

CULTURAL NOTES

Holy Mother, Mother Dear...or, How Would You Like To Be a Mother in Thailand

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Introduction

The present note on the position of women in Thai culture derives its interest from the comparability of that position with that of women in lowland Christian Filipino culture. As such its publication is meant to entice reflection and discussion.

The note can be read as information about how educated, middle class Thais conceptualize and ideologize the role of women. The power of these ideas still places the women in the golden cage of moral motherhood in spite of her active participation in modern society. The cage is both imposed and self-imposed, women apparently finding security in role fulfillment and satisfaction in the idea of moral superiority.

At a deeper level the note approaches the position of women as a problem of the complementarity of the male and female domains in Thai culture. It appears that male roles are as much prescribed as female roles and that each gender has been assigned a different domain in life. The relative exclusiveness of domains leads to a remarkable mutual dependence and probably to a low measure of sharing because activities and experiences remain gender specific.

The combination of complementarity and separations of domains, especially in everyday life, leads to a rather obstinate resistance against the reconceptualization of the female domain. This conservative attitude is reinforced by the central importance of the position of "mother" in Thai culture and the threatening awareness that the totality of the cultural fabric will be affected by any change in gender relationships.

Thailand, "The Land of Smiles", is known for the charm of its women and also thought to be a bachelor's holiday paradise. It is known for serene Buddhist temples and also for Thai boxing, probably the most vicious form of pugilism. As it is often said, the Thai have a smile for every emotion, and whereas the gracious smile of one woman may underline her unassailability, it may be another woman's invitation. The peaceful temple preserves the Buddhist Path and may also serve as a training-school for kick boxing.

What brings all this together is a remarkable separation of the male and female domains in life. The Thais like women to be beautiful and charming, virtuous and unassailable. Yet, the men also seem to have a strong need for other women for their self-expression. They also box. And become monks.

Whereas women seem to represent beauty and virtue—the two elements are almost fused in Thai thinking—men are supposed to be able to dominate the wider world and express their manliness in the brothel and the ring, in politics and religion. In that last area women need them most.

As monks, men are representatives of the virtue of Buddhism and of the sacred and its power. It is by way of monks that people can gain the merit they need to enhance their chances for a better rebirth or even for the improvement of their current circumstances. Whereas gaining merit is not an exclusive female preoccupation, women are thought to gain tremendous merit by having a son ordained in the temple.

Yet, why would a young man bother to engage in the disciplined life of a monk when there is so much more fun and excitement in the world outside? Of course, there may be many reasons such as poverty or the quest for an education, but the traditional motivation will also hold for most, namely, to make merit for one's parents, especially for mother.

In Thai education children are impregnated with the idea that mother is the most important of persons. She has given life to the child, suffering for and feeding the child at the cost of her own body. Moreover, she is the source of love and care, and all that she gives for free. This giving of goodness results in a moral debt on the side of her child, a debt that the latter is never able to repay.

The only thing that the child can do to reciprocate, is to love his/her mother. This love is expressed in being obedient to her, in considering and anticipating her feelings, in showing gratitude and

respect. Not doing so would imply the denial of the goodness of the mother, a denial that would come closest to the western notion of sin, also because such behaviour is believed to invite immediate supernatural retribution. No wonder that mother succeeds in impressing herself firmly on the emotional life of her offspring. Consequently, to make the sacrifice of becoming a temporary monk, is an expression of filial devotion.

As a source of goodness mother symbolizes virtue and selflessness. She is the pivot of one's moral obligations that revolve in the family. Her purity symbolizes the wholeness of the home. It is thus not too far-fetched to conclude that mother easily becomes the foremost reference point of one's conscience, that conscience is consciousness of her, and that she is the primary superego representative of most Thais.

This thinking may elucidate a curious phenomenon, namely, a vast production of mother-centred literature. When I first ran across the collection *Mother Dear*, I just felt amazed at finding some sixty short stories and poems devoted to "Mother" and written by all kinds of notable people, such as army officers, medical doctors, government ministers, well-known nobility, etc. Soon I found out that almost all Thai authors write one or more short stories, and sometimes whole novels presumably about their own mothers.

Needless to observe that this literature is most boring. Apart from eulogizing mother, she is invariably depicted in the terms that the Thai ideology requires. She is not a person any longer, but the symbol of virtue and sacrifice, of goodness and forgiveness. Yet, also in the general literature it is very difficult indeed to find flawed mothers, mothers of flesh and blood who act as normal living people.

