizenship, and (7) unwanted government plans to resettle Hmong people (Baird, 2020, p. 5).

When the CPT had expanded to the countryside and jungle areas in the 1950s-1960s, the ethnic group saw Party membership as a new opportunity for them to improve their lives and gain their fundamental rights. The policy of the CPT on their "Ten-Point Program" was relevant to their lives and appreciated by the Hmong, especially women, because it encompassed the idea of gender equality which Hmong women had never genuinely experienced. Hence, by becoming part of the CPT, Hmong women could break through archaic cultural and traditional practices, for example the Party's prohibition of "bride capture" and the bride price tradition. (Baird, 2020, p. 14) The CPT also allowed Hmong

women to have access to education and military training. Such changes broke the old norms of Hmong traditional society.

Figure 3 The heading on a special column about Hmong revolutionary women.
Source: Illustration from *Ekkarat*, March 1980.

With the increased popularity of the CPT along the borders, the number of Hmong women joining the movement as female comrades grew consistently. Hmong women were portrayed as exemplary role models for revolutionary women who fought against societal prejudices and for gender equality. The admirable lives of Hmong comrades were celebrated in several publications. In *Ekkarat* (1980), a special issue was released to honor the heroic acts of Hmong women who became essential driving forces in the liberated areas (Figure 3). The cover features the image of a Hmong woman with short, bobbed hair wearing a military uniform. She holds a gun, and her face is tilted upward, reflecting her fearless aspiration as a female revolutionary ready to engage in battle. The star on her uniform serves as a symbol of her membership in the Communist Party. The caption on the right reads, “Without you]communist women[, we will be demolished,” highlighting the significant involvement of Hmong women in the revolutionary movement.

This issue also features the ‘new life’ of Hmong women in the ‘new society’ created by the CPT, reminiscent of the similar socialist ideal of creating a ‘new man’ in Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union, and China (see Chen, 2008; Luku, 2024). Significantly, young Hmong women who had joined the movement had adjusted their visual appearance through the adoption of new clothing. One interviewee in the special edition of *Ekkarat* mentioned that “]...[the physical appearance of Hmong women has changed from growing their hair long and wearing colorful dresses to having short hair and carrying guns and uniforms]...[” (Ibid., 1980, p. 28). In this context, women’s bodies had become politicized and gendered, as modifying one’s body and donning homogeneous attire communicated a “sexless” and

"shapeless" appearance expected in a society in the course of achieving revolutionary goals (Chen, 2001, p. 143).

After joining the CPT, Hmong women became leading agents in the revolution; they received effective military training from their comrades and fought in actual battles. Those who bravely sacrificed their lives were admired and revered as heroines, and their stories were told even after their deaths (Ibid., 1980, p. 17). This physical and mental reconstruction aimed to integrate Hmong women as equals to their male comrades and represents a significant step toward gender equality. However, it also risked perpetuating a perception of gender erasure in public discourse and the visual realm of mass media.

Despite the portrayal of Hmong women in this light, the CPT's policy to promote gender equality and women's rights by treating individuals with sameness significantly impacted their lives (Baird, 2021). These women were a minority within a minority, choosing to revolt against old societal norms and stand up for themselves. The visuals and narratives surrounding the revolution illustrate that, without Hmong women—the most marginalized of all social groups—other revolutionaries might not have awakened from their oppression. Thus, Hmong women served as communist icons in the physical world, inspiring many female comrades.

Visualizing Socialist Culture*:* Women*'*s at the Forefront

The rapid development of communist publications began in the late 1970s when university students and intellectuals fled to the jungle following the events of October 6, 1976. As a result, the number of left-wing newspapers surged at an unprecedented rate, ultimately exceeding twenty new publications. Some of them are *Tawan Daeng* (The Red Sun)*, Prakaifai* (Spark of Fire)*, Failamthung* (A Wildfire), *Kongna* (The Frontline), *Thong Rop* (Warrior Flag), *Phloeng Patiwat* (Fire of Revolution), *Rutna* (March Forward), *Ekkaphap* (the Equity) (Srinara, 2009, p. 231). These publications were produced in the jungle areas and distributed to other revolutionary bases and cities. The publications affiliated with the CPT can mostly be seen as a mouthpiece of the Party; and thus, they consisted of the political and strategic essays as well as radical literature.

