

The Role of Gender Relations in the Study of Female Images

Entry in Heisei 16

Destination country: Thailand

Dispatch organization: Women's and Youth's Studies Program, Thammasat University

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A Brief Summary of the Organization and of the Dispatch Destination

The Master of Arts in Women's Studies, Thammasat University, traces its origin back in 1986 when the Women's and Youth's Studies Project, an agency under the supervision of the Office of the Dean, embarked on developing the curriculum related to women and youth. During its infancy, the Project put tremendous efforts on broadening views on women and youth by including them into the already available courses and by initiating new courses that accommodate and propagate these views. However, in 1996 the Project Committee foresaw the need to establish a course focusing specifically on women and the youth as social problems related to women and the youth intensified both in degree and scope. Drafting of the course outline followed in parallel with the promotion of other scholarly activities such as holding academic conferences and publishing scholarly journals on women's



studies. These efforts culminated in the establishment of the Master of Arts Degree in Women's Studies when the University Council approved the curriculum and authorized the Women's and Youth's Studies Project to oversee the course in collaboration with the Board of Volunteer Bachelors. In 2006, the University Council decided to subsume the course under the supervision of the College of Interdisciplinary Studies; the course has held its current status ever since.

The brochure of the Master of Arts Program in Women's Studies, Thammasat University. The program's flagship principle of "Opening New Perspectives, Knowing Men, and Understanding Women" is shown on the front page of the brochure.

Motives behind the Choice of Dispatch Destination and Objectives Set Prior to Dispatch

My research deals primarily with the comparison of popular female images during the first Phibun's Administration (1938 – 1944) against those during Phibun's second administration (1948 – 1957). During both periods, the ideology of nationalism was spread widely to the general public. At its core, the study concentrates on female images as reflected in issues of enormous social implications such as polygyny and prostitution in a practically polygynous society of Thailand in the mid-twentieth-century.

Historians suggest that gender relations must be integrated if one is to understand the dynamics of historical incidents. This further suggests to me that to effectively capture female images during Phibun's regimes, it is thus necessary for my study to utilize gender relations as an analyzing tool, as they could elucidate not only



National Archives of Thailand, a must-visit place for historians.

the inferiority of women who were often victimized during these periods but also the underlying power relations between both sexes in a culturally unique setting of Thailand. Furthermore, a good understanding of gender relations would serve as a critical basis for tackling social problems being faced by the contemporary Thai society such as polygyny and prostitution.

It would thus be an invaluable experience for me, as a historian who lacks background training in sociology, to participate in a course that enriches participants with extensive gender perspectives and theories.

Another one of my objectives was to collect data related to polygyny and prostitution during the studied periods at the National Archive. It was expected that insightful perspectives obtained from attending a course in gender relations would contribute a great deal to the way I interpret the collected data and to my better understanding of female images during both of the Phibun administrations.

Activities during Dispatch

I attended a course, “*Developments and Conceptualizations in Feminist Theory*”, held from June 8 to October 30, 2007. The course was held as part of the requisite coursework required to earn the Master Degree of Arts in Women’s Studies, Thammasat University. Instructed by Associate Professor Dr. Chalidaporn Songsamphan, the course provides an overview and the evolution of feminist theory, with particular attention to two questions: How does a feminist analysis influence our understanding of sociopolitical processes? What are the political issues and strategies that emerge from feminist theory?

During the course of study, I had an opportunity to explore the broad range of theories and ideas that make up the body of scholarship referred to as “feminist theory”; to analyze the variety of feminist theoretical positions and how each examines the nature and causes of the oppression of females; to examine how differences in class, sexual identity, time, place, values, etc., inform their assessment of a particular theoretical position; and to apply feminist theory to practical situations with the goal of improving women’s lives. The small class-size of 20 students allowed for active engagement in discussions on these topics.

