

REINSERTING "MAEM", A FRAGMENT OF THAI HISTORY:

WHITE WOMEN IN SIAM 1860-1920.

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STATEMENT

I, Kathryn Sweet, certify that this thesis is my own work and that I have acknowledged all sources used.

Signed: K. Sweet guided, encouraged and challenged me to

Date: 19-11-96

Thank you to Nick Murray for invaluable computer assistance at the most unpredictable of times, help with scanning and presenting the photographs, and also for proofreading large segments of the thesis. Thank you also to Heather Sweet and Jennifer Calles for their proofreading efforts.

I thank my house-mates, Tim and Jen for living with me for the life of the thesis, for providing encouragement and consultation along the way, and generously allowing me to monopolise their computer and printer, respectively. I thank my circle of girlfriends for helping to keep me sane for the past three years: Amanda, Jude, Lea, Lisa, Trish and Vij. Also, I thank my Thai friends, Pia Prua, Deeng, Pu and Phichai for nurturing my interest in Thai studies, and Thai history in particular.

Last but not least, thank you to Arch, the black cat, who kept me company during more late nights at the computer than ever he or I care to remember.

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Thank you to Nick Murray for invaluable computer assistance at the most unpredictable of times, help with scanning and presenting the photographs, and also for proofreading large segments of the thesis. Thank you also to Heather Sweet and Jennifer Callen for their proofreading efforts.

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PROLOGUE

THAI LANGUAGE CONVENTIONS AND TERMINOLOGY

I have used a standard phonemic system for transcribing most Thai words. Where there is variance in the way words have been transcribed, I have opted for the more commonly used alternative. For example, I reject most of Phongdeit's transcriptions in his English translation of *Lakhorn haeng chiwit*, in favour of the more common transcriptions which appear in English language studies of Thai literature.

Also, according to conventional usage, I have referred to Thai people in the text by their first names, and to Westerners by their surnames. Similarly, in the bibliography I have entered Thai names according to first names.

In referring to what is today the nation of Thailand, I have used two terms: Thailand and Siam. I have used the term Thailand when referring to the country in a general, detemporalised way, but when referring to the specific period before the name change to Thailand in 1939 (i.e. for the bulk of my thesis) I have used the name current at the time: Siam. Throughout the thesis I refer to Thai people (never Siamese, except in quotes taken from other sources) and to the Thai language. Of course, in Thai language the country that is now Thailand to the outside world has always been referred to as *Muang Thai*, the people as *Khon Thai* and the language as *Phasa Thai*.

PROLOGUE

My aim in undertaking this thesis is to understand some of the complexity surrounding the position occupied by white European women, known as *maem*, in late nineteenth century and early twentieth century Siam. How did belonging to a small minority group (i.e., white, European, predominantly Christian women) affect these women in a predominantly male-dominated, Buddhist nation that did not bow to European colonisation as did most of its Southeast Asian neighbours? How did these women feel about their minority status, how did they deal with it and how did they negotiate their lives around the daily reactions of the locals to their race, gender and (often presumed) class? And most importantly, how did Thai people treat them?

My thesis topic is personally motivated, as have been several previous studies of race, gender and class by women. For example, Amirah Inglis wrote about white women in Papua New Guinea after living there herself,¹ Claudia Knapman was drawn to examining the lives of white women in colonial Fiji after having lived there,² and Helen Callaway had lived in Nigeria before embarking on her study of white women in that country.³

In my case, I spent 1984 as a seventeen year old exchange student in the north-eastern Thai province of Udon Thani, living with a Thai family and attending a Thai secondary school. During the course of the year, I became increasingly aware not only of my race (white, European, *farang*) and my gender (female) but also of the social reaction to the apparently complex combination of these two factors in contemporary Thai society. Judging by people's reactions to me, and their assumptions about me, I

¹Amirah Inglis, *Not a White Woman Safe, Sexual Anxiety and Politics in Port Moresby 1920-1934*, (Canberra, Australian National University Press, 1974). The study examined the White Women's Protection Ordinances passed in the Papua New Guinea parliament during the 1920s.

²Claudia Knapman, *White Women in Fiji 1835-1930: the ruin of empire?*, (Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 1986).

³Helen Callaway, *Gender, Culture and Empire. European Women in Colonial Nigeria*, (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1987).

gathered that the position of white European women in Thai society was not a comfortable one. As such, my thesis topic is one which relates to my own life experience, although it is removed by epoch. Thus this study, like several before it, tries to better understand my own experiences by considering the historically created complexities of race, gender and class.

Why was I in Thailand, Thai people asked me. Was I different to Thai women, and if so, how different? How promiscuous was I? Did I presume I could ever adapt to become 'like a Thai woman'? Were the images of women in the West portrayed in American movies realistic?

I tired of having my personal character constantly appraised, and returned to Australia wondering whether there was a place for white European women, or in fact any social group that differed from the dominant group, in Thailand. If so, I asked myself what that place was and whether it needed to be so problematic. I was also curious to know whether white European women living in Thailand in earlier times had faced similar demands to the ones I faced, and how they had responded.

There were few studies available in 1985 in Thai, English or any other language, which could enlighten me or offer an enhanced understanding of Thai life as it related to race, class and gender. This seemed especially so in relation to white European women, who in many colonial and contemporary studies were regarded as belonging to a privileged, dominant, social group, which therefore did not warrant study as a racialised minority. But what of white European women living in multi-racial societies like Thailand where they did not belong to the social majority, nor to the ruling class as in some colonial societies?

White European women were never a sizeable minority group in Thailand warranting attention because of their numbers nor their influence on the course of Thai history.

But although a tiny minority, they evoked dramatic responses. Thus I try to understand why they evoked such dramatic responses and to unravel some of the dilemmas and debates about them in Thai society, and to submit these debates to critical examination. This is a contribution to a broader appreciation of race, gender and class operating in Thai society during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. To date, there has been no major study of white European women in Thai history. In fact, Tamara Loos is the only other scholar of whom I know, whose work has concentrated on such women in Thai history.⁴

The study also aims to shed some understanding on the situation of other ethnic minorities living within Thailand's national boundaries, as well as foreigners resident in Thailand for various reasons (study, work, family) and even those who visit Thailand as tourists. I hope to add another dimension to the study of Thai history by undertaking such a study and examining the lives and experiences of a number of white European women resident in Thailand in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

⁴Tamara Loos, 'Engendering Siam: Propagation of Western Notions of the Feminine in 19th Century Siam by American and British Women', unpublished graduate paper, Cornell University, 25 May 1993.

CHAPTER 1

"MAEM": RACE, GENDER AND CLASS IN THAI HISTORY

White European women's presence in Thailand since at least the seventeenth century has highlighted the interconnected dynamics of race,¹ gender and class in a way that the presence of few other social minority groups in Thailand has done. In this chapter I want to situate white European women within the overall history of Thailand, and especially within the Thai historiography dealing with race, gender and class. White European women in nineteenth century Siam were from a racial minority group that did not enjoy the power of being the colonising race as they did elsewhere in Southeast Asia during the century. They belonged to the gendered majority (ie: women) that had least access to social and political power, although some access to economic power. And as Siam remained an independent monarchy with its own nobility, Europeans, and white women in particular, were offered few inroads into the Thai ruling elite. Therefore, even if white European women came from the middle or upper class in their home countries, in Thailand they did not, in fact could not, belong to the powerful social and political class which was dominated by Thai males of royal birth. European women were outsiders three times over - by race, gender and class.

Paradoxically, Thailand has been noted for its assimilationist approach to a number of ethnic groups (usually those from neighbouring regions), especially during its time under the pluralistic name, Siam,² but white, European people have been always been

¹'Race' is a biological term of nineteenth century science referring to human beings of differing skin colours and physical features, akin to the term 'species' which referred to the plant and animal worlds. For some time in the nineteenth century there was debate over whether or not humans of different races were of the same species, and whether miscegenation would result in an infertile human hybrid. This proved not the case, as people of mixed race ancestry reproduced without difficulty. Academics shied away from using the term 'race' preferring 'ethnicity' as it became clear 'race' was more a cultural construct than a biological determinant. However, 'race' is now re-emerging in academic literature, and in most cases can be interchanged with 'ethnicity', although it is commonly accepted that 'ethnicities' are more numerous than 'races'. I use the term 'race' to denote people of similar ancestry, physical appearance and cultural traditions who identify themselves as a 'racial' group.

²Craig Reynolds, 'Introduction', in Reynolds (ed.), *National Identity and its Defenders. Thailand 1939-1989*, (Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, Clayton, (Monash Papers on Southeast Asia, no. 25), 1991), p. 11.

located outside such conceptual boundaries. White European people were not 'Thai' and, unlike some other ethnic groups in Thailand, they could never hope to become so.

Since earliest contact, Europeans had been referred to by Thais by names such as "yellow heads", "red-haired devils" and "cowardly white-eyes".³ Furthermore, Thai literary critic, Mattani Modjara Rutnin, noted that Europeans were depicted in Thai paintings of the early 1800s as:

... the followers of Mara, the God of Evil, who came to tempt the Buddha before His Enlightenment. They were portrayed as sinners being grotesquely and cruelly punished in Hell. On temple walls, French and Portuguese soldiers, diplomats and priests are usually presented in the Lower World, together with demons, ogres, and semi-human or sub-human beings.⁴

Despite such extreme denigrations of Europeans by local Thais, this should not suggest that Siam has ever been an ethnically homogenous region of the world. When the Thais moved south from China in the eleventh century into the area that is present-day Thailand they mixed with Mons, Khmers and Lawas who were residing in the Chao Phraya basin. During the following centuries there was also intermarriage between Thais and Peguans, Burmese and Chinese people. And even in the mid-1800s, Siam's was a very multiracial population. Bishop Pallegoix adjudged of Siam's estimated total population of six million in 1854, that there were 1,900,000 Thais, 1,500,000 Chinese, 1,000,000 Malays and the same number of Laos, 500,000 Cambodians, 50,000 Peguans and another 50,000 Karens, Xong and Lawas.⁵ These communities have

³Auraiwan Thanasthid, "A Study of the Role of Americans in the Modernization of Siam, 1851-1910", PhD thesis, New York University, 1981, p. 122.

⁴Mattani Modjara Rutnin, *Modern Thai Literature: The Process of Modernization and the Transformation of Values*, (Bangkok, Thammasart University Press, 1988 [1975]), p. 98.

⁵Jean-Baptiste Pallegoix, *Description du royaume thai ou Siam*, vol. I, (Farnborough, Gregg International, 1969, [1854]), p. 8.

intermarried over the past 140 years to a point where Thai nationals are cultural and ethnic hybrids formed from a rich mix of different peoples within the region.

Despite their hybridity, Thongchai Winichakul claims there is a widespread belief in present-day Thailand of the existence of an undefined, unspecified but omnipresent condition called 'Thainess' (*khwam pen thai*). He says: "It is believed to have existed for a long time, and all Thai are supposed to be well aware of its virtue."⁶ Possession of 'Thainess' is thought to confer a certain status upon a person, for example, the ability to be able to understand the roots of anything 'Thai' in a way that no foreigner can ever hope to do.⁷ There is much disagreement about the elements which go to make up 'Thainess', and of course they are not static but are continually evolving over time, but commonly mentioned elements are respect for Buddhism and the Thai monarchy. Most strikingly, 'Thainess', like most identity constructs, is often defined negatively, that is, not by what it *is*, but by what it is *not*.

For a richer, fuller, more subtle understanding of the Thai national character, one must examine not only the centre of the Thai elite and the Chao Phraya basin-dwelling Thais, but also the peripheral minority groups living in the more outlying regions of Thailand in both the geographical and the ideological sense.⁸ Thus, studies of minority groups of different race, social class and/or gender within Thailand serve to foster a better understanding of the full range of possibilities and potentials of Thai studies in general and Thai history in particular. A historian's examination of a social group that has been categorised as un-Thai, or non-Thai, helps build a fuller appreciation not only of the minority being studied, but of the majority within whose midst they exist.

⁶Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation*, (Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 1994), p. 3.

⁷Thongchai, *Siam Mapped*, p. 7.

⁸Craig Reynolds, 'Predicaments of Modern Thai History', *Southeast Asia Research*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1994, p. 70.

Moreover, for a better understanding of the realities of Thai people's lives, one must examine the complex ways in which race, gender and class intersect. Feminist history too can benefit from these additional categories of analysis, employed in a variety of historical time frames and geographical locations, as they have the power to create histories where the concerns and experiences of the diverse range of people, black, yellow, white; female, male, transsexual; and of all social classes, can be more fully represented. There have been gaps in Thai historiography for some time now, as historians have been preoccupied with what Reynolds has termed the "epic narrative":

... this epic narrative tends to squeeze out the bits that do not fit very well, such as the history of a contested nationalism, or the history of violence, or regional foundation myths, or the history of gender relations. Anything that detracts from 'distinctiveness' and 'success' and 'continuity with the ancient past' is suspect.⁹

The presence of white European women in Thailand does not accord with the distinctiveness, success or continuity with Thailand's ancient past, and as such, a history of white women in Thailand may be viewed as suspect by some Thai historians. White European women undoubtedly fall into the category of someone and/or something that is *not* Thai, a category into which few of the other ethnic communities resident in Siam at the time of sparse white settlement fell so blatantly. Often they have appeared 'out of place' - incongruous with their surroundings, inappropriately attired for the tropical heat and unfamiliar with the local customs, including the degree of respect held for the Thai monarch, and the practices of Buddhism. In these ways, they have been in the same position as white women in other colonies, and their white male colleagues. But while European men have made occasional forays into the documented history of Thailand, and where attempts have been made to explain their

⁹Reynolds, 'Predicaments of Modern Thai History', p. 82.

actions and influence, there has been little or no mention of European women. They are almost completely invisible in the written history of Thailand.

Maem: White European women in Thai history

European women cannot have been as invisible as historians of Thailand would have us believe. Although few in numbers, white European women were highly visible in the physical sense amongst the peoples living in Thailand last century because of their relative height, and their pale skin, hair and eye colour. Linguistically, white European women were, and still are, quite visible. *Maem* is the specific Thai word used to refer to white women. Mary Haas' popular Thai students' dictionary defines *maem* as "an occidental woman" or "title used for occidental women".¹⁰ The *New Model Thai-English Dictionary* offers a slightly broader definition: "Ma'am, a white woman, Madam, Mrs."¹¹ *Maem* is a loan word that has been in usage since at least the early 1800s, when Protestant American missionaries first began settling in Siam in small numbers. It is unclear whether the term was adopted from the Anglo-Indian term, *memsahib*,¹² or adapted directly from the American 'Ma'am' (a polite abbreviation of Madam common in the United States) to address the early missionary women, nearly all of whom were American. Now, however, the term is used to describe all white-skinned women, from Europe or of European background,¹³ regardless of nationality.

The separate term, *farang*¹⁴ is used to refer to white, Western people (men, women and children) "without any specification of nationality, culture, ethnicity, language, or

¹⁰Mary Haas, *Thai-English Students Dictionary*, (Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 1964), p. 594.

¹¹So Sethaputra, *New Model Thai-English Dictionary*, (Bangkok, Thai Wattana Panit, 1977), p. 323.

¹²Col. Henry Yule & A.C. Burnell, *Hobson Jobson. A Glossary of Anglo-Indian Words and Phrases, and of Kindred Terms, Etymological, Historical, Geographical and Discursive*, (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968 [1886]), p. 567.

¹³For example, North Americans, Australians, New Zealanders, white South Africans. The term is not used to refer to pale-skinned Chinese, Vietnamese or northern Thai women in this sense.

¹⁴See the discussion on the Khmer word *barang* (the equivalent of the Thai word, *farang*) in Serge Thion, 'On some Cambodian words', *Thai-Yunnan Project Newsletter*, no. 21, March 1993, pp. 18-23.

whatever."¹⁵ Thongchai argues that the term *farang* is specific only in its assertion that a person or thing is not Thai, as is the term *khaek*, which also denoted non-Thainess and refers in a collective sense to people and things from the Malay peninsula, the East Indies, South Asia, the Middle East as well as to Muslims and Hindus.¹⁶ The use of *maem* is similar, in that it refers to white women and girls of all European nationalities, cultures, ethnicities and languages. Moreover, pale skinned Thai women are sometimes nick-named *maem* to indicate their much prized skin colour and faintly European looks. Therefore, though not exclusively used of non-Thai women, this remains its core referent, its application to Thai women being a playful extension.

The arresting appearance of white European women in the Thai environment and the common usage of the term *maem* suggests that white European women have been absent from documented Thai history not because they were absolutely invisible but rather because of their being few, and most importantly because of their lack of any power or influence in the social hierarchy of Thailand.

Bradley reported that European women died frequently during the early years of Protestant missionary work in Siam in the early 1800s,¹⁷ and Loos estimated that until the early twentieth century there could not have been more than a few hundred white European women in Thailand at any one time.¹⁸ In comparison, Susan Abeyasekere notes in her social history of Jakarta that there were 1,363 European women living in the colonial Dutch outpost of Batavia by the turn of the century, although she cannot confirm that they were 'white'. Apparently, many of the women classified as European in the Dutch East Indies were in fact Eurasian.¹⁹

¹⁵Thongchai, *Siam Mapped*, p. 5.