Upon reading the materials, the authors found that women were occasionally depicted on the front cover of the publications. This representation, while not uniform, indicated a conscious effort to recognize the contributions of women within the context of the Thai leftist movement, albeit to a lesser extent than those of Thai leftist masculine radicals. For example, the cover of *Prachakom* (the People's Society), published as a special edition commemorating an occasion of the two Octobers in 1979, features a woman in university uniform standing side by side with her counterparts, holding the Thai flag. She is looking forward with confidence and assertive gestures, which implies her firm determined belief. The background also demonstrates the image of one big circle, resembling the shape of the sun

which reflects the achievement of the Octoberists in bringing a new dawn to Thailand. Similarly, another publication, *Chu Thong Rop* (Raising the Warrior Flag), features a cover that illustrates a socialist visual culture showcasing the patriotic actions of people of all ages holding a red flag adorned with a star. In the center of the image stands a woman wearing a university uniform, holding a book at her side. All individuals in the image face forward, filled with hope. The star on the flag serves as a symbol representing socialist and communist ideology.

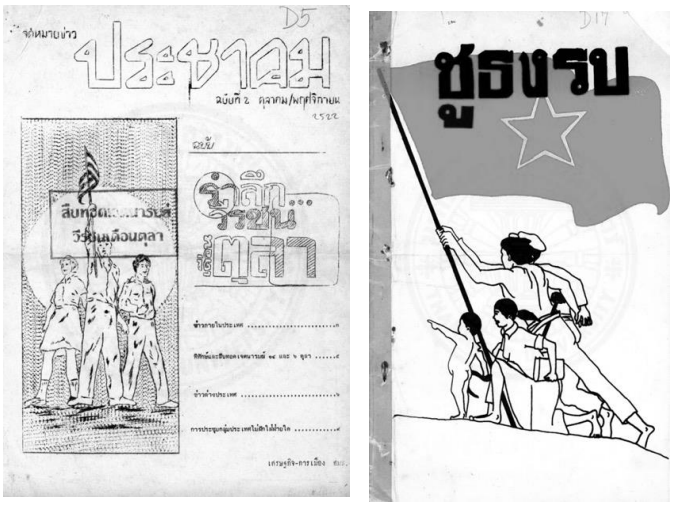

Figure 4 Images of women on newspaper covers presenting female images along with those of their male comrades (left).
Source: Illustration from *Prachakom*, 1979.

Figure 5 Comrades regardless of their gender or age, joining the revolution (right).
Source: Illustration from *Chu Thong Rop*, n.d.

It is interesting to note that there is not a huge number of publications that represent and highlight women and discussions regarding gender explicitly both on the front cover and within the contents. This scarcity suggests that while women's contributions to the movement are acknowledged occasionally, they are often overshadowed by male-centric narratives and perspectives. For example, *Phu Bukboek* (The Pioneers), a monthly magazine published in March-April 1979, also spotlighted women on the cover page. This time, the image differs from those in the two previously mentioned publications. While *Prachakom* and *Chu Thong Rop* depicted women as university students, the cover of *Phu Bukboek* emphasizes a female worker as the central figure in the image (Figure 5).