Two suggested readings assigned by the instructor, *Truth about Sex: A Public Debate on Sex in the House of Representatives* (เมื่อผู้หญิงคิดจะมีหนวด: การต่อสู้ความจริงของเรื่องเพศในสภาผู้แทนราษฎร by Chalidaporn Songsamphan) and *Subject Siam* (by Tamara Loos), provided me with a chance to explore a way in which rhetorical discourses were used by men in the respective periods to justify the continued existence of polygyny and prostitution. The books demonstrate an influential role that gender perspectives can play in reassessing history. In connection to *Truth about Sex*, I also had an opportunity to present an article involving



The atmosphere during the 8th conference of women’s studies, “*Political Economy of Gender*”, held during August 16-17, 2007 at the Faculty of Economics, Thammasat University.

elite-class women imposing social sanctions (as opposed to legal sanctions imposed by the authorities) among themselves as an attempt to curb women's undesirable sexual behavior and to eradicate polygyny during Phibun's first administration (1938 – 1944). Also, I had opportunities to present the data collected from the National Archive; to share views and opinions with regard to the interpretation of the data; and even to receive constructive criticisms with respect to the direction for which my study should be heading.

Finally, during the course of the study, I had a chance to attend the Eighth Academic Conference on Women's Studies held on August 16 – 17, 2007 at Thammasat University. Themed *Political Economy of Gender*, the conference served as a stage for discussing a wide range of issues involving economic, social, and political aspects of gender. The conference attracted a number of authorities on their respective fields.

Impressive Experiences at the Dispatch Destination

I was profoundly impressed by the friendly and yet academic atmosphere surrounding the class all through the course of my four-month internship. Students were impressively energetic and enthusiastic. Despite the fact that most of the students were relatively young with limited hands-on experiences, they were impressively knowledgeable about the discussed matters. Since they had been less polluted by real-life experiences that are not necessarily pleasing, their views were less cynical and could be seen as reflecting their ideals of what the world should look like when it comes to gender relations, feminine roles, or sexual equality. Many comments and questions posed by my colleagues on the collected data and constructive criticisms aimed toward the direction of the study really forced me to readjust the tone of my dissertation in such a way that the desired messages are effectively conveyed to the audience.

I have learnt that although the status of polygyny and prostitution has been markedly improved, it is still far from acceptable. With the enactment of legislation in 1935 as an attempt by Thailand to restore judicial independence from the Western colonial imperialism, polygyny has been officially outlawed, ending – at least nominally – a social practice that had been continued for generations. But what is striking to me is that the practice of polygyny is still prevalent. Exploitation of legal loopholes has become rampant because legal measures can be applied only to those who officially file for more than one marriage. A man can practice polygyny, with no legal action being brought against him, as long as he retains his wife as the sole official partner.

It then comes to my realization that the practice of polygyny perhaps has historical and cultural roots. Only when the complicated historical discourses are untangled can the current phenomenon of widespread polygyny be fully accounted for. To that end, I was even more inspired by what I learned from this internship to continue to be part of the fact-finding attempt in the academic community.

Attainability of objectives and reflection

A major accomplishment of this four-month internship was the completion of a section of my dissertation related to polygyny. The accomplishment could be attributed to a combination of an excellent coursework at Thammasat University and the enrichment of data available at the National Archive.

Over the course of this internship, I learned two important lessons. First, I learned that many gender issues we face today are inextricably tied to historical developments in the past. That is, even gender issues have historical roots. Second, in connection with what was just mentioned, I learned that in order to better understand the dynamics of a historical context, it is always a wise strategy to see it through gender perspectives. With these two lessons in mind, the message I want to convey is that history should not be approached from a perspective of power relationships between genders as we understand them or take them for granted today; rather, it should be

approached from a perspective of gender relations that exist at the time such a historical incident unfolds.

In retrospect, having spent four months attending a lecture course in gender relations, collecting data, and attending a symposium, I was able to broaden my perspective on gender relations. In addition, I have come to realize that not only do gender relations play an important role in understanding contemporary issues that involve males and females and that have causal relationships with historical and cultural developments such as polygyny or prostitution, but, importantly, gender relations can also serve as a powerful analyzing tool in the discipline of history. By putting such a tool in place, I am confident that history as a challenge to scholarly endeavor can make a significant progress in its future undertaking.