¹⁶Thongchai, *Siam Mapped*, p. 5.

¹⁷William L. Bradley, *Siam Then. The Foreign Colony in Bangkok before and after Anna*, (Pasadena, William Carey Library, 1981), p. 63.

¹⁸Tamara Loos, "Engendering Siam".

¹⁹Susan Abeyasekere, *Jakarta. A History*, (Singapore, Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 57.

Though small in numbers, there have been white European women in Thailand for many centuries. Dutch traders working in warehouses (called factories in the language of the time) in the Thai capital, Ayutthaya, and the southern port city of Pattani in the early seventeenth century were sometimes accompanied by their Dutch wives. Some of these women joined their husbands from the Netherlands, others came from settlements the Dutch had established in the Dutch East Indies since their being granted trading rights there in 1596.²⁰ In 1661, Englishman John South wrote from Ayutthaya to his colleague Lambton in Surat advising: "to bring his wife with him, because the place was so peaceable, the Dutch all had scores of wives and children with them, and there were at least 300-400 Portuguese families, all with wives and children."²¹ These are the first, documented cases of white European women living in Siam.

Although South gave some indication as to the numbers of Dutch and Portuguese women living in Ayutthaya, neither he nor the historian George Smith gave any indication of their degree of 'Europeanness'. Some of the Dutch women in Siam may well have been Eurasian, as noted above by Abeyasekere, because as Ann Stoler has convincingly argued, racial divides in colonial Southeast Asia were in this early period not fixed barriers. At times people of mixed race ancestry and those who married across class lines were defined as European, at other times 'native', depending on which of the many socio-cultural factors were currently being employed by the colonial authorities or the colonial courts.²² Ideas about the boundaries of race, thrown into contention by the colonising drives of European nations in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the existence of mixed race marriages and mixed race children, were not static, and in fact, shifted quite remarkably over the years. In the

²⁰George V. Smith, "The Dutch East India Company in the Kingdom of Ayutthaya 1604-1694", Northern Illinois University, PhD thesis, 1974, p. 283.

²¹M. L. Manich Jumsai, *History of Anglo-Thai Relations*, (Bangkok, Chalermit, 1970), p. 11.

²²Ann Stoler, 'Mixed bloods' and the cultural politics of European identity in colonial Southeast Asia', in Jan Nederveen Pieterse & Bhikhu Parekh (eds), *The Decolonization of Imagination: Culture, Knowledge and Power*, (London & Atlantic Heights, NJ, Zed Books, 1995), p. 141.

case of Ayutthaya, we do not know if or how the Thai courts defined race, though we may imagine that 'race' determined in which quarter of the residentially-segregated city an individual lived.

The small European community of Ayutthaya, established by Portuguese traders and military advisers in the early 1500s, had swelled to around 300 men by the mid-1500s, mostly soldiers.²³ Portuguese priests arrived in the early 1600s, soon after the appearance of the Dutch, and a seminary was established. The number of Europeans resident in Ayutthaya continued to grow in the 1600s, with the arrival of the English East India Company in 1612, the Danish East India Company in 1620, French Jesuit priests in 1662 and the French East India Company in 1680, who established trading factories in Ayutthaya, as had the Portuguese and the Dutch. Other nationalities, such as the Japanese, Persians, Arabs, Chinese, Macassans, and Indians, also had factories in Ayutthaya and resided in their separate quarters within the multi-racial, seventeenth century city.

Thai contact with Europe blossomed in the 1600s not only in the field of trade but also diplomacy, with a Thai mission of five men being sent to the Netherlands in 1608-1611, and a number of embassies being exchanged between the French court of King Louis XIV and the Thai court of King Narai in the 1680s. In addition, a number of European men in particular rose to prominence in the Thai administration. Englishman Samuel White was appointed Governor of Tenasserim, including the port city of Mergui, from 1677-1687, at that time a Siamese vassal but now part of present-day Myanmar. A Frenchman was Governor of Phuket, and Constantine Phaulkon, a Greek-born bureaucrat and trader who arrived in Ayutthaya in 1678 as an employee of the English East India Company, won such favour with King Narai (1657-1688) that he rose to the position of Prime Minister within the king's administration.²⁴

²³Joaquim de Campo, *Early Portuguese Accounts of Thailand*, (Lisbon, Camara Municipal de Lisboa, 1983), p. 29.

²⁴Manich, *History of Anglo-Thai Relations*, p. 5.

The boom experienced in Thai-European relations in the 1600s did not continue into the next century. A change of ruler and a subsequent change in trade and religious policies led to most European trading companies closing their Thai factories and their staff moving on to new trade opportunities elsewhere in the region. Only the Dutch traders stayed on, and even they closed their factory in 1760 and traded instead from their colonial base in Batavia. Thus, any white, European women presumably accompanied their husbands or fathers in leaving Siam, although I have found no documented evidence of this apart from South's reference to a thriving European community of men, women and children a hundred years previously. The only documented white Europeans remaining in Siam during the final decades of the Ayutthaya period²⁵ and the early decades of the Bangkok period were a scattering of Portuguese and French Roman Catholic priests, and their mixed race followers.

Notable numbers of white European women did not appear again in Siam until the 1830s, when Protestant missionaries began arriving in Bangkok from the surrounding region (early missionaries transferred to Siam from British Burma and India), and later from the United States. The number of missionaries in Siam fluctuated constantly throughout the nineteenth century, as individuals succumbed to tropical diseases, died in childbirth, transferred to other missions in Asia or returned home to the United States. According to American missionary Mary Cort's statistics, by 1840 there were at least fourteen white missionary women in Siam. By 1850 there appeared to be only six, but their numbers increased to at least nine adult women in 1870 and by 1880 to at least twelve.²⁶ These figures are conservative, as Cort recorded the date of missionaries' arrivals in Siam, but sometimes did not record deaths or departures from Siam. Until the 1870s the majority of missionary women were married to male

²⁵The Thai capital of Ayutthaya fell to the invading Burmese army in 1767AD. A new Thai capital was formed further south along the Chao Phraya River in Thonburi (1768-1782), and later moved to its present site of Bangkok in 1782.

²⁶Mary Lovina Cort, *Siam: or, The Heart of Farther India*, (New York, Anson D. F. Randolph & Co, 1886), pp. 297-300.

missionaries, but from the 1870s onwards the mission boards in America were sending increasing numbers of single women to Siam to teach in the schools the missionaries had established to educate the local population in the intertwined subjects of Western 'civilisation' and religion. Auraiwan Thanasthid, a Thai PhD student, gave figures for American families resident in Siam. She calculated that there were sixteen missionaries and their families resident in Siam in 1860. By 1871 the American community had expanded to between 30 and 35 families and by 1885 there were definitely 35 families, the figure taking into account 13 missionary families, three master mariners, four (river?) pilots, two millwrights, a businessman, a royal interpreter and translator, a military instructor, a physician, a surgeon, a clerk, a hotel-keeper and a woman, whose occupation was not listed.²⁷

King Rama II had permitted the Portuguese to instal a consul in Bangkok, Carlos Manual Silveira, who took up duty in 1818.²⁸ He was the only official European representative in Bangkok until the 1850s. The British (represented by Captain Burney, an official from British Malaya) signed a trade treaty with the Thai king in 1826, and the United States (represented by Edmund Roberts) did likewise in 1833. By the reign of King Mongkut (also known as Rama IV) a number of European nations were eager to sign commercial treaties with Siam. For example: the British led by Sir John Bowring signed a revised treaty in 1855, France signed a treaty in 1856, both Denmark and the Hanseatic League in 1858, Portugal in 1859, the Netherlands in 1860, Prussia in 1862 and Sweden-Norway in 1868.²⁹ An outcome of many of these treaties was the instalment of trade consuls in Bangkok.

During the reign of King Chulalongkorn (1868-1910), the resident white European community expanded with the families of European advisers and technicians engaged

²⁷Auraiwan, "The Role of Americans in the Modernization of Siam", p. 115.

²⁸Walter F. Vella, *Siam under Rama III, 1824-1851*, (Locust Valley, NY, J. J. Augustin Inc. [Monographs of the Association for Asian Studies], 1957), p.115.

²⁹H.R.H. Prince Chula Chakrabongse, *Lords of Life. A History of the Kings of Thailand*, (London, Alvin Redman, 1960), p. 201-202.

by the king to aid the establishment of a Westernised Thai administration. By 1870 the royal court employed fourteen Western advisers: translators, secretaries, army drill-masters, printers, band-masters and technical officers.³⁰ In total, King Chulalongkorn employed 549 Europeans (including Americans) during his reign, the majority during or after the 1880s.³¹ However, many of the Western men posted to Bangkok (as a result of the expanding commercial and political relations enabled by the treaties and the small but growing demand for advisers and technicians) did not bring Western wives with them but rather cohabited with or married Thai or other local women resident in Siam. Although few, the white European women resident in nineteenth century Bangkok enjoyed a degree of social communion: church services, formal gatherings, and in 1856 the Bangkok Women's Sewing Circle was formed, for sewing and recreational purposes.³²

Because of the small number of white European women resident in Siam during the nineteenth century, they were referred to as fleeting, unexpected and strange creatures of novelty. For example, George Finlayson, a member of Crawford's unsuccessful trade mission to Siam in the 1820s, reported the local people's reaction to the sight of Mrs Crawford, after the passengers on their ship landed at a small island in the Gulf of Siam:

Mrs Crawford[']s presence conferred a degree of interest upon the scene not easily described. The men, stupid with wonder, seemed to look upon her as a being of another creation, and indeed, if we cast our eyes upon the contrast in the female forms before us, their wonder will not appear surprising...³³

³⁰D. K. Wyatt, *Thailand. A Short History*, (London & New Haven, Yale University Press, 1984), p. 188.

³¹Auraiwan, "The Role of Americans in the Modernization of Siam", p. 109.

³²Suwadee Tanaprasitpatana, "Thai Society's Expectations of Women, 1851-1935", PhD thesis, University of Sydney, 1989, p. 100.

³³George Finlayson, *The Mission to Siam and Hue 1821-1822*, (Singapore, Oxford University Press in association with the Siam Society, 1988 [1826]), p. 270.

American missionary Dr Dan Beach Bradley, who arrived in Bangkok to commence his mission in 1835, further confirmed the strangeness for Thai people setting sight of European families, and women in particular. Describing his arrival in Bangkok, he noted in his diary:

Scores of men, women and children flocked to the banks and stood on tiptoe to see Mrs Bradley and the baby she carried in her arms.³⁴

Nearly eighty years later, a French traveller, Marthe Bassenne, who journeyed up the Mekong River through Siamese and French Laos to Luang Prabang in 1909, commented:

Even though six to eight European women have already visited Luang Prabang since the French occupation, I enjoyed great success as a [sic] object of good willed curiosity among the Laotian women, young and old. Sao Toug Di, Sao Bang, Sao Thane, Sao Kay and all the sao [young women] surrounded me. They discreetly caressed my hands and, my clothes.³⁵

White European women were a novelty in nineteenth century Siam because of their rarity. Thai people were curious about who these creatures were, and white women were eager on the whole to write about their experiences in 'exotic' Siam for the benefit of Western readers 'back home', wherever home may have been. Of the three women I will examine in greater detail in the following three chapters, both Anna Leonowens and Mary Cort wrote books and articles about their experiences, while Katherine Desnitsky wrote many letters home, excerpts of which have been published in a recent biography.

³⁴Bradley, *Siam Then*, p. 4.

³⁵Marthe Bassenne, *In Laos and Siam*, translated & introduced by Walter E. J. Tips, (Bangkok, White Lotus, 1995 [1912]), p. 64.

The majority of early white European women's writing about their lives and experiences in Siam has been produced by missionary women.³⁶ Towards the end of the nineteenth century travellers or wives of European advisers employed by the Thai administration entered the fray, recording their impressions and experiences.³⁷ The trend to write about one's experiences in Thailand has continued into the twentieth century, but there is still only a small body of work in this field. American Carol Hollinger wrote *Mai Pen Rai Means Never Mind* after she taught at Chulalongkorn University for a period of several years in the early 1960s,³⁸ and most recently the young Canadian Karen Connelly published her diary as a former Rotary exchange student in the northern province of Prae, *Touch the Dragon, a Thai journal*,³⁹ strangely titled, given that there are few references to dragons in Thai culture!

But where does this small body of white European women's personal accounts of impressions and experiences in Thailand fit into the greater scheme of writing about Thai history? As I will explain in the next section of this chapter, white European women's writings were accorded no place in Thai historiography until quite recently, when a modest corpus of historical work concerning race, gender and class has begun to form.

³⁶For example: Eliza G. Jones, *Memoir of Mrs Eliza G. Jones, Missionary to Burmah and Siam*, ed. by the Committee of Publication, (Philadelphia, American Baptist Publication and Sunday School Society, 1842); Nancy Royce, *A Sketch of the Life and Character of Mrs Emilie Royce Bradley, Ten Years a Missionary in Siam*, (New York, American Tract Society, 1856); Mary Backus (ed.) *Siam and Laos: As Seen by Our American Missionaries*, (Philadelphia, Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1884).

³⁷Florence Caddy, *To Siam and Malay in the Duke of Sutherland's Yacht, 'Sans Peur'*, (London, Hurst and Blackett Ltd, 1889); Katharine Grindrod, *"Siam" Personal Diary, vol. 1 (23 May-Dec 1892)*, (Hong Kong, University of Hong Kong, 1982) and Katharine Grindrod, *Siam: A geographical summary*, (London, Edward Stanford, 1895).

³⁸Carol Hollinger, *Mai Pen Rai Means Never Mind*, (Boston, Houghton & Mifflin Co., 1965).

³⁹Karen Connelly, *Touch the Dragon, a Thai journal*, (Sydney, Harper Collins, 1996 [1992]).

Thai history and studies of race, gender and class

In line with the growing world-wide proliferation of literature in feminist, race and postcolonial studies, several such studies have recently appeared in the field of Thai history. Most deal with race, gender or class, with few studies combining the three. However, gender studies in particular is gaining popularity as a discipline in Thailand.

Historian of Laos, Martin Stuart-Fox reminded us: "The study of women in Southeast Asia is still in its infancy, yet it is a rapidly growing field."⁴⁰ In recent years a number of studies dealing with gender in Southeast Asia have been published. *Women of Southeast Asia*, a collection of essays edited by Penny Van Esterik,⁴¹ investigated religious, domestic and economic aspects of Southeast Asian women's lives and compared their findings to the common assumption that women in this region of the world enjoyed high status. Several contributors to the volume cautioned that the 'high status' of women may have belonged to the mythic past but did not sit comfortably with the realities of present-day Southeast Asia. Errington countered in her introduction to *Power and Difference, Gender in Island Southeast Asia*,⁴² that European observers had traditionally thought women in island Southeast Asia enjoyed high status because they were seen to enjoy economic freedom and control over their own labour - freedoms that European women did not necessarily enjoy and signs of power in European societies. However, Errington warned that spiritual potency was accorded more power in island Southeast Asia than the worldly roles of trading and handling money, a point often forgotten in this debate, and that women in these societies had less access to highly valued spiritual power. She also commented that although gender differences between the sexes were not highly marked, small

⁴⁰Martin Stuart-Fox, 'Foreword' in Mayoury Ngaosyvathn, *Lao Women Yesterday and Today*, bilingual edition, (Vientiane, State Publishing Enterprise, 1993), p. 1.

⁴¹Penny Van Esterik (ed.), *Women of Southeast Asia*, (Dekalb, Northern Illinois University, Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, [Occasional Paper, no. 9], 1982).

⁴²Jane Monnig Atkinson & Shelley Errington (eds), *Power and Difference, Gender in Island Southeast Asia*, (Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 1990).

differences could signify "a world of difference".⁴³ Therefore, although gender differences in Southeast Asia did not easily parallel those in Europe or other societies, it did not mean that gender was irrelevant to the study of Southeast Asia. Maila Stivens continued this line of argument in the collection of essays titled, *Why Gender Matters in Southeast Asian Politics*,⁴⁴ which dealt mainly with examples drawn from Malaysia and Indonesia. Stivens questioned why gender has been absent from political writings about the region, and all contributors agreed that an adequate understanding of politics in the region cannot be gained without serious attention being paid to gender. Stivens concluded that the "imported Western scholarly constructs" used to discuss politics have been partly to blame for the invisibility of both women and gender issues in the region. The culprits, she argued, were "Eurocentric malestream political science and Eurocentric western feminism".⁴⁵

The studies above, though varied in their approach and coverage, have greatly expanded ideas about gender in the region. They have also helped to temper the traditional Western view of Southeast Asia as a region where the roles of men and women were and continue to be complementary and harmonious,⁴⁶ thereby dismissing the need to look more closely at gender relations and power between the sexes. One historian to seriously challenge this view is Lao historian, Mayoury Ngaosyvathn, who argued strongly that women do not enjoy equal social status with men in socialist Laos, nor did they in earlier times under the French colonials or earlier still under self-rule.⁴⁷

⁴³Shelley Errington, 'Recasting Sex, Gender and Power. A Theoretical and Regional Overview', in Atkinson & Errington (eds), *Power and Difference*, p. 5.

