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## Women's Rôle in the Development of Burma, Thailand and Malaya

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Southeast Asia consists of a number of countries of differing history and racial composition, and when I asked Professor D.G.E. Hall, author of the *History of Southeast Asia*, what were the common characteristics of these countries which justified the treatment of Southeast Asia as a historical unit, he instanced several, including the high position of women in this region.

The position of women in the Hindu, Muslim and Chinese (Confucian - Buddhist - Taoist) societies has certainly not been high in the past, and although Burma, Thailand and Malaya are the extensions and developments of these several societies, the fact is that women have traditionally enjoyed a greater freedom than in India, the Middle East, China or Japan, though still not great as compared with (say) Britain or among the highly emancipated women of America. But in the growth of Far Eastern nationalism, the women's movement has taken an increasingly important part. In the case of China, I should, from personal experience, be willing to commit myself to the statement that of the numerous factors conducing to the success of the Communist Revolution the most important was the emancipation of women. One English writer who witnessed the spread of women's emancipation in the "liberated areas" of the North-West during the Japanese war of 1941-5 described it as spreading through the villages "like a forest fire". In Southeast Asian, however, where women have been much less in evidence than in China, they have nevertheless played an increasingly important rôle in social and political affairs.

I will now attempt to give some detailed impressions of women's rôle, country by country, before attempting to generalize for the three countries together.

## BURMA (I)

Women have always enjoyed a high legal and social status in Burma. In marriage they retain their own name, the rights in the property they bring to the marriage, and an equal share with the husband in property acquired during the marriage. Husband and wife are practically equal in regard to divorce. A man could have more than one wife, however, and in this case customary law protected the rights of the several wives. Trant in *Two Years at the Court of Ava* (1826) refers to the intelligent interest taken by the women in public affairs. At least two of the queens of Burma during the eighteenth century ruled both their husbands and their country. Until (and for sometime after) the introduction of British rule, the chieftainship in some villages descended in the female line.

Although from a material and administrative point of view, British rule accomplished marked improvements in Burma, its social results were largely negative. Burmans neither liked nor understood the impersonal British Indian system of law, which was so vastly different from their own personal feudal obligations and customary law. Factors responsible for social control were also weakened because of the declining influence of the Buddhist monks. In these circumstances women in Burma fell into the background, but were beginning to emerge again in the twentieth century with the growth of nationalism. Social work was mostly carried out (if at all) by English women. A notable Burmese exception, however, was Daw Tee Tee (Mrs Luce), a magistrate of the Children's Court who conducted and (with her husband) still conducts a home for Waifs and Strays in Rangoon.

During the latter years of British rule about one quarter of the graduates in Arts at the University of Rangoon were women, and more than half of the graduates in Education. There were a few lady doctors and a few lawyers including one or two barristers, and some of these practised in the Courts. But before the Second World War Burmese women had not taken very much even to clerical employment. In the pre-war political system women had the franchise on nearly the same terms as men, and they were eligible for membership of either Chamber of the Legislature — but it does not appear that any women were elected.

(1) I am indebted to Mr J.S. Furnivall, I.C.S. (Retd.) for some valuable notes on Women's Rôle in the Development of Burma.



After the attainment of independence there was a sudden development in the activities of women in Burma. There were half a dozen women in the Constituent Assembly, though none was prominent. Since the Constituent Assembly was replaced by a Legislature with two Chambers there have usually been one or two women in either or both Chambers. There is an active women's branch of the ruling party, A.F.P.F.L. who turn up in their uniform (red *longyis*) at meetings alongside elderly girl-guides, also numerous, in blue *longyis*. But the main rôle of Burmese women remains behind the scenes and is exercised through their menfolk. There is an increasing number of female doctors and lawyers and a considerable number of lecturers and tutors in the University, including at least one Professor (of geography). Burmese women also appear to be taking an increased part in business, not merely in the bazaars (which they have always done) but in business conducted on modern lines (in which they seem singularly adept in obtaining import licenses!) A Women's Auxiliary Corps has recently been recruited for work in the Signals Department, the Army Medical Department and the Army Records Office.