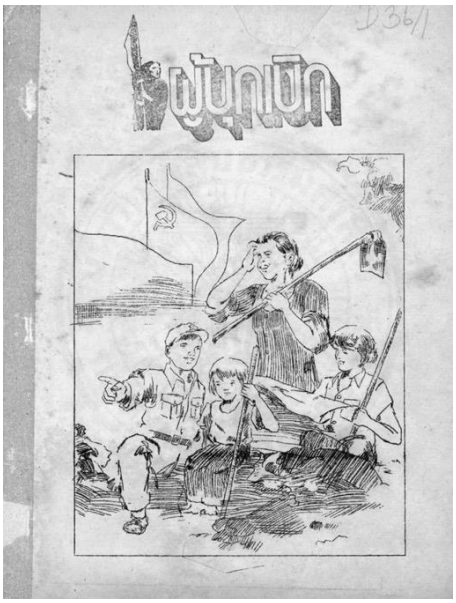

Figure 6 A cover of the *Phu bukboek* newspaper
Source: Illustration from *Phu Bukboek,* March-April 1979.

As shown in Figure 5, the main cover of *Phu Bukboek* (The Pioneers) illustrates different characteristics of women. An adult female worker stands at the center; she holds a spade on her shoulder and faces forward with determination. Her facial expression clearly conveys her pride in her work. Below her are two young girls, both holding shovels and under the supervision of a male comrade. These figures represent female laborers in the countryside. The backdrop of the cover features a communist flag, which flies elegantly in the wind. The message of the image is clear: under the guidance of the CPT, men and women are equal and both can contribute to society and a brighter future for later generations. This representation and rhetoric is similar to how socialist-states in China and the Eastern bloc use to endorse and communicate with people.

Additionally, the content of the March-April 1979 issue of *Phu Bukboek* reflects a socialist viewpoint on female workers illustrated in a form of visual illustration. For example, the story of Rosa Luxemburg (Figure 6) is featured in the publication to inspire readers—particularly its female audience—to recognize their class struggle and pursue the path to emancipation.

Figure 7 Biography of Rosa Luxemburg as one of the newspaper contents.
targeted female audiences
Source: Illustration from *Phu Bukboek*, March-April 1979.

Remarkably, it is only on important occasions such as International Women's Day on March 8th—a day celebrated across socialist states and Western countries—that women are more prominently featured than usual. The emphasis placed on this day echoes the CPT's core belief in gender equality, as outlined in the Ten Points Program, and reflects the significance of women within the CPT. The tone of these special issues differs slightly from that of general publications, as most of the content showcases women as the main agents. The selected publications to be discussed include *Chayo Tulachai* (Victorious Octoberists), *Ekkarat* (Independence), and *Thong Rop* (Warrior Flag).

The special issue of the first publication is *Chayo Tulachai* (Victorious Octoberists), published in March 1980 features images of female revolutionaries on the cover. The sub-headline reads, "female and male comrades stand shoulder-to-shoulder to embrace the new society we create" (Figure 7). The message implies that the contribution of male and female comrades is equally valued towards a transformation of a new society. The women on the cover give a sense of freedom and liberation to the readers; the image suggests that they have "nothing to lose but their chains." Other comrades, both men and women, also come to celebrate the emancipation of women and themselves.

Figure 8 A cover of *Chayo Tulachai* on celebrating International Women's Day.
Source: Illustration from *Chayo Tulachai*, March 1980.

In addition to the visual representation of women on the cover, another element observed in this newspaper is that women-related contents are featured more than the general issues. One interesting section is a cartoon that tells the history of International Women's Day (Figure 8).

Figure 9 A cartoon about the history of International Women's Day
Source: Illustration from *Chayo Tulachai*, March 1980, p. 47.

The illustration below shows how the exploitation of female proletarians in Chicago led to a demand for revolt against the old system. The intention to recount the history of this day is only the tip of the iceberg; in fact, the underlying message is to raise awareness and encourage readers, especially women, to gather their strength and fight against the oppressive capitalist system. It is noteworthy that this publication explicitly provides a glimpse into its political agenda.