⁴⁴Maila Stivens (ed.), *Why Gender Matters in Southeast Asian Politics*, (Clayton, Victoria: Monash University, Centre of Southeast Asian Studies [Monash Papers on Southeast Asia, no. 23], 1991).

⁴⁵Stivens (ed.), *Why Gender Matters in Southeast Asian Politics*, p. 10.

⁴⁶Errington, 'Recasting Sex, Gender and Power. A Theoretical and Regional Overview', in Atkinson & Errington (eds), *Power and Difference*, p. 1.

⁴⁷See in particular chapters 2 and 3, entitled: 'Men's Self-Empowerment, Women in the Social Wilderness' and 'Economics of the Feminisation of Poverty', in Mayoury, *Lao Women Yesterday and Today*.

Women and gender have rarely been examined in the discipline of Thai history, despite gender relations being "central to the history of the Thai/Tai people and the Tai states in mainland South East Asia".⁴⁸ Thai language histories of Thai women have appeared in the past two decades, for example, Chiranan Phitpricha's, *Lok ti See: Prawattisat Na Mai khong Ying Thai* [*The Fourth World: A New Page in the History of Thai Women*] in 1975,⁴⁹ *The history of Thai women* in 1979,⁵⁰ *Satri Sayam* [*Siamese Women*] in 1986,⁵¹ *Satthanaphab Satri Thai* [*The Status of Thai Women*],⁵² and *The Image of Thai Women in the Media*.⁵³ The 1980s saw the development of an academic debate about the role assigned to women in Theravada Buddhism,⁵⁴ which has been continued in Thai language in the 1990s,⁵⁵ and a series of studies on prostitution,⁵⁶ including a pervasive trend for postgraduate theses in history to deal with aspects of the prostitution industry in Thailand.

⁴⁸Reynolds, 'Predicaments of Modern Thai History', p. 64-65.

⁴⁹Chiranan Phitpricha, *Lok ti See: Prawattisat Na Mai khong Ying Thai* [*The Fourth World: A New Page in the History of Thai Women*], (Bangkok, Samnakphim Song Thang, 1979 [1975]).

⁵⁰Somrom Saengdao (ed.), *Prawatthisart Satri Thai* [*The History of Thai Women*], (Bangkok, 1979).

⁵¹Wibun Wichitwathakan, *Satri Sayam* [*Siamese Women*], (Bangkok, Yaima: Aetwaen Phaplitiching, 2529 [1986]).

⁵²Bunyong Ketthat, *Sathanaphap Satri Thai*, [*The Status of Thai Women*], (Bangkok, Odien Store Publishers, 1989).

⁵³Meettaa Kritwit, *The Image of Thai Women in the Media*, (Bangkok, Research Project of Chulalongkorn University, 1992).

⁵⁴Nerida Cook, 'The position of nuns in Thai Buddhism: the parameters of religious recognition', MA thesis, ANU, 1981; Penny Van Esterik, 'Laywomen in Theravada Buddhism', in P. Van Esterik (ed.), *Women of Southeast Asia*, pp. 55-78; C. F. Keyes, 'Mother or mistress but never a monk: Buddhist notions of female gender in rural Thailand', *American Ethnologist*, vol. 11, no. 2, 1984, pp. 223-241; Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, 'Buddhism and the Status of Women', in B. J. Terweil (ed.), *Buddhism and Society in Thailand*, (Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, Bihar, India, Catholic Press, 1984); and A. T. Kirsch, 'Text and context: Buddhist sex roles and culture revisited', *American Ethnologist*, vol. 12, no. 2, 1985, pp. 302-320.

⁵⁵Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, *Thai Women in Buddhism*, (Berkeley, CA, Parallax Press, 1991); Ranchuan Inthrakamhaeng, *Sitth Satri Withi Phut* [*The Rights of Women in Buddhism*], (Bangkok, Chendoephret, 1994).

⁵⁶Khin Thitsa, *Providence and Prostitution: image and reality for women in Buddhist Thailand*, (London, Change International Reports (Women & Society), 1980); Khin Thitsa, 'Nuns, mediums and prostitutes in Chiangmai: A study of some marginal categories of women', in Khin Thitsa & S. Howell (eds), *Women and Development in Southeast Asia 1*, (Canterbury, University of Kent, Centre of South-East Asian Studies, 1983); Pasuk Phongpaichit, *From peasant girls to Bangkok masseuses*, (Geneva, International Labour Office (Women, Work and Development 2), 1982); Dararat Mettarikanon, 'Kotmai sopeni 'ti tabian' krang raek nai Prathetthai' [The first proclamation of prostitution law in Thailand], *Sinlapa Wattanatham*, vol. 5, no. 5, 1984, pp. 6-19.

Thai language studies of more specific gender issues have appeared in more recent years, dealing with such varied topics as Western feminism and Thai beauty pageants.⁵⁷ The theoretical boundaries of gender have been explored in Eberhardt's *Gender, power and the moral order*,⁵⁸ and Jackson's discussion of male homosexuality and transvestism in Thailand.⁵⁹ There have also been a number of theses produced in Thai about gender and sexuality, for example, Chonthichaa Saalikhup⁶⁰ and Matthana Chetame's writings on lesbianism.⁶¹

Fortunately, these studies are now having a wider impact on the international field of Thai studies. For example, last year the Australian National University hosted a conference titled, 'Gender and Sexuality in Modern Thailand'. Researchers from many fields of academic enquiry were represented at the conference, the majority being anthropologists, sociologists and historians. This is not a surprising situation, given that gender relations is an unavoidable, primary category of analysis in the fields of anthropology and sociology, while gender is only now establishing its rightful place in Thai historiography.

The slow growth in popularity and acceptance of gender as a legitimate category of analysis in Thai history has sometimes been explained away by arguing that the category of gender is irrelevant to the majority of Thai people and for an understanding of the workings of Thai society, and that gender as a category of analysis is only of

⁵⁷Wibun Wichitwathakan, *Chiwit Sao Chaowang [Life of the Palace Women]*, (Bangkok, Media Focus, 2535 [1992]), Kanjana Kaewthep, *Itthisat [Feminism]*, (Bangkok, Gender Press, 1992); Supatra Kopkitsuksakun, *Sen tang nang ngam phuak thoe ma jak nai, ja bai nai phua khrai [The path of the beauty queens. Where did they come from? Where are they going? Who will benefit?]*, (Bangkok, Dokbia Press, 1992).

⁵⁸N. Eberhardt (ed.), *Gender, power and the construction of the moral order: studies from the Thai periphery*, (Madison, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Center for Southeast Asian Studies. [Monograph 4], 1988).

⁵⁹Peter Jackson, *Male homosexuality in Thailand: an interpretation of contemporary Thai sources*, (Elmhurst, NY, Global Academic Publishers, 1989).

⁶⁰Chonthichaa Saalikhup, "The development and maintenance process of lesbian identity", (in Thai), MA thesis, Thammasart University, 1989.

⁶¹Matthana Chetame, 'Lesbian Lifestyles and Concepts of the Family', conference paper delivered at Gender and Sexuality in Modern Thailand, ANU, Canberra, 11-12 July 1995.

interest to Westerners. Craig Reynolds has disputed this argument, claiming that in the early decades of this century it was not Orientalist or *farang* knowledge that determined how the debate on gender relations in Thailand unfolded, but that it was "a debate in Thai conducted by Thai women and men."⁶²

One of the main reasons why gender relations have been overlooked by many Thai historians appears to be that Thai historiography has not been overly concerned with the kind of social issues that would create an opportunity to examine the lives of most women, white or otherwise. Until very recently, Thai historiography has been overwhelmingly comprised of elite, nationalist history - the history of divine kings wielding absolute power, replaced this century by dictatorial army generals. Works of Thai history have traditionally concentrated on 'big picture', epic history which serves the ends of the nation-state, fostering nationalistic feelings among the Thai population by describing how the Thai/Tai people came to be who they are today. These works emphasise ancient Thai civilisations, the former Thai kingdoms, Thailand's skilful avoidance of European colonisation from the seventeenth century to the present day, thus glorifying the role of the Thai kings. Confirming the previous concentration on the nationalist kind of Thai history, several studies have emerged in the past decade which analyse the strong nationalist bent to Thai history and theorise about how and why this was constructed by the architects of the modern Thai nation-state.⁶³ Some of the recent analytical work concerning Thai nationalism is beginning to address the role of women within the nationalist movement, but as there have been no female god-kings or army generals who have seized political power, women's role in Thai nationalism has always been secondary to that of the men in power.

⁶²Reynolds, 'Predicaments of Modern Thai History', p. 67.

⁶³For example, Likhit Dhiravegin, *Nationalism and the State in Thailand*, (Bangkok, Research Center, Faculty of Political Science, Thammasart University, 1985); Reynolds (ed.) *National Identity and its Defenders*; Scot Barmé, *Luang Wichit Wathakan and the Creation of a Thai Identity*, (Singapore, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1993); Matthew Phillip Copeland, "Contested nationalism and the 1932 overthrow of the absolute monarchy in Siam", PhD thesis, ANU, 1993; Maurizio Peleggi, "National heritage and nationalist narrative in contemporary Thailand: an essay on culture and politics", MA sub-thesis, ANU, 1994.

In addition, Thai historiography has no tradition of addressing the relationships of the colonised people to the coloniser, the ruled to the ruler, and the powerless to the powerful. The above have been common themes leading to the development of gender studies and colonial and post colonial studies in many nations formerly colonised by European nations. But Thailand was the sole Southeast Asian nation to escape European colonisation in the previous centuries, and as such, Thai nationalist history has preferred to concentrate almost exclusively on Thai agency and strategies of Thai independence. This kind of history has been highly political and economic in its focus, and as mentioned before, rarely strays from recounting and analysing the strategies of the various kings and dictators. There has been little opportunity for Thai women to feature in nationalist history except as obedient, reproducing patriots. Labour history, another source from which gender history has developed in Australian and European history, is very weak in Thai history.

Nancy Eberhardt claimed that in the 1980s anthropological studies in Thailand moved away from macro theories of gender and into more detailed, localised accounts of groups of specific women, and not always the dominant flood-plain-dwelling Thais. Her anthropologically-focused collection, *Gender, power and the moral order*, set out to examine the ways in which cultural beliefs about men and women of differing ethnic, religious, regional and class allegiances were linked to the wider sources of power and value in Thai society,⁶⁴ and how these cultural beliefs described not how gender relations *were* played out, but how they *should be* played out.

Thai race studies

Eberhardt's collection of essays focussing on ethnic minorities within Thailand's borders leads quite appropriately onto the matter of race and/or ethnicity studies in

⁶⁴Eberhardt (ed.), *Gender, Power and the Construction of the Moral Order*, p. 10.

Thailand. The area that is present-day Thailand is and always has been a region inhabited by different peoples. As already mentioned above, during the Ayutthaya period, Indians, Arabs, Persians, Malays, Mons, Macassans, Chinese, Japanese and Europeans lived in the Siamese kingdom. In the past century, additional ethnic groups have migrated to Thailand, including Vietnamese, and hill-tribe peoples from southern China.

Despite the multi-racial nature of Thailand, it has often been claimed that most of the social power in Thailand rests with ethnic Thais, while sections of the Chinese community have been influential in commercial activities. But little has been done to analyse the definitions or distinctions made to ascertain who is in fact Thai, or Chinese, or any other ethnicity. The field of Thai studies has produced a series of works examining the roles of ethnic groups living in Thailand, for example the Chinese,⁶⁵ the Vietnamese,⁶⁶ hill-tribe communities and others,⁶⁷ including Europeans.⁶⁸ These studies do not interrogate the concepts of 'race' or ethnicity, but rather, treat it as a given category. Intermarriage and the blurring of racial boundaries that occurs as a result, both biologically and culturally, is ignored for the most part, which is hardly surprising given that these studies rarely mention women, or issues of gender. These studies regard the ethnic or racial groups of their 'expertise' as separate, disconnected groups of people.

⁶⁵For example: Kenneth Landon, *The Chinese in Thailand*, (New York, Institute of Pacific Relations, 1941); G. William Skinner, *Chinese Society in Thailand: an analytical history*, (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1957); Richard Coughlin, *Double Identity. The Chinese in Modern Thailand*, (Hong Kong, Hong Kong University Press, 1960).

⁶⁶Peter A Poole, *The Vietnamese in Thailand. A Historical Perspective*, (Ithaca & London, Cornell University Press, 1970).

⁶⁷Michel Hoang, *La Thaïlande et ses populations*, (Brussels, Editions Complexe, 1976), Niyaphan Phonwaddhana, "Ethnic Relations in Thailand: The Mon-Thai Relationship", PhD thesis, University of Kansas, 1986.

⁶⁸Prince Damrong Rachanaubhab, *Ruang Khati khong Farang thi khao ma nai Muang Thai [The Stories of Westerners who came to Siam]*, (Bangkok, Rongphim Chatra, 1950); S. Phlainoi, *Chao Tangchat nai Prawatsat Thai [Foreigners in Thai History]*, (Bangkok, Ruamsarn, 1963); Wibun Wichitwathakan, *Chiwit Nai Adit. Farang nai Krung Sayam, [Life in the Past: Westerners in Siam]*, (Bangkok, Muek Chin, 1989); Manop Thanomsi, *Rachathut lae Batluang Farangset nai Krung Sayam [French Diplomats and Missionaries in Siam]*, (Bangkok, Samnakphim Ton'o, 1993).

However, there is an unofficial hierarchy of what I term 'ethnic others' in Thailand. Very different groups of migrants and ethnic minorities have been assimilated into Thai society to varying degrees. This has depended largely upon their perceived differences to the dominant Thai community, linguistically, religiously and culturally. As such, some groups have come to be considered as almost Thai by the Thai people (eg: the Mons),⁶⁹ if they speak Thai, practise Buddhism, cultivate wet rice (lowland, irrigated rice), and dress in a similar manner to the Thais. Other groups are designated 'ethnic minorities', for example hill-tribe peoples who speak their own languages, practice animism, cultivate upland rice and opium, and still wear a form of their traditional attire. Thais tend to regard these ethnic minorities as once-removed from Thai society, but able to become passable Thais with the benefit of a little Thai education. Still other groups, such as Indians, Chinese and Europeans, are considered further removed from Thai people. With their differing languages, religion and, in some cases, skin and hair colour, they are considered as belonging to separate races.

At times these ethnic outsiders to Thai society have been accorded different treatment to the more closely related ethnic minorities by the Thai authorities, not in the least because of the enormous political and economic clout that they have wielded over the centuries. The Chinese in particular, the largest ethnic minority group in Thailand since the Ayutthaya period (1350-1767), have seen their fortunes wax and wane throughout the history of Thailand.⁷⁰ G. William Skinner reported there was indirect evidence that the Chinese had settled and assimilated in Siam "well before the fifteenth century."⁷¹ A Chinese writer reported in 1617:

⁶⁹See Niyaphan, "Ethnic Relations in Thailand: The Mon-Thai Relationship".

⁷⁰Niyaphan, "Ethnic Relations in Thailand: The Mon-Thai Relationship", p. 39.

⁷¹Skinner, *Chinese Society in Thailand*, p. 19.

The inhabitants [of Siam] accept the Chinese very cordially, much better than do the natives of another country, therefore Siam is a country that is really friendly to the Chinese.⁷²

There were several waves of Chinese migration to Thailand, and wave after wave assimilated into Thai society, many marrying Thai women and their children being known as *luk chin* [the children of Chinese]. Phra Sarasas argued for Chinese assimilation even more strongly when he suggested the Chinese "fared well [in Siamese trade] for the simple reason that they were never considered foreigners by the Thai."⁷³

It was not until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that a problem arose in Siam with 'assimilated' Chinese. Kenneth Landon pointed the finger at "political nationalism", which was growing in both countries.⁷⁴ An anti-Chinese pamphlet entitled *The Jews of the East* was circulated from 1914, and attributed to King Vajiravudh, despite the Thai royal family being of part-Chinese blood. Anti-Chinese feelings intensified in Siam during the inter-war years, and in response the resident Chinese community strengthened its ethnic identity, establishing Chinese schools to teach "Chinese literature, patriotism and social customs."⁷⁵

There have not been any outright racially motivated campaigns against Europeans in Thailand, as there have been against the Chinese, perhaps because Europeans were never incorporated as Siamese/Thai the way the Chinese were in previous centuries. Ever since the first Thai contact with Europeans, they have been defined in opposition to Thais.

⁷²Skinner, *Chinese Society in Thailand*, p. 8.

⁷³Phra Sarasas, *My Country Thailand*, (Tokyo, Maruzen Co., 1942), p. 49.

⁷⁴Kenneth Landon, *The Chinese in Thailand*, p. 15.

⁷⁵Kenneth Landon, *The Chinese in Thailand*, p. 21.

This supposition concurs with David Streckfuss' position on race relations in Thai history. He has interrogated the concept of 'race' in Thai history, examining what he argues to be the origins of Thai racialist thought in the period 1890-1910. This is the period in which anti-Chinese feeling was first being articulated in an organised manner. Streckfuss argued that the ruling Thai elite adopted the European discourse of 'race' to defend their legal claim to the territory of present-day Thailand.⁷⁶ His basic premise was that 'race' itself did not become a meaningful category of human division for Europeans until the mid to late nineteenth century, when it was increasingly used to measure the level of civilisation a given society was believed to have attained, according to a European system of values and norms. The status of women within a given society, as understood by the Europeans, was one of the common ways a society's level of civilisation was assessed. And as European imperialists often portrayed their imperial mission as a civilising one, it was not in the interests of Siam, facing the threat of European colonisation, to be judged 'uncivilised'.