One of the striking features in recent years is the emergence of Burmese women in various welfare activities. The official list of Social Welfare Agencies contains a dozen or more organizations run by women for women. Chief among these is the Union of Burma Council of Social Service, founded in 1954, with Daw Khin Kyi, the widow of General Aung San, as Chairman. She was already prominent in welfare work before the Council was founded. Another lady who has taken a leading part in welfare activities is Daw Mya Yi, the wife of the Prime Minister. One offshoot of the Council is the Union of Burma Moral and Social Council founded in 1956. Among the leaders in intellectual activities one of the most prominent is Daw Mya Sein, a historian who was the first U Nu lecturer in America — in a series of lectures organized by the Asá Society in honour of the Prime Minister, U Nu.

Burmese girls have long taken to tennis and play other outdoor games. They also appear in "swim-suits" at beauty contests, but this is considered "not quite nice", and ballroom dancing is also regarded as a very doubtful propriety. One rarely sees a woman drive a car or ride a bicycle.

Daw Mya Sein has recently written a very interesting article on



"The Women of Burma" (2), from which I abstract the following points.

My foreign friends (she says) are surprised to see an ordinary Burmese woman sitting at her stall in a bazaar, often smoking a cigar, and handling her trade with all the hardheaded business acumen of a man, or in an agricultural family, planting, reaping, or winnowing, yet on a social occasion to see the Burmese women cluster together on one side of the room leaving the men to talk to each other in a group of their own. They also remark that at a meal the men are served first and that their wives offer them every deference within the home. Nor is there anything unusual in the sight of a man walking ahead while his wife follows a few paces behind carrying bundles. The apparent paradox is due to the special place that Burmese women occupy in our society. For centuries Burmese women have accepted as their right a high measure of independence. The Buddhist and Hindu influences that came to Burma at comparatively later periods have modified the social status of women but they have always retained their legal and economic rights. "In most of Asia (remarks Daw Mya Sein) women have had to fight for equality with men primarily on these matters — marriage, divorce and inheritance. In Burma we have been singularly fortunate in possessing this equality even before we knew it was a problem."

Another leading personality among the women of Modern Burma is Daw Mi Mi Kyang (with whom I had the advantage of conversing when visiting the Shan State in 1956). She is the author of "Burmese Family" (London, 1946) which gives a graphic picture of the woman's rôle in Burma.

#### THAILAND

Although they have frequently been at war with one another, the Burmese and the Thais have a lot common, and are very similar in basic racial origin and in customs and religion (as in Burma, the Theravada — Hinayana — Buddhism is paramount). Thus most of the things that have been already said about Burmese women apply with almost equal force to Thai women. But because Burma and Malaya came under British rule while Thailand remained inde-

(2) In « Perspective of Burma », An *Atlantic Monthly* supplement, published in 1958.



pendent under an absolute monarchy, modern Western ideas regarding women's rights have penetrated rather more slowly into Thailand.

Writing of his mission to Siam (now officially known as Thailand) in 1855, Sir John Bowring said in his book, *The Kingdom and People of Siam*, "On the whole, the condition of woman in Siam is better than in most Oriental countries". Wives or concubines, he recorded, were kept in any number according to the wealth or will of the husband, but the wife who had been the object of the marriage ceremony, called the Khan mak, took precedence of all the rest, and was really the sole legitimate spouse [as was the Ch'ai (Cantonese), or wife, in China] and she and her own descendants were the only legal heirs to the husband's possessions. Divorce was easily obtained on application from the woman, in which case the dowry was restored to the wife. If there were only one child it belonged to the mother, who also took the third, fifth child etc; the husband the second, fourth, etc. A husband might sell a wife he had purchased, but not one who had brought him a dowry.

One great obstacle to the emancipation of women in Thailand was the arbitrary nature of the government. Until 1932, when a middle-class "revolution" took place Thailand remained an absolute monarchy. Mrs. Anna H. Leonowens, who was for five years (1862-67) a governess at the Siamese Court, has left on record a striking account of her difficulties (3).<sup>5</sup> The Future King Chulalongkorn was her pupil. She gives a harrowing description of the flogging of the royal concubines with savage brutality for comparatively trivial offences ("When once the King was enraged, there was nothing to be done but to wait in patience until the storm should exhaust itself by its own fury. But it was horrible to witness such an abuse of power at the hands of one who was the only source of justice in the land"). But the injustice was not due to the inferior position of women in Siam but to the great respect for the royal "authority", which left justice to the caprice of a single individual.