Another publication that published a special issue to celebrate International Women's Day was *Ekkarat* (Independence). This special issue on the 8th International Women's Day gives a somewhat different impression when compared to *Chayo Tulachai* (1980). The cover of *Ekkarat* (Figure 9) depicted an image of a woman in uniform carrying a gun at her back.

Figure 10 A cover of *Ekkarat* in the special issue on International Women's Day.
Source: Illustration from *Ekkarat*, 1980.

Her portrayal implies that she is a well-trained soldier. It is in fact an adaptation of a famous socialist icon. The image strongly resembles the famous photograph of Che Guevara. Note the use of shadows, the angle of the hair and the eyes raised aloft. Below her image is a communist symbol and the sub-headline of "New Woman: The Liberation of Class Struggle." The message and the image of the woman give a clear understanding of roles of women in liberation struggles which again echo the socialist model of 'new man' (Luku, 2024). In addition to the cover, the content in this newspaper is more politico-centric than the articles previously mentioned. It contains a critical essay on the CPT's policy that is directly related to women's welfare and lengthy interviews with female comrades. This issue emphasized people who worked in the revolutionary areas and appreciatively recognized their dedication to the CPT and the welfare of the public. More interestingly, we can see the

emotional messages throughout the newspaper, which in turn are meant to arouse the readers' rapport and reflect the underlying intention of contributors.

Figure 11 Banners in *Ekkarat* newspaper reflected the newspaper's core belief in gender equality and anti-imperialist sentiment.

Source: Illustration from *Ekkarat*, March 1980.

The representation of 'New Women' is also evident in another communist publication, *Thong Rop* (Warrior Flag), which was issued on International Women's Day in 1980. As with *Ekkarat* (1980), the origins of *Thong Rop* and its other versions are unidentifiable. However, from the only issue available, it can be observed that these two publications (*Ekkarat*, 1980 and *Thong Rop*, 1980) attempt to present images of women in a similar way (Figure 11).

Figure 12 A cover of *Thong Rop*, represents a female comrade who single-handedly handles a heavy gun.

Source: Illustration from *Thong Rop*, March 1980.

Thong Rop's cover features an image of a woman handling a heavy gun single-handedly, dressed in a full revolutionary Maoist uniform that conveys her ideological stance. The expression on her face reflects her well-trained military skills and strong determination. This portrayal represents the ideal woman as envisioned by communist publications, which aim to reshape female identities and their representations from a communist perspective in their newly assigned roles. Collectively, these publications seek to disseminate leftist ideas, particularly about women, to raise awareness and ultimately mobilize individuals to advance the communist revolution. Each edition of these newspapers serves a distinct function primarily aligned with the political objectives of the party. Through these communist print media, the roles and voices of women are equally represented.

Discussion

In contrast with mainstream representations, the examination of communist publications demonstrates several attempts to reconstruct the image of womanhood. These representations aimed to reconstruct women's perceptions of themselves that contested with mainstream gender norms. From the socialist point of view, women were one of the main driving forces in achieving an egalitarian society. Thus, these publications portrayed women in their full potential, either physically or spiritually. One of the examples is Fatimah of Kao Ma-I Bu and her representation as a revolutionary woman. Fatimah was the revolutionary

icon whose qualities align with the socialist gender discourse and visual representation emphasizing revolution, the liberation from social class, the oppression from the central authority and even traditional marriage. She rejected the conventional form of relationship, marriage, and gender norms prescribed by society. Fatimah's physicality is barely alluded to, given that her creation is based on the author's imagination, and instead her *spirit* is implied as the most significant quality for women in the revolutionary movement. In the publications discussed above, one evident theme is the discourse surrounding socialism and gender, as well as its visual culture related to female bodies. The physical adjustments to women's appearances, framed as 'sameness,' along with their new representations, convey a central message for communist female comrades in an egalitarian society. The images of women wearing communist military uniforms, handling guns, dressing in unisex costumes, and training alongside their male counterparts are prevalent throughout these publications, implying an attempt to reconstruct gender norms that were previously absent in mainstream representations.