The nineteenth century racialist ideas adopted by the Thai elite from their European counterparts incorporated strong notions of racial purity and racial hierarchy. The different races were believed to be at different stages of development, and one's sense of identity was believed to flow from one's racial purity. Mixing of the races was undesirable in that it could blur the lines of racial hierarchy, as well as confuse an individual's sense of personal and group identity. Therefore, racial intermarriage was believed by both European and Thai racial theorists of the day to present a problematic situation where racial purity, hierarchy and identity were confused, possibly even lost. The anxious feelings surrounding the prospect of interracial marriage will be more fully discussed in chapters five and six.

⁷⁶David Streckfuss, 'The Mixed Colonial Legacy in Siam: Origins of Thai Racialist Thought, 1890-1910', in Laurie J. Sears (ed.), *Autonomous Histories, Particular Truths. Essays in Honor of John R. W. Smail*, (Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Monograph no. 11, University of Wisconsin, 1993), pp. 123-154.

As studies both of gender and of race have highlighted, one's gender and/or race can substantially influence access to resources and the degree of power one has over one's own life, and over those in the wider community. As such, gender and race can play an important role in determining the social and economic class of an individual. I have not examined Thai studies concentrating solely on class to help illuminate this thesis, because class alone does not adequately explain the situation and experiences of white European women in Thailand, but when combined with the factors of race and gender, class conveys a much more nuanced understanding of their situation.

As a large literature on race, gender and class has been produced beyond Thailand, I intend to draw many of my theoretical approaches for this thesis from this broader corpus. I discuss the literature and its relevance to Thai history in general, and this thesis topic in particular, in the following chapter.

Conclusion

White European people (*farang*), and white European women (*maem*) in particular, are an extruded fragment of Thai history that does not sit comfortably within the overall scheme of the official Thai narrative of nationalist history. Being female has marginalised them from the mainstream of Thai historiography, which until recently has shied away from employing gender as a category of analysis. Their racial 'whiteness' has placed them in a position where they are regarded as foreign and separate from Thai society. Thai society has been shown to be accommodating and assimilationist in its dealings with a number of Asian ethnic minority groups within its borders, but this accommodation has not been extended to *maem* and their *farang* relatives. They belong not to a neighbouring ethnicity, but to a different race which, although a site of desire culturally, technologically and sexually, has proved itself dangerous to the independence of Thailand's neighbours. As such, Europeans have been held at bay but warily respected.

CHAPTER 2

The desire among Thai scholars to present a harmonious view of history to Thai citizens has led to a situation where groups and minorities that do not fit easily within the scheme of official Thai history are typically ignored. Analysing the lives and experiences of minority groups in Thailand may well throw the surface harmony of Thai history into question, but it is important for a fuller and more nuanced understanding of Thai history to do just that. A study of white European women in Siam, and the responses to race, gender and class evoked by their presence, is one such study, capable of disrupting the smooth exterior of Thai history. However, for Thai historiography to grow and become more enriched, it is beneficial to examine, analyse and question all of the potential diversity that lies within its scope.

The bulk of material dealing with white European women, and race, gender, and class in multi-racial societies, has appeared in historical and anthropological studies of European imperialism and colonialism. Although originally viewed from or appearing solely as stereotypes of the 'good imperialist' as a carrier of European imperialism, the marginalised absence or the politicised presence of Phoenix described in white European women and the various roles they played in colonisation are now being increasingly analysed, especially from the nineteenth and twentieth century.

¹The most of the literature of this kind. The term 'white women' is used as 'white women'. I prefer to refer to them as white European women because of the dearth of Thai history the use of 'white' should not be confused with Chinese, Vietnamese or people from northern Thailand, all of whom may have pale skin, and could thus be called 'white' in Thai.

²Margaret Jolly, *Collecting Women: A History of the Body and Empire*, in Tracy Kidder & Anne Carson (eds), *Women and the Politics of Agency*, Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 1997, p. 105.

³A. P. S. Phipps, 'The White Man's Burden and the Black Man's Burden', in G. Wilson (ed.), *The White Man's Burden*, London: Duckworth, 1990, p. 76.

CHAPTER 2

WHITE EUROPEAN WOMEN IN COLONIAL SOCIETIES

White European women's presence in Thailand, a multi-racial community comprised of men and women predominantly Thai, but also Chinese, Malay, Burmese, Peguan, Mon, Khmer, Vietnamese, South Asian, Arab and European, among others, highlights Thai attitudes about race, gender and class, and Thai identity. I pieced together a history of white European women in Siam during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the previous chapter in order to examine some of the attitudes concerning race, gender and class operating in Thai historiography. My approach in constructing this history has been influenced by the disciplines of feminist history, colonial and post-colonialist studies and race studies. Because there was little material available in these disciplines which centred on Thailand in particular, it was necessary for me to familiarise myself with the theoretical literature relating to race, gender and class focussing on other regions of the world, where, as in Thailand, multi-racial societies prevailed.

The bulk of material dealing with white European women,¹ and race, gender and class in multi-racial societies has been generated in historical and anthropological studies of European imperialism and colonisation. Although originally absent from or appearing solely as stereotypes of the 'gross memsahib' in histories of European imperialism,² the normalised absence or the pathologised presence as Phoenix described it,³ white European women and the various roles they played in colonisation are now being increasingly analysed, especially in relation to eighteenth and nineteenth century

¹In most of the literature of this kind, European women are referred to as 'white women'. I prefer to refer to them as white, European women because in the case of Thailand the use of 'white' alone could be confused with Chinese, Vietnamese or people from northern Thailand, all of whom may have pale skins, and could thus be termed 'white' in Thai.

²Margaret Jolly, 'Colonizing Women: The Maternal Body and Empire', in Sneja Gunew & Anna Yeatman (eds), *Feminism and the Politics of Difference*, (Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 1993), p. 105.

³A. Phoenix, 'Theories of Gender and Black Families', in G. Weiner (ed.), *Just a Bunch of Girls*, (London, Open University Press, 1985), p. 51.

colonisation in Africa, Asia and the Pacific. Many of these studies are quite relevant to the Thai case, even though Thailand itself was never formally colonised.

Thailand was influenced by European imperialism even though it remained politically independent. One of the main differences Thailand experienced in relation to its neighbours was that fewer white European people settled there than in official European colonies. It has often been stated that some of the trade treaties and concessions the Thai court made to European nations in the nineteenth century, especially the conditions of extra-territoriality, blunted Thai independence. Therefore, although not always entirely relevant to the specific political situation in Thailand, theoretical works dealing with white women's role in European imperialism can and do offer useful methods by which to understand white European women's lives in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Siam. These works examine the inter-related spheres of race, gender and class, and help explain how they relate to the lives and experiences of white women who lived in multi-racial, colonial societies.

The literature dealing with white women in multi-racial, colonial societies grew out of women's history and the parallel work of colonial and postcolonial studies, both of which had a theoretical appreciation of the 'other', a concept first mooted by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*.⁴ In the case of women's history, the theoretical 'other' of the predominantly masculinist discourse was 'woman', while in the case of postcolonial studies the theoretical 'other' was 'the native' or 'the colonised'. Frantz Fanon posited the 'black man' as 'other'⁵ and Edward Said argued that the European gaze had consigned the 'oriental' to 'otherness'.⁶ Feminist literature argued that women were 'colonised' by patriarchy, whereas Said argued that the colonised people of Asia were regarded as 'feminised others' by their European colonisers. However, Jolly warned in

⁴Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, (Ringwood, Penguin Books, 1972 [1949]).

⁵Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, (St Albans, Paladin, 1970 [1952]).

⁶Edward Said, *Orientalism. Western Conceptions of the Orient*, (Ringwood, Penguin Books, 1991 [1978]).

an introduction to an edition of *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* devoted to ethnicity and gender that although parallels existed, there was no easy equation between the categories of 'woman' and 'native', as neither 'woman' nor 'native' are homogenous categories.⁷ Moreover, by introducing white women to the formula of ethnicity and gender in colonial settings, the neat theoretical categories are ruptured, hence the title of Jolly's 'Colonizing women', cited earlier in this chapter.

Feminist history, colonial studies and later post-colonialism met in the theoretical sense when academic attention turned to the roles played by white women in European imperialism. Until then, their theoretical frameworks had developed in relative isolation to each other. Feminist work, which initially examined 'women' as an analytical category, had branched out into sub-categories of 'black women', 'Asian women', 'working class women', and the like but throughout this process, the dominant 'whiteness' of the Western world remained largely ignored or avoided. Not until the intersection of postcoloniality (that is, a theoretical critique of colonialism in which representations of 'others' are questioned), and feminism in the past decade was a situation created where the dominant whiteness of the mainstream feminist movement could no longer be ignored, although some query the easy intersection of the two disciplines. White feminists were forced to examine their own position in global history as educated, middle-class white women.⁸ Consequently, there has been a degree of political and theoretical introspection in the past decade in the field of feminist, imperialist history.

Gendered, feminist history has demanded its place in the mainstream of academic history since the mid-1970s when the growing movement of second-wave feminists sought to establish the category of gender as a vital concept in the way history was

⁷Margaret Jolly, 'Introduction', *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*, vol. 5, nos. 1&2, 1994, p. 3.

⁸Nupur Chaudhuri & Margaret Strobel (eds.), *Western women and imperialism: complicity and resistance*, (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 3.

analysed and interpreted.⁹ As a result, a proliferation of new histories appeared, writing women back into the mainstream of history, and providing gendered accounts of what, until then, had been considered the traditional preserve of men. However, more recent writings on the aims of feminist women's history have moved beyond the need to recover women's history and place them within the framework of history, to one of using gender as one of the several crucial axes of power within society.¹⁰ Joan Scott has requested that feminist historians reconceptualise history along the lines of representation, involving a questioning of how hierarchies such as those of gender are constructed and legitimised.¹¹ These more recent ideas and directions evolved as a response to some of the criticisms levelled at the original women's history of the 1970s.

In the 1970s gender was used as the central and most important analytical category in many of the women's histories being produced. Social relations were perceived to be principally organised by patriarchy, which had oppressed women and kept them out of the mainstream of history for so long. Womanhood was thereby reduced to a 'universal femininity' in continual conflict with an 'essential, universal masculinity' in these theoretical arguments.¹² As such, all women were held to share a common set of interests at some general level, and gender was privileged over all other analytical categories, such as race or social class. Socialist or Marxist feminists, on the other hand, claimed that capitalism, rather than patriarchy, was the oppressive force against which most women laboured. They were suspicious of analysing society solely in terms of gender, which ignored class divisions among women, and therefore divided

⁹A variety of works appeared in the mid to late 1970s, arguing the case for women's history and the category of gender. For example: Anna Davin, 'Women and History', in Michelene Wandor (ed.), *The Body Politic. Women's Liberation in Britain*, (London, Stage One, 1972); Carl Egler, *Is There a History of Women?*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1975), Sheila Rowbotham, *Hidden from History: 300 Years of Women's Oppression and the Fight Against It*, (Ringwood, Penguin (Pelican), 1975); Anne Summers, 'An Object Lesson in Women's History', in J. Mercer (ed.), *The Other Half: Women in Australian Society*, (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1975).

¹⁰Catherine Hall, *White, Male and Middle-class. Explorations in Feminism and History*, (London, Polity Press, 1992), p. 33.

¹¹Joan Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, (New York, Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 4.

¹²Anne McClintock criticises early feminist histories of doing this in *Imperial Leather. Race, gender and sexuality in the colonial contest*, (New York & London, Routledge, 1995), p. 7.

the proletariat.¹³ Their theoretical stance privileged class, and then gender, but again often neglected the factor of race.

Not surprisingly, black feminists, Asian feminists, Aboriginal feminists and 'women of color' (to use the inclusive American term) were angered at the privileging of gender at the expense of race and social class in the new histories of oppression that continued to emerge. They were angry because their oppression was based on race and/or social class as often, if not more often, than it was on gender. They felt angry that white feminists had projected their experiences and understanding of womanhood as universal and were claiming to speak for all women, where in many cases they were speaking only for themselves.¹⁴ Black, Asian, Aboriginal and 'colored' feminists felt that white feminists had "blatantly ignore[d] or misrepresent[ed] their concerns",¹⁵ and that the importance of race as an analytical category and source of oppression had been, if not overlooked, then seriously downplayed.

The early feminist stance of universal womanhood oppressed by patriarchy or capitalism above all else has been comprehensively criticised for assuming a racially homogenous society where gender and class are the only significant variables, and because it does not acknowledge the influence that race and/or ethnicity can have on a person's life. Among the most influential critics have been Gayatri Spivak,¹⁶ Hazel Carby,¹⁷ and Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar.¹⁸ They have highlighted where the claims and aims of white feminism do not sit comfortably with those of non-white

¹³Catherine MacKinnon, 'Feminism, Marxism, Method and the State: An Agenda for Theory', in Nannerl O. Keohane, Michelle Z. Rosaldo & Barbara C. Gelpi (eds), *Feminist Theory. A Critique of Ideology*, (Sussex, Harvester Press, 1982), p. 3.

¹⁴Caroline Knowles & Sharmila Mercer, 'Feminism and anti-racism', in J. Donald & A. Rattansi (eds), *Race, culture and difference*, (London, Open University, 1992), p. 106.

¹⁵Knowles & Mercer, 'Feminism and anti-racism', p. 105.

¹⁶Gayatri Spivak, 'Can the sub-altern speak?', in G. Nelson & L. Grossberg (eds), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 271-313; and Gayatri Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic: interviews, strategies, dialogues*, (New York, Routledge, 1990).

¹⁷Hazel Carby, 'White woman listen. Black feminism and the boundaries of sisterhood', in Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, *The Empire Strikes Back*, (London, Hutchinson, 1982).

¹⁸Valerie Amos & Pratibha Parmar, 'Challenging imperial feminism', *Feminist Review*, vol. 17, 1984.

women. They have pointed out that race and social class often unite men and women, despite the dynamics of gender power. Carby argued that black men did not benefit from patriarchy in the same way or to the same degree that white men did, and that therefore patriarchy was not such an important issue for black women as it was for white women.¹⁹

Unease amongst the academic feminist movement about the interrelated issues of social inequalities based on race and gender was evident. By the mid-1980s prominent white feminists Michele Barrett and Mary McIntosh had apologised in an article for the Eurocentrism of earlier white feminist thought.²⁰ Knowles and Mercer also conceded that white feminism's privileging of gender and assumption that the experience and goals of white women were those of all women had been Eurocentric, ignorant and unsisterly, but they insisted that it was not racist.²¹ Vron Ware, investigating the way thinking about race has influenced the development of white feminism, argued that Western feminism from its inception was a political movement formed within a racist society, and that as such, it is not surprising that some of its concerns have been racially inflected.²²

While the literature dealing with the non-white feminist response to white 'universal' feminism grew by tapping into material which dealt with ethnic minority groups defined as 'the other', 'the colonised' or 'the subaltern', for example drawing on the works of Homi Bhabha,²³ and the already cited works of Fanon and Spivak, there were few studies which analysed white feminists, or their white female forebears, in relation to their race and therefore their position of relative privilege within multi-racial and multi-cultural colonial or postcolonial societies. The racial 'whiteness' of the majority

¹⁹Hazel Carby cited in Knowles & Mercer, 'Feminism and anti-racism', p. 108.

²⁰M. Barrett & M. McIntosh, 'Ethnocentrism and socialist feminist theory', *Feminist Review*, 20, 1985.

²¹Knowles & Mercer, 'Feminism and anti-racism', p. 117.

²²Vron Ware, *Beyond the Pale. White Women, Racism and History*, (London, Verso, 1992), p. xiii.

²³Homi Bhabha, 'Of mimicry and man: the ambivalence of colonial discourse', *October*, vol. 28, no. 4, 1984, pp. 125-133.

of the community in the Western world was ignored or assumed, while the racial difference of ethnic minority groups was focussed upon. However, with attention in the discipline of race studies beginning to focus on majority groups as well as minority groups, greater attention has been paid to the social, political and economic experience of racial 'whiteness'. It was not until the intersection of feminist history and colonialism and postcoloniality, that examinations of race, gender and class, with the focus on 'whiteness' and gender, began to be seen in any numbers.²⁴

The roles white women played in European imperialism

When feminist academics first turned their attention to the roles that white women had played in the European imperialist projects of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, they were confronted in the existing histories with either the absence of white women or alternatively, overwhelmingly negative stereotypes of them as racist memsahibs. Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel noted the efforts of academics since the late 1970s to refute the "stereotypically negative image of Western women as participants in empire".²⁵ Claudia Knapman and Helen Callaway both attempted to redress the history of white (notably British) women's agency and experience in Fiji in the years 1835-1930 and colonial Nigeria from the late 1800s to the 1950s respectively. They both lamented that in most reconstructions of colonialism, white women were either omitted entirely or presented in a simplistic, negative light as being petty, snobbish and racist.²⁶ In fact, Knapman charged that while white women had been regarded by previous historians as irrelevant to the main historical themes and events of colonial

²⁴For example, see Ruth Frankenberg, *White women, race matters. The social construction of whiteness*, (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1993), and Virginia Dominguez, *White by definition: Social classification in Creole Louisiana*, (New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1986).