Thus I was very happy the day somebody told me about a collection of short stories written by a practising female psychiatrist. Five of the six stories are about the mother-child relationship, and indeed, the author tries to bring more life to the character of the mother, some of whom she describes as cruel, non-caring and non-protective. Yet even she does not dare to draw clear conclusions; on the contrary, toward the end of her stories it is the children who recognize that their mothers are the best of persons and that it was their own perceptions which were at fault.

Obviously the mother image is inviolably sacred. Being mystified, the ideological fog surrounding her position seems to be

particularly dense. By becoming the symbol of Thai morality she is placed beyond the ordinary world of men and everyday life. There she goes unaided, she is the Holy Mother on earth where Catholics would have the Holy Virgin of the Chinese their Kwan Yin.

Ideologically mother stands on the lonely pedestal that seems to be her place in many societies that cultivate a virility complex, whether it is Mexican macho or Latin he-manship. In that complex it is men who compulsively strive to steal the show, not so much to outdo women, but in competition among themselves. They like to indulge in boastful behaviour, demonstrating their masculinity by drinking and playing around with women. They relegate their wives to the home where she should fulfill the role of moral mother who is not supposed to be a lover. The area of erotic adventure is squarely outside the home where one finds a "different type of woman".

It appears that roles are firmly prescribed and that people find their security in conforming to role expectations. For the Thai husband these expectations focus on his duty to provide for his family while the other expectations about his virility should be proven in the world outside. And whereas Thai women may and do occupy all kinds of positions in public life, they are supposed to find their fulfillment in the roles of mother and wife. In these positions they should defer to men and accept the latter's privileged status. Needless to say that this separation of domains keeps men and women at a distance from each other, a distance that marriage most often maintains rather than bridges.

In Thailand the competition for status and power appears to be intense, often giving rise to a lively political spectacle. Beyond the smile and female gracefulness one finds the authoritarian ethos of a highly hierarchical society characterized by the struggle for power and personal prestige. It is conflicts of interest and the condition in which "face" can be easily insulted that make the country a rather violent place with an unusually high murder rate.

So, next to the serene Buddhist temples and the mother centred home, one finds the male area of contention and strife that contrasts with the dependable area of existence that is symbolized by things female. The good things in life, such as the earth on which we depend for a living, the rice that nourishes us, the water that sustains life, and the guardian angel that protects the young child—all of them are represented as female, such as Mother Earth, Mother Rice, Mother of Water, etc.

It is not really a question of whether an ordinary Thai woman can even moderately live up to the image of goodness and morality that the Thai ideology bestows on her. Normally she is firmly of the world, and in that world she should first of all be dependable. This is the role that Thai culture assigns to her; to be dependable as a wife and a mother, to be the stable point in a world that allows males to gamble and gallowant, seek adventure and self-aggrandizement.

The male world means risk, politics and prestige. Consequently males are vulnerable, easily offended, liable to loss of face in their quest for glory. Basically theirs is a competitive world, and where the risk of disappointment is so high, they need the compensation of a reliable home to relax in and to nurse the injuries to their egos that they suffer in the world outside. They therefore depend far more on their mothers and wives than the latter do on them. In a way many men remain boys, a kind of sons to their wives.

This practical situation gives the woman a one-up vis-a-vis the man and sustains her claim on him, gives reason for her possessiveness. By being dependable she fills in her position of the other's "conscience" and it is her dependability that is her bargaining power with respect to a dependent male. As the Thai say, she functions as "the hindlegs of the elephant", sustaining the great masculinity show that would crumble without her support.

Most Thai women are quite pragmatic about all this. Where men often appear to be wishy-washy, spoiled, cocky, and lost in the greatness of their schemes, the women are generally hard-working, responsible and conscientious. They can take and do take a lot. In spite of this, they normally maintain their good humor and their grace, contributing to the mystique of Thailand being "The Land of Smiles". Let nobody be mistaken, though. In the male dominated world of Thailand a smile may mean anything, from defence to submission, from politeness to subservience, and behind smiling female grace and elegance one often finds powerful, goal-getting women. Be that as it may, the Thais appreciate grace and elegance; things should be beautiful to be in order, yet, this order also requires hard work and dependability. Consequently it is women who are at the heart of Thai life.