The representations of women through images and narratives in these publications serve as role models within a socialist utopia, reflecting a degree of receptivity from other socialist states. However, this receptivity is minimal, largely due to the lack of state involvement in the underground party's propaganda efforts and the absence of a prevailing influence of socialist ideology in shaping visual communication and public discourse, especially when compared to other socialist states. In those states, visual culture is often explicitly and heavily state-sponsored, with top-down policies aimed at enforcing gender equality through print media. In Thailand, however, this approach resonated more with individuals engaged in or interested in leftist and radical politics as an alternative means of societal transformation, alongside the notion that communism and the Communist Party of Thailand have always been viewed as anathema. Aesthetically, the artworks in Thai communist publications align with the principles of social realism, a genre of art that was predominantly supported by the socialist states, aimed at emphasizing the working class as a means of reflecting socio-political conditions.

Furthermore, these publications and the CPT played a significant role in promoting gender equality. One example as discussed was Hmong women's gender liberating experiences and physical readjustment under the guidance of the CPT. Indeed, the policy of the CPT, as illustrated in at least one of these publications, succeeded in promoting gender equality and women's rights for Hmong women by transforming both their physical and mental states to challenge traditional societal structures and assert their independence.

It is important to note that discussions regarding women in these publications were mentioned occasionally. And, as noted earlier, this was particularly evident on occasions like International Women's Day, when women's issues were prominently addressed. For

example, the column in *Thong Rop* (1980), published in a special issue for International Women's Day and titled 'Shoulder to Shoulder, Ready to Fight for Our New World,' stated that the role of women at revolutionary bases was to stand up and realize their potential as equals in rights and abilities alongside their male counterparts. It, thus, depicted women in accordance with socialist visual culture and socialist values.

Upon analyzing these materials, it is evident that certain aspects of gender are examined from a leftist male standpoint, with masculinity serving as the reference point for defining gender equality. This perspective introduces ambiguity in the discourse surrounding equality as sameness and other representations and narratives regarding women, as it implies the erasure of women as a distinct gender and the masculinization of their bodies. Despite this tendency, there were several attempts to promote women's welfare and equal rights. The Thai Communist Movement, however, was a minority movement that faced significant suppression and did not gain widespread traction throughout the country, unlike the movements in Eastern Bloc countries and China during the Cold War tensions. It frequently encountered restrictions and censorship from the rightist forces.

From the materials examined, while the intention of the CPT and its publications was to promote gender equality, they did not fully address the essence and practicality of this notion. Nevertheless, they brought women to the forefront and highlighted their narratives as the main subjects. The reconstruction of female images portrayed in these publications led some women to attempt a process of self-reconstruction and self-discovery, enabling them, to a certain extent, to become part of the revolutionary force striving for a just society.

Conclusion

This article presents a new perspective on gender discourse through the lens of socialist visual culture in left-wing publications. It contributes to the existing scholarship on the Thai leftist movement and the cultural politics of the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT). While previous studies have examined Thai leftist publications in depth, they lack insight into gender issues, particularly regarding women's involvement in the revolutionary movement.

We have examined the contested images and representations of women by assessing the narratives and visual communication within left-wing materials, focusing on the discourses surrounding gender and socialism and how they were received and depicted in these publications. By analyzing the images and representations of women, we demonstrate that they serve not only as effective instruments for articulating ideological positions but also reveal the political tensions of the era. Understanding this pivotal period of the progressive movement in modern Thai history is incomplete if the roles and voices of women within the movement are overlooked.

Many avenues remain to be explored, as our study is based entirely on archival sources. Future investigations should not only include oral histories, especially as involved

individuals pass away over time, but also consider other aspects such as transnational connections and flows. By pursuing this approach, we can gain a broader understanding of the women's movement beyond our immediate context and engage in conversations about how women in the Thai leftist movement served an integral part of a larger revolutionary force internationally.

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