²⁵Chaudhuri & Strobel (eds), *Western Women and Imperialism*, p. 4.

²⁶Helen Callaway, *Gender, Culture and Empire. European Women in Colonial Nigeria*, (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1987), p. 3.

history, at the same time they had been accused of playing a significant role in the vital area of worsening race relations in multiracial, colonial societies.²⁷

Both Knapman and Callaway examined how white women had come to be blamed for the deterioration in race relations and ultimately, and most extremely, for the failure of empire itself. They both claimed that white women had been unfairly burdened with a bad reputation in multiracial colonial societies. Callaway made several sweeping references to the bad reputation attributed to white women in fictional works, the popular media and scholarly writers, allegedly because of their trespass into the male-dominated colonial realm.²⁸ Meanwhile, Knapman found it disturbing that impressionistic moralisms about white women in colonial history had been allowed to creep into academic writing, and had not been subjected to more rigorous examination. She suggested that this commonly unquestioned but also unsubstantiated blame is partly a result of a world where white male views and prejudices predominate. Whereas views which conflict with those of the dominant white male experience are subjected to much rigorous academic examination, those which do not challenge beliefs commonly held by the dominant group in a given society are sometimes able to slip through the net of academic rigour. She argued that this has allowed the proliferation of works blaming white women for the deterioration of race relations in colonial societies to emerge, backed with little evidence.

Callaway claimed that white women were not active agents in the deterioration in race relations. Rather, the deterioration was the result of a new structural alignment in society brought about by official government policy, and of an expansive push in a later epoch of colonial invasion. She also offered a theoretical explanation put forward by psychoanalyst Jean Baker Miller, that women have been made to embody the

²⁷Claudia Knapman, *White Women in Fiji 1835-1930: the ruin of empire?*, (Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 1986) p. 16.

²⁸Callaway, *Gender, Culture and Empire*, p. 25-27.

dominant culture's unsolved problems.²⁹ In this case then, white women in the colonies conveniently embodied the unsolved dilemma of imperialism. The dominant male culture of colonial Nigeria was able to distance itself from the worst imperial traits, defining them as 'feminine' rather than masculinely oriented 'imperial',³⁰ although Callaway then manages to recuperate the 'feminine imperial' in the transition from empire to Commonwealth.

Despite Knapman and Callaway making concerned efforts to integrate the role of white women in the colonies, Callaway concluded that the stereotypes and images of white women in the colonies, and Nigeria in particular, had been undeserved. White women had been made the scapegoats of all that was bad about imperialism, while white men had claimed all the good points as stemming from masculine values. In addition, the efforts of women who contributed in the masculine-defined environment of work as colonial administrators had been devalued. These women were perceived as not being fully feminine, because they had not married and had intruded on the male sphere of paid work.

In the case of Fiji, most explanations for the deterioration of racial harmony focus on increased segregation in society, rather than overt hostility, as an indicator of racial disharmony. Racial segregation, Knapman argued, proved very little about female racial prejudice, and female racial prejudice could not be established from male assumptions.³¹ She stated that in 1870s racial tensions increased in Fiji, not as a result of the allegedly racist views of white women, but in direct relation to white settler aspirations for control of Fijian land and labour.³² Nothing deriving from gender could explain increased racism in Fiji. She concluded that white men were just as racist as white women.³³

²⁹Callaway, *Gender, Culture and Empire*, p. 228.

³⁰Callaway, *Gender, Culture and Empire*, p. 229.

³¹Knapman, *White Women in Fiji*, p. 12.

³²Knapman, *White Women in Fiji*, p. 162.

³³Knapman, *White Women in Fiji*, p. 163.

Knapman also argued that to fall back on gender to explain the failure of British colonialism obscured the realities of power relationships between the ruler and the ruled. She concluded, as did Callaway, that gendered blame of this kind left the male 'imperial idea' intact, and excused men of the ultimate responsibility for imperialism, which is now both unpopular and assessed as a failure.³⁴

Despite Knapman and Callaway making concerted efforts to integrate the role of white women into the European colonial projects of Fiji and Nigeria respectively, they have been criticised by Jane Haggis for privileging the gender divisions amongst white people over those of non-white people. She argued:

In the treatment of both black men and women ... neither author really extends gender to include them.³⁵

So while Knapman and Callaway have succeeded in reinserting white women back into imperial histories, they have done so at the expense of denying gender to the local populations, Fijian, Indian and Nigerian. The challenge of studies examining white women's roles in colonialism, imperialism and other forms of class and cultural exploitation which have emerged in the late 1980s and 1990s has been to situate white women in the colonial environment and to analyse their conflicting roles and allegiances in all their complexity, not just apropos white men, or the local populations, but in relation to local women and local men of varying social classes.

Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel evoked white women's complex relation to European imperialism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, reinforcing their understanding of white women's complicity with and resistance to imperialism.³⁶ By

³⁴Knapman, *White Women in Fiji*, p. 175.

³⁵Jane Haggis, 'Gendering Colonialism or Colonising Gender? Recent Women's Studies Approaches to White Women and the History of British Colonialism', *Women's Studies International Forum*, vol. 13, nos. 1&2, 1990, p. 113.

³⁶Chaudhuri and Strobel (eds), *Western Women and Imperialism*, p. 5.

virtue of their race, white women enjoyed a certain degree of power and social status in colonial societies and contributed also to the colonial endeavour. However, by virtue of their gender, white women did not exercise as much power as the white men in their community, nor did they always share the views of their menfolk. It is such simultaneous complicity and resistance of white women to imperialism and global racism that has lent the field of study its feeling of 'unease'.

Ware noted that both major waves of the feminist movement originated from race movements in the United States: first-wave feminism from the abolitionist movement of the mid-1800s; and second-wave feminism from the civil rights movement of the 1960s, and that they originally employed similar rhetoric: e.g. all people are equal, whether black or white, male or female. However, as soon as the fledgling feminist movement gained the public acceptance and legitimacy it was seeking, it moved away from issues of race and, often unwittingly, into the territory of white domination.

Chaudhuri and Strobel noticed a rise in popular interest in the roles of white women in nineteenth and early twentieth century colonialism/imperialism occurring in 1980s Britain. They cited the popular films, *Out of Africa* (1985) and *White Mischief* (1987), both set in colonial Africa with white European female lead characters, as an illustration of this. They could have mentioned the equally relevant *A Passage to India* (1984) and *Heat and Dust* (1982), both set in India under the British Raj. At the same time as these films were enjoying widespread popularity in Britain and elsewhere, a slightly romantic, nostalgic literature focussing mainly on white women in India (the *memsahibs*) was also enjoying popularity.³⁷

³⁷Chaudhuri and Strobel list Pat Barr, *The Memsahibs: The Women of Victorian India*, (London, Secker & Warburg, 1976); and Margaret Macmillan, *Women of the Raj*, (London, Thames & Hudson, 1988) as examples of popular history of empire, in Chaudhuri and Strobel (eds), *Western Women and Imperialism*, p. 14.

Literature of a more analytical nature, which examined the roles of white women in imperial settings also began appearing at this time, for example, the already discussed works of Knapman, Callaway and Ware, as well as works by Margaret Jolly,³⁸ Jane Haggis,³⁹ Patricia Grimshaw⁴⁰ and Ann Stoler.⁴¹ These studies examined the paternalism of imperialism in both its formal guise of colonial rule, and its less formal but just as powerful manifestations of 'colonial influence', for example, Christian philanthropy and missionary work. They investigated the degree to which white women collaborated in white men's project of imperialism, examining the privileges that white women were accorded because of their race, and the disadvantages they encountered because they were women in a patriarchal social hierarchy. They also examined in some detail the strength of the allegation that the racist attitudes of white women were to blame for the decline in racial relations in the colonies and ultimately, were the cause of the British loss of empire,⁴² as well as the powerfully emotive issues of inter-racial marriage and sexual fear of the 'other' race and the 'other' sex.

The various authors mentioned above set out very deliberately to address the combined complexities of race, gender and class for white women in both historical and contemporary society. As Ware explained, questions of race and feminism are inextricably linked, but until recently women's studies and race studies have been

³⁸Margaret Jolly, 'Colonizing Women'; also Margaret Jolly, 'Introduction', *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*, vol. 5, nos. 1&2, 1994; and 'Motherlands? Some notes on Women and Nationalism in India and Africa', *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*, vol. 5, nos. 1&2, 1994.

³⁹Jane Haggis, 'Gendering Colonialism or Colonizing Gender?'; and "Good wives and mothers' or 'dedicated workers'?" in Kalpana Ram & Margaret Jolly (eds) *Maternities and Modernities, Colonial and Postcolonial Experiences in Asia and the Pacific*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, in press).

⁴⁰Patricia Grimshaw, *New England Missionary Wives, Hawaiian Women and 'The Cult of True Womanhood'*, in Margaret Jolly & Martha McIntyre (eds), *Family and Gender in the Pacific*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989); and Patricia Grimshaw, *Paths of Duty. American Missionary Wives in Nineteenth-Century Hawaii*, (Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 1989).

⁴¹Ann Stoler, 'Sexual Affronts and Racial Frontiers: European identities and the cultural politics of exclusion in colonial Southeast Asia', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 34, no. 3, 1992; also Ann Stoler, 'Mixed bloods and the cultural politics of European identity in colonial Southeast Asia', in Jan Nederveen Pieterse & Bhikhu Parekh (eds), *The Decolonization of Imagination. Culture, Knowledge and Power*, (London & Atlantic Heights, NJ, Zed Books, 1995).

⁴²Knapman concludes it was irrational to blame white women and their influence on the decline in race relations for the loss of British Empire.

treated as two separate categories by researchers and social commentators alike.⁴³ McClintock linked gender with imperialism, arguing that imperialism could not be understood without a theory of gender, although she cautioned that gender was not the dominant dynamic of industrial imperialism.⁴⁴ Jan Pettman argued that, in the case of Australia, racialisation was in fact the dominant dynamic of colonisation, whether of the indigenous people, or later migrant groups,⁴⁵ but that also gender was often missing from representations of nation, race, ethnicity and cultural difference.⁴⁶

Ware intended to bridge the theoretical gap by integrating the study of race and gender, especially in relation to 'whiteness', in her history, *Beyond the Pale. White Women, Racism and History*. By integrating the study of race, gender and class in relation to 'whiteness', authors such as Ware hoped to create a space for a new history where the concerns and experiences of all people, black, white, female, male, and of all social classes, could be represented. In the introduction to *Western Women and Imperialism*, Chaudhuri and Strobel kept returning to their goals of contextualising the history of imperialism and the inequalities of gender, race and class that imperialism helped produce.

Imperialism, whether official colonial rule or 'colonial influence', was a potent and widespread force in the nineteenth century, and some would argue, continues to be so today in the guise of neo-colonialism or dependency. One of the most frequently recurring themes when examining and documenting the histories of white women in multi-racial, often colonial societies has been their role in European imperialism. To what degree did white women participate in the spread and maintenance of imperialism? To what degree did they resist? Were they willing agents, unwitting or

⁴³Ware, *Beyond the Pale*, p. 36.

⁴⁴McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, p. 6.

⁴⁵Jan Pettman, *Living in the Margins. Racism, Sexism and Feminism in Australia*, (Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 1992), p. 9.

⁴⁶Pettman, *Living in the Margins*, p. 14.

even reluctant agents of imperialism? And as Jolly has suggested, were they signs or speakers, silent or voiced?⁴⁷

McClintock answered the question thus:

[W]hite women were not the hapless onlookers of empire but were ambiguously complicit both as colonizers and colonized, privileged and restricted, acted upon and acting.⁴⁸

Her answer, while rhetorically comprehensive, requires further thought and research.

Chaudhuri and Strobel defined imperialism as signifying any relationship of dominance and subordination, including the modern form of economic control, often dubbed dependency or underdevelopment.⁴⁹ Colonialism is but one type of imperialism, they claimed, that is, the politically and legally sanctioned rule of one country over another. Thomas, meanwhile, defined colonialism not only as political rule and economic extraction from the periphery to the metropole, but also as a contradictory and contested cultural process.⁵⁰ In the nineteenth century, the practice of European colonialism was widespread across the continents of Africa, Asia and the Pacific. While colonial rule is in itself easy to identify, the many guises of 'colonial influence' are more subtle in their manifestation, and it is to 'colonial influence' that many of the recent analytical studies have devoted the bulk of their attention, for it is in this field that the presence and efforts of white women have been most keenly felt. Evangelical Protestant Christianity and first-wave feminist attempts to assist their 'less fortunate sisters', are prime examples of the 'colonial influence' form of imperialism.

⁴⁷Jolly, 'Introduction', p. 9.

⁴⁸McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, p. 6.

⁴⁹Chaudhuri & Strobel (eds), *Western Women and Imperialism*, p. 2.

⁵⁰Nicholas Thomas, *Colonialism's Culture. Anthropology, Travel and Government*, (Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1994), p. 12.

Ware examined white women's participation in philanthropic 'civilising' works in the far flung corners of empire, and claimed that British women saw their philanthropic role as primarily liberating the indigenous, colonised people from their uncivilised habits and replacing them with the 'benefits' of British education and 'decent' Christian values. They often viewed local customs as barbaric and tyrannical (especially those relating to women, for example *purdah* and *zenana*), to be cured only through contact with Western civilisation.⁵¹ Barbara Ramusack has characterised the practice of well-meaning colonial women assisting their native 'sisters' to adopt Western modes of domesticity and thereby become more 'civilised' as 'maternal imperialism',⁵² while Jolly and Haggis termed it simply maternalism, a special female brand of imperialism.⁵³

In line with the nineteenth century ideal of femininity, it was commonly accepted that British 'ladies' had a moral, spiritual and civilising role to play, not only within their own homes, but within the general community. The 1800s saw an increase in the number of middle-class British women who devoted their time and energies to educating the poor, working classes who had moved from the land into British manufacturing towns in search of waged labour, British settler communities throughout the British Empire, and also to the educational and spiritual advancement of the colonised, indigenous populations of the British Empire. Underlying nineteenth century philanthropy, whether in Britain or overseas in the colonies, was the belief that the British upper and middle classes were superior to all those they helped, either inherently or because of the level of their education, their Christian beliefs or their way of life.

⁵¹Ware, *Beyond the Pale*, p. 129, 147.

⁵²Barbara Ramusack, 'Cultural Missionaries, Maternal Imperialists, Feminist Allies: British Women Activists in India, 1865-1945', in Chaudhuri & Strobel (eds.), *Western Women and Imperialism*, pp. 119-136.

⁵³Haggis, 'Good wives and mothers' or 'dedicated workers'? in Ram & Jolly (eds), *Maternities and Modernities*, p. 101; and Jolly, 'Colonizing women', p. 104.

Callaway argued that imperialism, like Ruskin's Victorian ideal of gentlemanly chivalry toward the 'fairer sex', was rooted in ideas of inequality,⁵⁴ and McClintock linked the discourse concerning the working classes of Britain to that concerning indigenous people in the colonies. She explored the development of social Darwinist ideas about the evolution of human races, stating that while indigenous people in the British colonies were classified as belonging to different (and inferior) races to the middle-class British colonisers, the poor, industrial working classes of Britain were also believed to belong to a different race by their middle and upper-class employers and masters. A case in point, the colonised Irish were treated by the English as white negroes. Because they did not look visibly different from the English, their separate race was detected by the "barbarism of the Irish accent" and the domestic squalor in which they were said to live.⁵⁵

Missionary Christianity

Nineteenth century European philanthropic concerns were often played out in the colonies by Christian missionaries, both Catholic and Protestant. To help others less fortunate than themselves, the missionaries offered both education and religion to the local people of the European colonies, as well as to the populations of uncolonised territories such as Siam and China. The missionaries offered Western-style education because it was felt that otherwise religion would be wasted upon 'uncivilised savages'. The aims of the missionaries were as much about 'civilising' the indigenous people, as about converting them. In fact, there could be no true conversion to Christianity without an appreciation of European modes of behaviour in both the public and private spheres. Langmore addressed these issues in her history of missionary work in New Guinea,⁵⁶ as did Haggis in her already-cited work on the 'bible women' in southern

⁵⁴Callaway, *Gender, Culture and Empire*, p. 40.

⁵⁵McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, p. 53.

⁵⁶Diane Langmore, 'The Object Lesson of a Civilised, Christian Home' in Jolly & McIntyre (eds) *Family and Gender in the Pacific*; and also Diane Langmore, *Missionary Lives, Papua 1874-1914*, (Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 1989).

India, and Grimshaw in her already-cited work on white missionary women in Hawaii. Mary Cort gave first-hand information about the civilising and educational drive of Christian missionaries in Siam in the late nineteenth century, and I examine her views more closely in chapter four.