Under Chulalongkorn and his successors, Thailand was modernized by fairly rapid stages so that the foreign powers were prevailed upon to give up their extra-territorial privileges in the first twenty years of the present century. Debt-slavery (once common) was abolished.

(3) «The English Governess at the Siamese Court» (1870, new edition 1954).

Mr John de Young has given us an up-to-date picture of the position of women in rural Thai society (4). He says :

"The social position of the Thai peasant woman is powerful : she has long had a voice in village governmental affairs; she often represents her household at village meetings where her husband cannot attend; she almost always does the buying and selling in the local market (It is so unusual for a Thai male to do this that it elicits comment if he does). Through their marketing activities Thai farm women produce a sizable portion of the family cash income, and they not only handle the household money, but usually act as the family treasurer and hold the purse string..."

Thai women attend primary schools, like their husbands, and may, if they are widowed, become heads of households; religious and military careers are not open to them, and they play little direct part in politics.

#### MALAYA (5)

For the purposes of brevity, I have treated the population of Burma and Thailand as being composed entirely of Burmese or Thais though there are several minorities in Burma with varying attitudes towards women and in Thailand there is a large Chinese minority accounting for a fifth or sixth of the total population. In Malaya, however, the Malays are only in a small majority of some hundreds of thousands over the Chinese in the Federation while Singapore is 85 % a Chinese Colony. (The Indians in Malaya total about 800,000). Since intermarriage between Malays and Chinese is negligible I shall deal with these communities separately.

#### The Malays.

The Malays are Muslims, but originally followed the Hindu religion until their conversion to Islam, beginning in Malaya with that of the Kingdom of Malacca in the fifteenth century. Malay society still retains some Hindu elements.

In Negri Sembilan a matrilineal system of inheritance still prevails; elsewhere it is patrilineal. Regarding Malay women, Sir Richard Winstedt says that they can hardly be described as an inferior sex,

(4) « Village Life in Modern Thailand », University of California, 1955.

(5) I am indebted to Mr W.L. Blythe, C.M.G., M.C.S. (retired) for some valuable notes on the women of Malaya.

although immemorial superstition makes it rare for the unsophisticated to feed with their male folk, "but the Muhammedan law is less kind to them over divorce and inheritance than is native custom". The property, and income from it, of a Mohammedan woman are independent of control by her husband. Professor Raymond Firth in his Study of Malay fishermen was struck by "the freedom of [Malay] women especially in economic matters. Not only do they exercise an important influence on the control of the family finances, commonly acting as bankers for their husbands, but they also engage in independent enterprises, which increase the family supply of cash". But Malay society, although without much differentiation between the sexes, is by no means without class distinctions, and in intermarriage between the classes the raja had greater liberties of choice than that enjoyed by his women folk. A Malay, as a Muslim, may have up to four wives at a time.

There is no *pardah* system among the Malays, and women move about with perfect freedom with their faces only slightly concealed by a shawl. They laugh, chat, and (often) flirt with the other sex in a way their sisters in most other Muslim countries would not dare to do.

But though Malay women have made great advances in recent years and take an increasing part in social affairs, They have taken little part, to date, in politics, though there is at least one Malay woman member of the Federal Legislature. At the same time, as compared with her Malayan Chinese sister, she is still very backward and secluded. It is among the Chinese of Malaya that the greatest advance among women is to be found.

### The Chinese.

Up to the Second World war, there were three Chinese males in Malaya to every female. This unbalance led to prostitution and a traffic in women and girls. The Chinese Protectorate combated this traffic, and it was in association with the homes for women and girls established by the Protectorate that some of the earliest welfare work was done by Chinese women. A Chinese Ladies Society was formed in Singapore some thirty-five years ago whose members were mostly graduates of Methodist Mission Schools. Later on Ladies Chinese Athletic Societies were formed in several centres. But the most important development in women's activities came through the increase in the number of girls attending Chinese schools (schools in which Chinese was the medium of instruction). This brought Malayan



Chinese girls into contact with the women's movement in China, and the students' self-governing associations which were now formed in these schools had a strong Communist tinge.