Sometimes missionaries worked in tandem with the goals of the European colonial rulers, sometimes against them. In some cases, it has been argued that missionaries *were* the colonial representatives, for example American missionaries in China, in the situation where political colonisation was out of the question but a degree of cultural colonisation was not.⁵⁷ Although the missionaries sought to convert the local people to Christianity, and to reshape their modes of domestic and public organisation, sometimes they also provided a useful avenue for local people to negotiate with their colonial rulers. The Thai kings, for example, although not under colonial rule themselves, made great use of American missionaries (as interpreters and cultural advisers) in their negotiations with European trade and diplomatic representatives in the early to mid-nineteenth century.

Therefore, although the aims of the missionaries did not always equate with those of the colonial administrators, or the capitalist companies establishing footholds in the colonies, there existed also a degree of complicity.

Sexual fear of the 'other' race

When histories of imperialism expand to acknowledge the presence of white women and the roles they played in colonial endeavours, one encounters not only the efforts of white women in areas such as philanthropic missionary work, but also the desire of white men to protect 'their women' from others. In this framework, one inevitably

⁵⁷Jane Hunter, *The Gospel of Gentility. American Women Missionaries in Turn-of-the-Century China*, (New Haven & London, Yale University Press, 1984), p. 8.

encounters the rhetoric of sexual fear of the 'other' race. Sexual analogies come thick and fast when one strays into the field, either geographically or metaphorically, of new, unknown territory. The sexualisation of imperialism should not be such a surprise then, especially given the European preoccupation with sexuality during the Victorian era.

Said argued in his influential study, *Orientalism*, that the European colonisers 'feminised' the Orient as they conquered and attempted to pacify and domesticate it.⁵⁸ Oriental men were characterised as innately feminine, and not 'man enough' to resist colonisation and the subjugation by a foreign power that this entailed. Said's analogy cannot be applied to colonial settings across the board, though, because in the Pacific the invading Europeans portrayed both male and female islanders in some regions as masculinised rather than feminised.⁵⁹ More recently McClintock drew powerful psychoanalytic links between the language of European imperialism and sexual violence towards women, for example, the invading colonisers and the passively waiting virgin land of the colonies.⁶⁰ But rather than accede to this passivity and penetration, she highlighted what she termed the "crisis" in the male imperial identity: the colonisers' fantasy of conquest and fear of being engulfed by unknown territory and its inhabitants, and portrayed the imperial act of discovery as a male substitute for the birthing ritual. She claimed that male colonists named new lands in the same way they named their children - to denote their ownership of them.⁶¹

While psychoanalysis has explored the sexual fear evident between the sexes, cross-cultural psychoanalytic theory has revealed that sexual fear of the 'other' race is a powerful issue lurking below the surface in many multi-racial societies, just waiting to be exploited. The potential power of this fear has meant that certain sections of

⁵⁸Said, *Orientalism*.

⁵⁹Jolly, 'Introduction', p. 5.

⁶⁰McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, p. 24.

⁶¹McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, p. 29.

society have invoked it at various times, in order to manipulate public sentiment and to defend racial boundaries.

Callaway argued that sexual fear was a concept often invoked at times of particular political pressure when the dominant group perceived itself to be vulnerable and threatened. Women's sexuality became symbolic of the body of the ruling group: if she was penetrated by someone from a rival group (even with her own consent) this represented a violation of the dominant group's integrity. In these circumstances, violence against women of the dominant group could become a potent symbol of revenge.⁶² Fanon perhaps confirmed every white man's fear of inter-racial sexual violence when he alluded to this desire for sexual revenge in *Black Skin, White Masks*.⁶³

Lynching in the United States was carried out under the guise of protecting white women from the violence and sexual depravity of black men.⁶⁴ Black people (read 'men') made up a good 75 per cent of all lynchings in late nineteenth century United States, according to Ware, and defenders of lynching argued that although unpleasant, the practice was nevertheless a social necessity because it protected white women. Relationships between white women and black men challenged dominant notions of white women's sexuality and of appropriate relations between races. The Victorian ideal of womanhood current in the nineteenth century decreed that, preferably, Victorian 'ladies' were devoid of any sexual desire. Moreover, ideas derived from social Darwinism and theories of racial superiority meant that it was difficult to understand why a white woman, possessed of all her mental faculties, could be attracted to a black man. The public outcry over such relationships, or the inability of

⁶²Callaway, *Gender, Culture and Empire*, p. 237.

⁶³Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 16 cited in McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, p. 362.

⁶⁴This is a similar argument to that put forward by Inglis in the already-cited, *Not a White Woman Safe*.

white men to accept that white women would want to pursue these kinds of relationships, often resulted in the lynching of black men.

The feminisation of Asian men, in line with Said's theory of Orientalism, meant that they were not perceived as such a sexual threat to white women as were hyper-masculinised black men. However, European travellers and later colonisers understood Asian sexuality to be deviant, and they were particularly concerned when white women formed unions with Asian men, fearing that this may lead to racial degeneracy.

As women have been regarded not only as the possessions of men in patriarchal societies, whose attack by the enemy can be a strike against their 'owner' (father and husband), but also as the reproducers of the race, it has been very important to control their social behaviour. Of special importance has been the practice of controlling women's sexuality, and therefore their reproduction, to ensure the continuing 'purity' of the race. The clear link between controlling women's sexuality and maintaining the discourse of racial purity further implicates the categories of race and gender.⁶⁵

In the Southeast Asian context, Ann Stoler has examined the matter of racial purity raised by mixed race marriages and their mixed blood offspring in the colonial societies of nineteenth century French Indochina and the Netherlands Indies (also known as the Dutch East Indies).⁶⁶ She argued that *métissage* (mixed race) was highly politicised in the colonies during this period because people who straddled the theoretical divide in the discourse of racial difference and superiority challenged the stability of national identity in Europe, as well as the "Manichean categories of ruler and ruled".⁶⁷ Judges

⁶⁵McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, p. 61.

⁶⁶Ann Stoler, 'Carnal knowledge and imperial power', in Micaela di Leonardo (ed.), *Gender at the Crossroads: Feminist Anthropology in the Postmodern Era*, (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1991).

⁶⁷Stoler, 'Mixed bloods and the cultural politics of European identity in colonial Southeast Asia', p. 143.

in colonial courts of law employed cultural markers such as one's geographical environment, social class and national character, rather than physiological distinctions, to help determine one's race.⁶⁷ Because nineteenth century racially mixed marriages threw sexual and moral boundaries between races into total confusion, *métissage*, claimed Stoler, was legally handled, culturally inscribed and politically treated.⁶⁸

Racial purity gained importance in Europe and the colonies in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a means of ensuring the continuation of the 'white race', and part of the justification for colonial rule. The *métissage* Stoler discussed was perceived as a direct threat to that project, for it threatened internal contamination, an embodiment of European degeneration and moral decay.⁶⁹ Stoler found that "class distinctions, gender prescriptions, cultural knowledge and racial membership were simultaneously invoked and strategically filled with different meanings for varied projects."⁷⁰

Therefore, there was not a set way of administrations dealing with people of mixed blood, but a variety of ways and interpretations, depending on what was at stake in each individual case.

Of particular concern to white, colonial society was the choice of some white women to marry or cohabit with native men. Colonial officials feared the contamination and degeneracy of the purity of not only the white race, but the white individual concerned, through these mixed-race unions, and sought to discourage them. It was thought that poor whites living on the cultural borderlands of the *echte* (real) European community were most in danger of degeneracy. These included:

⁶⁷Stoler, 'Mixed bloods and the cultural politics of European identity in colonial Southeast Asia', p. 128.

⁶⁸Stoler, 'Sexual Affronts and Racial Frontiers: European identities and the cultural politics of exclusion in colonial Southeast Asia', p. 514.

⁶⁹Stoler, 'Mixed bloods and the cultural politics of European identity in colonial Southeast Asia', p. 130.

⁷⁰Stoler, 'Sexual Affronts and Racial Frontiers: European identities and the cultural politics of exclusion in colonial Southeast Asia', p. 521.

some European men who married native women, ... *all* European women who chose to marry native men, and ... both European and Indo-European women who co-resided with non-Europeans and chose not to marry at all.⁷¹

One major debate concerning people of mixed race, which was played out in both French Indochina and the Netherlands Indies, was that of the legal designation of race. In the Netherlands Indies people of different racial ancestry enjoyed different legal classifications, and so, when people of mixed race married it was a matter of having to clarify a person's legal status rather than their race that preoccupied the lawyers of the day - although, in fact, the two exercises overlapped.⁷²

The debate wavered between two outcomes. One was that women, regardless of their race or legal classification, should take the legal classification of their husband (thereby allowing white women to be classified as 'inlanders' (natives)). The other was that the Europeanness of one partner should be dominant, regardless of whether it was the bride or the groom who was European, and that they should be permitted to adopt the legal classification which accompanied being European, ensuring that any children from the union would be raised in the European manner. In an effort to dissuade women classified as European from cohabiting or marrying non-European men in turn-of-the-century Netherlands Indies, the Napoleonic civil code was reinvoked, which decreed that upon marriage women took on the legal status of their husbands. Thus, European men were conferred "invisible bonds of nationality", which remained intact no matter who they married, but European women were "summarily disenfranchised from their national community" if they married a native man.⁷³

⁷¹Stoler, 'Mixed bloods and the cultural politics of European identity in colonial Southeast Asia', p. 137.

⁷²Stoler, 'Mixed bloods and the cultural politics of European identity in colonial Southeast Asia', p. 139.

⁷³Stoler, 'Mixed bloods and the cultural politics of European identity in colonial Southeast Asia', p. 141.

This debate highlighted the fact that, when it came to the *métis/Indo* (people of mixed race in the Netherlands Indies) problem, race was in fact treated as something that was fluid and flexible. One could be born into one legal classification, marry into another, perhaps be widowed and then remarry and revert to one's original legal classification. Racial theory was therefore a permeable border on which to ground the social inequalities of empire.

Three white European women in Siam

The lives of the three white European women I have chosen to examine in some detail over the following three chapters illustrate influences of cultural colonialism and sexual fears of the racial 'other' in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Siam. Anna Leonowens, Mary Cort and Katherine Desnitsky lived in Siam, consecutively, between the years 1860 and 1920. All three women were classified as *maem*. They were middle-class, white European women,⁷⁵ based in Bangkok and Phetburi, who mixed predominantly with the upper class of Thai society, including royalty. Of the three, Mary Cort was the only one to have any long-term contact with poor, ethnic minority farming people.

Significantly, both Anna Leonowens and Mary Cort were teachers, although Leonowens was engaged on the express demand that she confine her activities to secular education. Meanwhile Cort, in her position as a Presbyterian missionary teacher, combined her secular teaching with religion. Both women spoke of their desire to assist their Thai 'sisters' in a range of matters: educational, religious, marital and financial. As such, it could be argued that they shared a 'maternalist' approach to their educational work in Siam. Desnitsky, on the other hand, embodied the fear of both European and Thai communities of sexual liaisons across racial boundaries - a

⁷⁵Bristowe's research now suggests that Anna Leonowens may well have been of mixed Anglo-Indian descent. See the discussion in the following chapter, or alternatively, W. S. Bristowe, *Louis and the King of Siam*, (New York, Thai-American Publishers, 1976).

white European woman who had married a Thai man, albeit a high-ranking prince of the ruling family.

Leonowens, Cort and Desnitsky shared many characteristics besides their white Europeaness, despite coming from very diverse backgrounds: British India, the United States of America and imperial Russia. They were all Christian. They were all from middle class families, although Desnitsky's family appears to have been the most solidly middle-class, and all had trained in professions deemed suitably feminine for women of those times whose situation necessitated that they work: teaching and nursing. All spent considerable periods of time in Siam, living and working there, and all arrived when they were quite young. All three women appear from their writings (memoirs and letters) to have formed a significant attachment to the country and its people. However, they also all experienced difficulties due to feelings of homesickness and loneliness, and the way Thai people regarded and treated them because of their status as white women living in Siam.

I chose to examine these women because their lives were of great interest to me, but also because their writings were accessible. As most Thai historians appreciate, there is sometimes a shortage of desirable historical sources for social historians to examine, and so often one has to study whatever documents are available, rather than the hypothetical documents of one's choice. The three women I decided to examine had attracted my attention because of their relative fame or prominence. They had either written books about their lives in Siam, or excerpts of their private letters had been published, giving me some degree of access to their thoughts and experiences. In the course of my research I discovered that all three women played significant although relatively little-known and unacknowledged roles in Thai history. However, only the first of the women I will examine, Anna Leonowens, may be known to the majority of readers. And her fame is possibly due to the fact that she is the subject of a Broadway musical and film, rather than because of her role in Thai history.

Of course, three separate women from three separate and disparate countries are bound to have differed greatly. It would be naive to treat all white women as a homogenous group for examination, especially across time and place, and I do not intend to do this. Therefore, I will attempt to address not only their commonalities of experience in Siam but also the differences inherent in their lives, due to their personalities, their personal situations, and the changing ideas current in Thai society during their periods of residence. Anna Leonowens, Mary Lovina Cort and Katherine Desnitsky thus provide an interesting set of windows into the lives of white women in Siam in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Conclusion

The relations between race, gender and class in nineteenth century imperialism have at times been complementary and at other times contradictory but always complex, working together and against each other to produce ever-changing social hierarchies of privilege and disadvantage. As can be seen by the preceding discussion, the categories of race, gender and class are not biological, social or even cultural givens, and they are constructed differently in different geographical locales and time frames.

In the past decade the attention of feminist academics in the West has turned to the roles white European women have played in European imperialism, and by extension in all multi-racial societies which experienced some degree of European influence.

Shifting the focus of European imperialism from that of a male-centred enterprise to that of a gendered enterprise has provided a richer and more rounded appreciation of European imperialism. Histories published in the past decade have highlighted the imperial roles played by white women, with both positive and negative effects, especially in relation to philanthropic missionary work and racial ideology concerning the family.

CHAPTER 3

However, the present challenge for feminist academics is to produce histories that not only insert gender into the 'white' racial equation while continuing to ignore the gender and class differences within the often colonised, native populations, but to introduce gender as one of the many theoretical categories along with race and class that wax and wane, depending on the context, the epoch and the interests at stake.

Anna Leonowens has since provided the basis of several books, plays, films and a television series. Ironically, however, it now appears that she may not have been the white European woman, or *novel*, that she portrayed herself to be, but rather of mixed race. Her role in Thai history is interesting because through her position as a teacher within the royal palace she had access to areas of Thai royal life that very few Europeans had ever had. However, rather than celebrating her experiences and the books that resulted from them, Anna Leonowens has been pilloried by historians of Thailand for her allegedly scathing and incorrect views of the Thai king and his subjects. She has been accused of giving Thailand a bad, and undeserved, reputation abroad, and of misrepresenting herself in order to do so. The identity that Anna Leonowens posed in Thai identity was not through her work as an educator, but rather by way of the books she wrote about her impressions and experiences in Siam. Her books have since become a site of competing discourses surrounding the persona of Anna Leonowens and the wider history of Thailand.

It is only in the past decade that Anna Leonowens has begun to be rehabilitated as a valuable contributor to our understanding of nineteenth century Bangkok, and the operations of the Inner Palace. She was engaged by King Mongkut (Rama IV) to teach English to his many children, as well as to his royal wives and concubines, within the royal palace. Despite a number of problems, including her insistence on protecting her own independence and freedom of movement, her cultural and racial difference to her employer and her pupils, and her loneliness, Anna Leonowens served in this

CHAPTER 3

DISMISSING ANNA

Anna Leonowens, Anglo-Indian governess resident in Siam 1862-1867

Anna Leonowens is no doubt the most well-known white European woman to have spent time in Thailand last century, partly because her experiences in Bangkok in the 1860s have since provided the basis of several books, plays, films and a television series. Ironically, however, it now appears that she may not have been the white European woman, or *maem*, that she portrayed herself to be, but rather of mixed race. Her role in Thai history is interesting because through her position as a teacher within the royal palace she had access to areas of Thai royal life that very few Europeans had ever had. However, rather than celebrating her experiences and the books that resulted from them, Anna Leonowens has been pilloried by historians of Thailand for her allegedly scathing and incorrect views of the Thai king and his subjects. She has been accused of giving Thailand a bad, and undeserved, reputation abroad, and of misrepresenting herself in order to do so. The threat Anna Leonowens posed to Thai identity was not through her work as an educator, but rather by way of the books she wrote about her impressions and experiences in Siam. Her books have since become a site of competing discourses surrounding the persona of Anna Leonowens and the wider history of Thailand.

It is only in the past decade that Anna Leonowens has begun to be rehabilitated as a valuable contributor to our understanding of nineteenth century Bangkok, and the operations of the Inner Palace. She was engaged by King Mongkut (Rama IV) to teach English to his many children, as well as to his royal wives and concubines, within the royal palace. Despite a number of problems, including her insistence on protecting her own independence and freedom of movement, her cultural and racial difference to her employer and her pupils, and her loneliness, Anna Leonowens served in this



Anna Leonowens 1831-1914



position for a five year period from March 1862 until July 1867. Her experiences as a teacher to the children of King Mongkut (Rama IV) and his royal consorts were first publicised in her two memoirs, *The English Governess at the Siamese Court* (1870)¹ and *The Romance of the Harem* (1872).² Both books were quiet sellers, although the first was reissued in 1897 under the title, *Siam and the Siamese*.³ *The Romance of the Harem* was not reprinted until the 1950s, under yet another new title, *Siamese Harem Life*.⁴ Since then both of the original books have been reprinted several times. Anna Leonowens' accounts were amalgamated into a quasi-biography by Margaret Landon in 1944,⁵ and over the next decade were dramatised into a black and white film, a Broadway musical and then another, more well-known film starring Yul Brynner and Deborah Kerr, all entitled *The King and I*.⁶ In 1972 a short-lived television series, *Anna and the King*, was produced which also starred Yul Brynner in the role of the king.

The stage play, film and television series inspired by Anna Leonowens' writings were all popular with Western audiences, but since the 1950s have come under attack from historians of Thailand and others sympathetic to the favourable representation of Thailand on the world stage for portraying a disrespectful image of Siam and the Siamese ruler, King Mongkut. Historians agree that the Hollywood film fell far short of doing justice to King Mongkut's character, by all accounts an educated and progressive ruler, who had spent 27 years as a learned scholar in the Buddhist monkhood before ascending the throne in 1851. Julia Keay, writing from a broadly

¹Anna Harriette Leonowens, *The English Governess at the Siamese Court*, (Boston, Fields, Osgood & Co., 1870).

²Anna Harriette Leonowens, *The Romance of the Harem*, (Boston, James R. Osgood & Co., 1872); The book was issued in England as *The Romance of Siamese Harem Life*, (London, Trubner & Co., 1873).

³Anna Harriette Leonowens, *Siam and the Siamese*, (Philadelphia, Henry Coates, 1897).

⁴Anna Harriette Leonowens, *Siamese Harem Life*, (London, Arthur Baker, 1952). The book was also published under this title by E. P. Dutton of New York in 1953.

⁵Margaret Landon, *Anna and the King of Siam*, (New York, The John Day Co., 1944).

⁶Jennings and Bensonby's screenplay (1945) was followed by a black and white film starring Rex Harrison and Irene Dunn; the Broadway musical by Rodgers and Hammerstein appeared in 1951 and in 1956 the colour film, starring Yul Brynner and Deborah Kerr in the title roles, was released.

feminist stance about Victorian women travellers, pointed out that the film did not portray Anna Leonowens any more accurately than it did King Mongkut, although the portrayal of her character as a "patronising American widow" was perhaps "less offensive".⁷

The film and the television series were banned in Thailand, chiefly because of the way King Mongkut was portrayed. Certainly, *The King and I* was instrumental in blurring the distinction between fact and fiction in this period of Thai history. Prince Chula Chakrabongse expressed his concern circumspectly, lamenting that "a musical film based on a novel, which was made for commercial purposes, should have been able to alter history in the minds of hundreds of millions of people."⁸

Some critics have held Anna Leonowens personally responsible for the treatment King Mongkut received from the directors in Hollywood, despite the fact that she died in 1914 and could have had no active influence in the transposing of her books into Hollywood screenplays. Griswold laid the blame squarely at the feet of Anna in 1957, claiming that her books were the cause of the misrepresentation in the film, *The King and I*,⁹ whereas it could also be argued that it was the lack of English language factually-based histories of Thailand that led to the misrepresentations. The film, based loosely on Anna Leonowens' memoirs and Landon's 1944 biography-cum-novel, showed Anna introducing the Thai king and his court to Western ways in a bid to 'civilise' them. Anna and the King, portrayed as an autocratic and temperamental man, enjoyed an obviously flirtatious relationship, hinting not only at the sexual desirability of Anna but also the desirability of acquiring Western knowledge and mannerisms. Throughout the film, Anna is portrayed as being more in control of the situation than the Thai king - hardly realistic, considering that she was a newly arrived teacher from a

⁷Julia Keay, *With Passport and Parasol. The Adventures of Seven Victorian Ladies*, (London, BBC Books, 1989), p. 38.

⁸Chula Chakrabongse, *Lords of Life*, p. 211.

⁹A. B. Griswold, 'King Mongkut in Perspective', *Journal of the Siam Society*, vol. 45, part 1, 1957, p. 3.



Yul Brynner and Deborah Kerr in a scene from the film, *The King and I*.

very small ethnic minority with little political power, and he the absolute ruler of one of the most prosperous and strong nations of Southeast Asia.

Despite the above-mentioned inadequacies, *The King and I* is impressive in that it addressed questions of gender, race and class so overtly. The sexuality of Western women was portrayed as the single Anna flirted with the king and laughed off the suggestion that she was the latest and most exotic addition to his harem (confined within the Inner Palace). The sexuality of Thai men and women was also explored, with many of the supporting cast in the roles of the king's many wives. Manderson found it rather remarkable that a film such as *The King and I*, which dealt with gender and race in so overt a manner, was produced in mid-1950s United States, which was enveloped at the time in a climate of imperialism, conservatism, and anti-intellectualism.¹⁰ She argued that in keeping with Said's thesis of the Orient being portrayed as female by Europeans, Siam was portrayed in the film as woman and victim, deserving to be raped (i.e. colonised by European powers) if she failed to act in an appropriate (i.e. Western) manner.¹¹ Anna's role in the film was to domesticate Siam (like the good housewife of the mid-1950s), so that her male compatriots could subjugate the nation.¹² The character of Anna was that of a strong, independent woman who had rejected male patronage in the form of remarriage but who was not desexualised, as she was obviously sexually attracted to the Thai king.¹³

Blaming Anna

Blaming Anna Leonowens for the slant taken by the Hollywood films was no more than a continuation of blaming her for the historical inconsistencies found in her books.

¹⁰Lenore Manderson, 'Parables of Imperialism and Fantasies of the Exotic: Western Representations of Thailand, Place and Sex', in Manderson & Jolly (eds), *Sites of Desire/Economies of Pleasure*, p. 10.

¹¹Manderson, 'Parables of Imperialism and Fantasies of the Exotic', p. 9.

¹²Manderson, 'Parables of Imperialism and Fantasies of the Exotic', p. 10.

¹³Manderson, 'Parables of Imperialism and Fantasies of the Exotic', p. 11.

Detractors and critics have stereotyped her as the classic, 'gross mem-sahib' who did not know her place in nineteenth century Siam. She has been accused of being uninformed about her subject matter, and of bad personal character. The strongest criticisms of Anna Leonowens are that she was a liar and that her books are therefore worthless, and she does not deserve the attention the films afforded her.

Anna Leonowens wrote the books, described by Morgan as "fictionalized history or historical fiction",¹⁴ on which the films were based several years after she had ceased teaching in the royal palace, and although the film diverged from reality on many counts, Anna Leonowens does appear to have been a strong, independent woman as the film suggested. King Mongkut had been searching for an English teacher for his royal household to replace the American missionary women who had taught at the palace sporadically for almost three years from 1851. He had halted the teaching arrangement with the missionaries because they seemed more interested in converting his consorts to Christianity than teaching them English. Because the majority of white women in Bangkok qualified to teach in the 1860s were American missionaries, King Mongkut extended his search for a new English teacher to the British colony of Singapore. He wrote to the Siamese consul in Singapore, Tam Kin Ching, asking for enquiries to be made to find an appropriate English teacher for the palace in Bangkok. John Adamson of the Borneo Company recommended Anna Leonowens, who had been teaching at a small school she had established for the children of British personnel in Singapore since 1859, to the Siamese consul. An offer of employment was duly made, and after initial indecision Anna Leonowens accepted the king's offer. She despatched her young daughter Avis to England for study, and sailed to Bangkok with son Louis, and servants Moonshee and Beebe. They arrived on 15 March 1862.

¹⁴Susan Morgan, 'Introduction', to Anna Leonowens, *The Romance of the Harem*, (Charlottesville & London, University Press of Virginia, 1991 [1872]), p. xvi.

King Mongkut did not call Anna Leonowens to the Grand Palace to begin teaching for several months after her arrival. While she waited to be summoned from her quarters at the Kralahome's (Thai prime minister) compound, her days were filled with visits from Khun Ying Phan, the head wife of the Kralahome, Mr Robert Hunter, the Kralahome's English secretary,¹⁵ and Mr. and Mrs. Stephen Mattoon, American Presbyterian missionaries who had been living in Siam for the past 15 years.¹⁶ Mrs. Mattoon had been one of the missionary women invited to teach in the palace in 1851, and so no doubt she informed Anna Leonowens of the likely teaching challenges that lay ahead for her. While Anna waited for classes to begin, she also began studying the Thai language. There was debate about how well Leonowens ever knew Thai, a point on which her impressions and writings could be discounted owing to her lack of understanding. Morgan claimed that Anna became fluent in Thai,¹⁷ and Keay commented that she had a flair for languages, having learnt French in England, having studied Sanskrit, and speaking Hindustani and Malay due to the time she spent resident in India and Malaya.¹⁸ On the other hand, Griswold claimed that it was obvious Anna never truly mastered Thai, it being a "tricky language",¹⁹ a claim repeated by Chula Chakrabongse²⁰ and Hunter.²¹

Apart from an understanding of several languages, Anna Leonowens was also very well-travelled by the time she took up her position in Bangkok. She had previously studied in England, toured in the Middle-East, travelled widely in India with her husband, apparently spent some time in the British colony of New South Wales in 1853,²² and lived in Penang and later Singapore. As such, she was quite cosmopolitan

¹⁵Robert Hunter was the mixed race son of Robert Hunter (senior), the first Englishman to establish a trading factory in Bangkok in 1824. Leonowens described him thus: "... always very serious when he was sober and very volatile when he was not." Leonowens, *Governess*, p. 104.

¹⁶Margaret Landon, *Anna and the King of Siam*, p. 48.

¹⁷Morgan, 'Introduction', p. xvii.

¹⁸Keay, *With Passport and Parasol*, p. 40.

¹⁹Griswold, 'King Mongkut in Perspective', p. 5.

²⁰Chula Chakrabongse, *Lords of Life*, p. 209.

²¹Eileen Hunter with Narisa Chakrabongse, *Katya and the Prince of Siam*, (Bangkok, River Books, 1994), p. 15.

²²Margaret Landon, *Anna and the King of Siam*, p. 171.

in her outlook. However, she had had no previous contact with Thai people or Thai etiquette, and she was to make a number of socio-cultural errors during the course of her stay, some of which she detailed in her books and against which she was later to be harshly judged.

The success enjoyed by the film *The King and I* refocussed attention on the works of Anna Leonowens, and criticism of her writings has increased markedly in volume and in animosity. Her books had received a mixed reception when they were first published last century,²³ but the criticism of her work became noticeably hostile in the 1950s. Noted Western scholars of Thailand denounced Anna Leonowens' writing which, they claimed, were more fiction than fact, and downplayed her role within the Thai court. More recently, Western feminist scholars have attempted to rehabilitate Leonowens and rescue her from the narrow concerns of tradition historians who appeared miffed that her writings were not of more direct assistance to their own personal research projects. What has emerged is a rather conspicuous divide between Anna Leonowens' supporters, often academic feminists who have tended towards admiration of her while acknowledging her faults, and more traditional historians who have highlighted the inconsistencies in her accounts, declared that as such her works cannot be used as trouble-free historical sources, and who have totally dismissed her and her work on this basis. Thai historian Wibun Wichitwathakan, who is notable in that he devoted considerable space to an examination of Leonowens and her role in Thai history in his already-cited study, *Chiwit nai adit. Farang nai Krung Sayam*, dismissed Leonowens and her books as the writings of a white woman who never really understood Thailand or the Thais - a common response, as discussed in the opening chapter, to outsiders presuming to write about Thailand, as it is believed by many Thais that only true Thais can understand Thailand and what it is to be Thai.

²³For a discussion of the range of original reviews see Morgan, 'Introduction', pp. ix-x.

Although historians have been at odds over the proportion of fantasy to fiction in Anna Leonowens' works, all agree that her accounts of events within the Thai royal palace are not totally accurate. And, to the delight of many of Leonowens' detractors, W. S. Bristowe uncovered details concerning her personal life prior to her arrival in Bangkok in the course of researching his book on Anna's son Louis Leonowens, which diverged substantially from her own version of her personal life. The discrepancies in the two versions of events (i.e. Anna Leonowens' and Bristowe's) threw the reliability of Leonowens' accounts of life in Thailand into further question because, depending on one's perspective, she had effectively been exposed as a liar, or a woman making the courageous decision to reinvent herself in order to escape the prejudices of a conservative society.

Anna Leonowens was a complex historical persona who has been contextualised in Thai history to a point where it is impossible to ever know exactly who she was or what her motives were. She has been described by admirers and detractors alike as emotional, naive, gauche, rude, impudent, aloof, brave, courageous, enterprising, determined, remarkable, naughty, audacious, of signal honour, petulant, disdainful, independent and lonely.

Dr Malcolm Smith, physician to the Thai Queen Mother (Saowabha) at the turn of the century and highly regarded in Thai circles, was one of Leonowens' earliest supporters, stating that she was "eminently fitted to teaching English in the palace", and that she was intensely interested in the people she worked amongst.²⁴ His comments are noteworthy because he worked amongst Thai people within the royal palace who had actually known Anna Leonowens during their childhood - Queen Saowabha, his most high-profile patient, was a major wife of King Chulalongkorn, Anna Leonowens' most prominent student.

²⁴Malcolm Smith, *A Physician at the Court of Siam*, (Kuala Lumpur, Oxford University Press, 1982 [1946]), p. 42.

Margaret Landon, in effect the unofficial biographer of Anna Leonowens, is one of her greatest supporters, and described Leonowens as "an amazing person". Landon was introduced to the books of her subject-to-be by a friend in Siam, Dr Edwin Bruce McDaniel in the 1930s. Landon herself lived in Thailand for ten years, from 1927 to 1937, and obviously identified with many of the difficulties that Anna Leonowens faced as a lone white woman having to adapt to Thai society and cultural practices. Landon stated that she "liked the idea of trying to introduce Leonowens to modern readers. The story of her life in Siam was more than interesting: it was the record of an amazing person."²⁵

Landon set about combining what she believed were the factual accounts contained within Anna Leonowens' two books about Siam, and a lesser known book she had written about her life in India²⁶, editing out the lengthy descriptions and supplementing the account with additional information gleaned from Leonowens' private papers to which her surviving relatives gave Landon access. To this day, her biography, *Anna and the King of Siam*, remains the main work dealing with the life of Anna Leonowens.²⁷

Although not privy to the evidence that Bristowe was to uncover thirty years later, Landon cautioned readers that her book was not a history but a romance set in a historical setting. She estimated it was "probably seventy-five per cent fact and twenty-five per cent fiction based on fact."²⁸ Other admirers have been similarly circumspect. Susan Morgan stated she was not personally outraged by Leonowens' undoubted lies, and that her lies were understandable in the circumstances - "practical,

²⁵Margaret Landon, *Anna and the King of Siam*, p. 357.

²⁶Anna Harriette Leonowens, *Life and Travel in India: being recollections of a journey before the days of railroads*, (Philadelphia, Porter & Coates, 1884).

²⁷Wibun informs the reader that Ajarn Sanitwong has translated the book into Thai. See Wibun, *Chiwit nai adit: Farang nai Krung Sayam, [Life in the past. Europeans in Siam]*, p. 239.

²⁸Margaret Landon, *Anna and the King of Siam*, p. 360.

sensible, possibly even courageous."²⁹ She claimed that Leonowens was a terrible historian, but a fine writer,³⁰ and that although her books could not be treated as factual history, they were valuable as fictionalised history or historical fiction.³¹

Julia Keay, in a recent work on Victorian lady travellers and adventurers, stated that Anna Leonowens "dramatise[d], exaggerate[d] and even fabricate[d] parts of her story in order to attract the general reader".³² Keay lamented that "if she had only written a straightforward account of her experiences, her recollections would have been unique".³³ She continued: "Sadly ... she destroyed her credibility as a historian by embroidering an intrinsically fascinating tale with unnecessary and inaccurate additions."³⁴ Despite this, Keay displayed a healthy respect for Leonowens, describing her as "a bravely independent spirit" with "a great deal of determination",³⁵ and "an excellent teacher".³⁶ Also complimentary, Eileen Hunter praised Anna Leonowens' for being "both enterprising and courageous",³⁷ and referred to her "fascinating and charmingly written account of her unusual post, but one over-spiced by a liberal addition of imaginary melodramatic incidents"³⁸ which she described as "regrettable".³⁹

Anna Leonowens' detractors have not been so understanding or lenient in their treatment of her or her books. Unlike her supporters, most critics seem less interested with Anna Leonowens the person, and focus instead on the degree of truth contained in her accounts of events in Siam, which, had she been more bound by fact, could have helped them to a much greater degree in their personal research projects. Because her

²⁹Morgan, 'Introduction', p. xv.

³⁰Morgan, 'Introduction', p. xvii.

³¹Morgan, 'Introduction', p. xvi.

³²Keay, *With Passport and Parasol*, p. 38.

³³Keay, *With Passport and Parasol*, p. 41.

³⁴Keay, *With Passport and Parasol*, p. 56.

³⁵Keay, *With Passport and Parasol*, p. 40.

³⁶Keay, *With Passport and Parasol*, p. 48.

³⁷Eileen Hunter, *Katya and the Prince of Siam*, p. 17.

³⁸Eileen Hunter, *Katya and the Prince of Siam*, p. 15.