The Chinese *towkays* (business leaders) of Malaya were very conservative and opposed the modernization of the marriage law (6). From 1931 onwards, however, after the promulgation of the new Civil Code in China, the modern style of marriage became increasingly popular, and the brides tended to insist on it as it treated them as equals — not as « chattels ».

With the liberation of Malaya from the Japanese in 1945, there was a great quickening in the pace of emancipation of Malayan Chinese women, and they began to take part in public life to an unprecedented extent. In the Federation, one or two Chinese women were elected to the Legislature (notable among them being Mrs B. H. Oon, O.B.E.) and in Singapore they were also appearing in active politics. One Chinese woman was elected to the Municipal Council in 1948, and there are now (I believe) three Chinese women members. Women in Singapore have the same franchise as men (everyone of 21 years and above, born in Singapore, and having lived there for a term of years is entitled to vote. There is no property qualification. But in the Federation the Chinese and Indians have not yet obtained equality of franchise with the Malays).

But, as in Burma and Thailand, it is not in the political field that women are most active. They are obtaining increased scope as clerks and typists in government and municipal offices and in business. There are now a number of Chinese and Indian J.P's in Singapore. They are also prominent in Red Cross, Rotary, etc. The success of Chinese women athletes from Malaya in England and elsewhere has been notable — especially in Badminton and table tennis in which they have won championships. When one sees Chinese women so energetic in every sphere, it is hard to believe that foot-binding was general in China almost up to the Revolution of 1911, and women with bound feet are still to be found in some country districts in China (7).

(6) See Purcell, « The Chinese in Malaya » (1948).

(7) Before World War II, Chinese girls under 17 years of age arriving in Malaya with bound feet had their feet unbound by order of the Protector of Chinese (on medical advice). Above that age, the feet were unlikely to recover their natural shape.







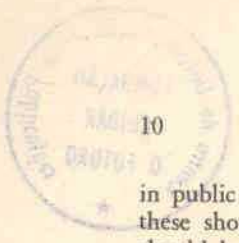
## CONCLUSION

The biggest single factor in encouraging the emergence of women in Southeast Asia is undoubtedly the increase in educational facilities for them. Traditionally it was not considered desirable in the several communities that women should be educated, and even the majority of boys remained illiterate. Now these attitudes have mostly disappeared, and women are coming into their own. Nevertheless, except for the few women fire-brands one encounters as leaders in the field of organized labour, they manifest no general desire to dominate their males — at least not by direct action. Thus the extreme form of feminism which has appeared in some Western countries is absent in Burma, Thailand and Malaya. The women of the several communities usually identify themselves with their husbands, sons, etc and no social problem has been created by their emergence from obscurity to a state of increasing power. Hence (unlike in some Western countries) there is no class of wealthy but disgruntled women with insufficient outlet for their energies, and the frustrated, "bossy" type of militant feminist is practically unknown.

## ADDENDUM

Since the above was written I have received the Report of the 1957 Seminar on the civic responsibilities and increased participation of Asian women in public life, held at Bangkok under the auspices of the United Nations from 5-16 August 1957 (UN/New York, 1957). The Seminar was conducted by delegates from Burma (Daw Sein Tin), Cambodia, China, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Malaya (Mrs Chin Nyeon Then), Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Sarawak, Singapore (Mrs Mary Lobo), and Thailand (Mrs Raem Promobol Bunyaprasop), as well as by numerous representatives of international women's agencies, UN agencies, and observers of governments, etc. The Seminar studied their subject under a number of headings — the meaning of civic rights and responsibilities, participation of women in the process of government, educational conditions, health conditions, social and religious attitudes, community development as it affects women's participation in public life, and projects in which women's participation should be developed and increased.

Among the numerous conclusions reached by the Seminar, there is space only to note a few — e. g. VIII, i, In many Asian countries the law gives women equal status with men, but their full participation



in public life is still hampered by customs and traditions. Some of these should be maintained, but those which have become obsolete should be discarded. VIII, ii, Particular attention must be given to transitional measures tending to curtail polygamy and to speed up the natural evolution towards monogamy, VIII, iv, Educated women should take the lead in changing social patterns which have hampered women's participation in public life, and should seek co-operation of men in this matter. VIII, viii, Legal and sociological studies on the status of women, on the national and international level, are useful for the improvement of women's status, in Asian countries.

## Fundação Cuidar o Futuro