³⁹Eileen Hunter, *Katya and the Prince of Siam*, p. 17.

writings did not assist them personally, Leonowens has been a victim of the "clannish scorn of traditional Western intellectuals".⁴⁰

Hall, writing in 1955 before the release of the second and most widely known of the two films, *The King and I*, commented that Leonowens was "gifted with more imagination than insight in her description of his [Mongkut's] domestic life."⁴¹

Griswold had reservations about the reliability of Leonowens as a historical source, exposing the inaccuracies in her written accounts ~~in a 1957 article of his~~. He alleged that she hovered "on the fringes of reality, often escaping into make-believe."⁴² He also documented several instances where she had plagiarised storylines from other Southeast Asian sources, removing them from their context and transposing them into the Bangkok of the 1860s.⁴³ Although criticising her for this, Griswold conceded that Anna Leonowens was "neither the first nor the last European writer on Siam to quote without acknowledgment large sections of earlier books".⁴⁴ He found her books "exasperating to the sober historian" and lamented that, "Though there is much good in them, it is useless, for not a single statement can be accepted without confirmation from elsewhere."⁴⁵ Even when attempting to pay her compliments, Griswold could not seem to help but put Leonowens down. For example:

[S]he was a brave woman, in fact a good deal braver than necessary if she could have seen how groundless her fears were.⁴⁶

and also:

⁴⁰Morgan, 'Introduction', p. xi.

⁴¹D. G. E. Hall, *History of Southeast Asia*, (London, Macmillan, 1988 [1955]), p. 579.

⁴²Griswold, 'King Mongkut in Perspective', p. 3.

⁴³Griswold, 'King Mongkut in Perspective', p. 5.

⁴⁴Griswold, 'King Mongkut in Perspective', p. 40.

⁴⁵Griswold, 'King Mongkut in Perspective', p. 31.

⁴⁶Griswold, 'King Mongkut in Perspective', p. 3.

Interested in Siamese life in all its phases, Anna made serious, though spasmodic, attempts to describe it intelligently. She took the trouble to learn a certain amount about Buddhism, but here she was beyond her depth.⁴⁷

Baas Terweil reiterated the reservations of Griswold,⁴⁸ noting that Leonowens' liberties with the truth had led most scholars to discrediting or summarily discarding her works.⁴⁹ Suwadee Tanaprasitpatana pitched in her criticism, claiming that Leonowens wrote a "distorted account about the Thai court"⁵⁰, while Moffat repeated Griswold's allegations that Anna had plagiarised many of her stories and taken liberties with the truth.⁵¹ Bristowe uncovered perhaps the most damning evidence concerning Anna Leonowens' life prior to her time in Bangkok, and as there were so many discrepancies between Leonowens' account and the official record, it threw the factual content of her books into even more doubt.⁵²

Keay took a swipe at Western historians such as those mentioned above, stating accusingly that those "who consider that her [Anna's] lapses place her beneath their contempt are obviously less forgiving than their Thai counterparts."⁵³ Here she may have been referring to comments Bristowe attributed to Prince Damrong, a son of King Mongkut, who reportedly stated understandingly:

Mrs Leonowens added drama to her story in order to make money from her books for the support of her children.⁵⁴

⁴⁷Griswold, 'King Mongkut in Perspective', p. 4.

⁴⁸B. J. Terweil, *A History of Modern Thailand, 1767-1942*, (St Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 1983), p. 208.

⁴⁹Terweil, *A History of Modern Thailand*, p. 191.

⁵⁰Suwadee, "Thai Society's Expectations of Women, 1851-1935", p. 106.

⁵¹Abbot Low Moffat, *Mongkut the King of Siam*, (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1961).

⁵²W. S. Bristowe, *Louis and the King of Siam*, (New York, Thai-American Publishers, 1976).

⁵³Keay, *With Passport and Parasol*, p. 56.

⁵⁴Bristowe, *Louis and the King of Siam*, p. 23.

Not all Thai counterparts were as forgiving or understanding as Prince Damrong. Wibun Wichitwathakan has been perhaps Anna Leonowens' harshest critic. Wibun relied heavily on the work of Bristowe (which he credited only in passing). He wrote in a sensational manner, and cast Leonowens in a much more hostile light than Bristowe ever did, suggesting that he may have also been familiar with British documentary-maker Ian Grimble's views on Anna Leonowens. Grimble was reported in the *New York Times* as having described Leonowens as "a mischief maker, a squalid little girl, ... one of those awful little English governesses, a sex-starved widow."⁵⁵

One of Wibun's milder criticisms warned readers to treat Anna Leonowens' writings with caution as they are based, he claimed, only very thinly on historical fact.⁵⁶ There are no means of assessing just what proportion of fact to fiction exists in Leonowens' writings, he alleged, but her prickly and displeasing character (especially to Thai sensibilities) gave good grounds to assume that she could not be trusted to contribute much truth or reliable information to our understanding of events of the time.⁵⁷ He added that besides being no historian, she did not have an extensive education, and that:

Mrs Anna Leonowens was an Englishwoman of the Victorian era who did not possess enough ability or intelligence to understand the culture of Oriental people (*chao tawan ork*). Anything that was different to the West she saw as being totally wrong.⁵⁸

Wibun also claimed that she did not have a good disposition, that she was easily displeased and quick to anger.⁵⁹ He alleged she was a jealous and sexually frustrated

⁵⁵Cited in Morgan, 'Introduction', p. xi.

⁵⁶Wibun, *Chiwit nai adit ... [Life in the past...]*, p. 215, 217.

⁵⁷Wibun, *Chiwit nai adit ... [Life in the past...]*, p. 221.

⁵⁸Wibun, *Chiwit nai adit... [Life in the past...]*, p. 229.

⁵⁹(*Phua kao ko dai pai laew, phua mai ko hah mai dai, cha mi khwamrusuek ichahrisayah*), Wibun, *Chiwit nai adit... [Life in the past...]*, p. 217.

woman, as her husband had died several years previously and she had been unable to find a new husband.⁶⁰ In fact, Wibun had only one thing to say about Anna Leonowens that could be construed as remotely positive. He reported that her writings provide us with some details about royal customs being practised within the royal court during this era of which we would not otherwise be aware.⁶¹

By criticising her character thus, Wibun hoped to thereby dismiss much of the content of Anna Leonowens' writings, especially the bits that painted King Mongkut in a negative light. Wibun's treatment of Leonowens is no doubt the most hostile of a range of works which discount her, discredit her or crucify her. His criticisms are not out of field, but rather the most extreme to be found on the continuum of disapproval.

Anna's contributions to an understanding of Thai history

Despite the criticisms against Anna Leonowens, she displayed a large degree of empathy and understanding for the people she worked amongst. In this regard, she differed from many of the official European envoys and American missionaries of the day, who at times could be quite judgemental of Thai social and religious customs. Leonowens displayed an acceptance of the equality between Europe and Asia, love and affection for her Thai pupils, and care and consideration for their mothers and slaves, all of whom were confined to the Inner Palace. She did not criticise the king's harem on grounds of prudishness, but rather on the grounds of the morality of slavery and the individual's right to personal freedom. She was also very tolerant of Buddhism, despite being Christian herself.

Anna Leonowens described her relationship with one of her pupils learning to spell, read and translate as being one of "novelty and hope to help the Buddhist child, and

⁶⁰Wibun, *Chiwit nai adit...[Life in the past...]*, p. 230.

⁶¹Wibun, *Chiwit nai adit...[Life in the past...]*, p. 231.

love to help the English woman."⁶² Her relationship with the women of the Inner Palace appears to be even closer. In fact, she dedicated her second book, *The Romance of the Harem*, to them thus:

To the noble and devoted women whom I learned to know, to esteem and to love in the city of the Nang Harm [the Inner Palace], I dedicate the following pages, containing a record of some of the events connected with their lives and sufferings.⁶³

The plight of the women of the Inner Palace greatly concerned Leonowens, who valued her own freedom and held liberal Victorian ideas about the necessary abolition of slavery, and she became known within the palace walls as the "white angel" for her assistance to those who resided there.⁶⁴ She exploited her access to the king, petitioning him on a range of issues on behalf of his many wives and concubines, the poor and the slaves living within the Inner Palace ... but what distinguished Leonowens from the vast majority of people petitioning the king was that she did not charge a fee for service. This led to a misunderstanding with King Mongkut which will be discussed in later pages. Leonowens believed King Mongkut was unduly severe with his wives and concubines, and although not opposed to the idea of harems per se (she was neither "a typically prim Victorian" nor "a narrow-minded, bigoted Christian"), she could not understand why the women within the Inner Palace accepted their fate so calmly.⁶⁵

In Anna Leonowens' opinion, life in the Inner Palace "was death in life".⁶⁶ She wrote:

⁶²Leonowens, *Governess*, p. 92.

⁶³Leonowens, 'Dedication' of *The Romance of the Harem*, (Charlottesville & London, University Press of Virginia, 1991 [1872]).

⁶⁴Margaret Landon, *Anna and the King of Siam*, p. 173.

⁶⁵Keay, *With Passport and Parasol*, p. 44.

⁶⁶Leonowens, *Governess*, p. 76.

I had never beheld misery till I found it here; I had never looked upon the sickening hideousness of slavery till I encountered its features here.⁶⁷

She likened the lives of the women of the Inner Palace (ie. the king's 'harem') to bondage, declaring:

How I have pitied these ill-fated sisters of mine, imprisoned without a crime! If they could but have rejoiced once more in the freedom of the fields and woods, what new births of gladness might have been theirs - they who with a gasp of despair and moral death first entered those royal dungeons, never again to come forth alive! And yet have I known more than one among them who accepted her fate with a repose of manner and a sweetness of smile that told how dead must be the heart under that still exterior. And I wondered at the sight. Only twenty minutes between bondage and freedom - such freedom as may be found in Siam! only twenty minutes between those gloomy, hateful cells and the fair fields and the radiant skies! only twenty minutes between the cramping and the suffocation and the fear, and the full, deep, glorious inspirations of freedom and safety.⁶⁸

As for Anna Leonowens' expressed views on religion, she again displayed understanding for those she worked amongst. Her accounts of the Buddhist ceremonies she witnessed are refreshingly unbiased towards Christianity, and she displayed the breadth of religious tolerance that she ascribed to the Thai people. She stated they viewed Roman Catholicism as no more than the Buddhism of foreigners. Of the Thai, she wrote:

⁶⁷Leonowens, *Governess*, p. 83.

⁶⁸Leonowens, *Governess*, p. 83.

He beholds familiar images ... and pictures of a Saviour in whom he charitably recognizes (sic) the stranger's Buddha. And if he happen to be a philosophic inquirer, how surprised and pleased is he to learn that the priests of this faith (like his own) are vowed to chastity, poverty, and obedience, and, like his own, devoted to the doing of good works, penance and alms.⁶⁹

She believed that Buddhism had good things to offer people, and despite being a Christian believer, defended Buddhism thus:

We are prone to ignore or to condemn that which we do not clearly understand; and thus it is, on no better ground, that we deny that there are influences in the religions of the East to render their followers wiser, nobler, purer.⁷⁰

It seems that at times critics have not examined Anna's books closely before branding her with criticism more suited to other Europeans within nineteenth century Siam. Hunter appeared to get Leonowens' view of religion confused with that of the rather hard-line American missionaries. She claimed that her accounts were "tempered by frequent denigration of 'paganism' and condescending pity for the 'heathen'", due to the proselytising Christianity of the epoch.⁷¹ True, Anna Leonowens does refer to paganism and the heathen, but these are no more than nineteenth century terms for anything or anyone non-Christian. I detect little denigration or condescension on Leonowens' part. Key more correctly commented that Leonowens displayed a complete lack of religious and/or cultural prejudice, a refreshing contrast to the prevailing attitudes of her contemporaries. Anna Leonowens was able to admire without reservation the glories of an ancient civilisation, which "many of her

⁶⁹Leonowens, *Governess*, p. 114.

⁷⁰Leonowens, *Governess*, p. 156.

⁷¹Eileen Hunter, *Katya and the Prince of Siam*, p. 15.

contemporaries would merely have dismissed ... as the ill-conceived creations of an ignorant and pagan people"⁷² as the above quotes illustrate.

Anna's mistakes

Despite the positive, remarkably unbiased contributions that Anna Leonowens made to our understanding of Thai history, she also made some serious mistakes. Apart from upsetting the traditional historians with her careless disregard for historical fact, her two major mistakes can be summarised as perceived rudeness and ingratitude. In particular, her behaviour towards King Mongkut, both personally and indirectly in her books and lectures, was considered very inappropriate and lacking in good manners by many critics. Leonowens made the mistake of dealing with the king and relating her opinions about him as if he were an ordinary man and her equal, whereas in fact he was a God-King and the absolute ruler of the Siamese kingdom. Although known for his liberal stand on many issues (eg: easing the terms of slavery, introducing Western-style learning to the members of his court and actively tolerating the preaching of other religions), the king still demanded the highest respect. Leonowens dared to criticise the king in her semi-fictional books for his treatment of the *Nang Harm*, his wives and concubines, and the slaves within the royal harem. At one point in *The English Governess at the Siamese Court*, Anna lashed out at King Mongkut, describing him thus:

...as husband and kinsman his character assumed a most revolting aspect.

Envious, revengeful, subtle, he was as fickle and petulant as he was suspicious and cruel.⁷³

⁷²Keay, *With Passport and Parasol*, p. 53.

⁷³Leonowens, *Governess*, p. 205.

Morgan argues that this criticism was most likely valid, especially from Anna Leonowens' point of view, as a young widow who held strong views on slavery and the freedom of the individual. Morgan reminds us that King Mongkut, no matter how liberal, was a nineteenth century absolute ruler "instructed by both his religion and his culture to view women in terms of their functions rather than their selves."⁷⁴

However, the fact that she dared to express such opinions has led many critics to believe Leonowens did not accord the king the required amount of respect, and that her subsequent behaviour in writing her books was in fact grossly ungrateful and disloyal to the king.

During her time in Bangkok and the royal palace Anna Leonowens ran foul of the king and Thai customs on several occasions, although it could be argued that this was in many instances a case of cultural ignorance rather than plain rudeness. However, she has been severely judged for these social faux-pas and they have been used to discredit her work and her often surprisingly broad-minded, considered opinions regarding Thai social and religious customs.

Anna Leonowens' first blunder of etiquette was at her initial meeting with her new employer, King Mongkut. Anna Leonowens and her son were presented to King Mongkut by the harbour master, English-born Captain John Bush, some three weeks after their arrival in Bangkok, on 3 April 1862.⁷⁵ The king outlined her duties as he understood them: teaching his 67 children and as many of his royal wives as wished to learn English, as well as helping him with English and French correspondence.⁷⁶

Leonowens' conduct upon meeting King Mongkut was, by Thai standards of appropriate behaviour in the presence of royalty, audacious and disrespectful.⁷⁷ She

⁷⁴Morgan, 'Introduction', p. xxxiv.

⁷⁵Margaret Landon, *Anna and the King of Siam*, p. 51.

⁷⁶Margaret Landon, *Anna and the King of Siam*, p. 56.

⁷⁷Wibun, *Chiwit nai adit...[Life in the past...]*, p. 221.

and Captain Bush did not wait to be invited into the audience hall at the Royal Palace but barged in on an audience the king was conducting with some Thai nobles. A well-bred person would not have done this, argued Wibun.⁷⁸ Of course, a well-bred Thai person would have known not to do this, but Anna Leonowens was not Thai. She had arrived in Siam alone, only three weeks previously, and was totally unfamiliar with the local customs. Judging from her memoirs, she had contact with few people who would have been in a position to advise her of the correct etiquette when meeting the king, and from her account I get the impression that she and Captain Bush, both unused to extremely formal occasions, were muddling through as best they could.

In addition to barging in at this initial interview with the king, Leonowens also allegedly joked with the king about her age and was evasive about other personal details the king enquired about according to polite Thai custom. Wibun alleged that this was proof of her lowly origins, as a real gentlewoman would have known how to behave appropriately in such situations. I suspect that there was perhaps some element of rudeness in Leonowens' response to the king, but that she may not have been sufficiently aware of the extent to which the Thai king was revered by the people, nobles and commoners alike, and that joking with the king in this fashion was no laughing matter! Keay offered understanding of this sort in her examination of Leonowens' behaviour,⁷⁹ but no one else has attempted to be so broad-minded, dismissing her simply as a rude white woman who did not know her place.

Although the critics have been harsh in their judgement of Anna Leonowens' behaviour at this initial meeting, there is no evidence to suggest that King Mongkut was so harsh, and he may well have given her the benefit of the doubt, especially given that non-religious English teachers were not in great supply in mid-nineteenth century Siam!

⁷⁸Wibun, *Chiwit nai adit...[Life in the past...]*, p. 239.

⁷⁹Keay, *With Passport and Parasol*, p. 46.

Anna Leonowens again incurred the wrath of her critics just over a year into her stay, when one of her favourite students, and one of the king's favourite children, Princess Chanthara Monthon, referred to by Anna as the *Fa-Ying* [Celestial Princess], died. Shortly after the funeral ceremony, the king conferred Anna with an honorary title, *Chao Khun Khru Yai* [Head Teacher (of the palace school)], and a parcel of land in Lopburi as a gesture of his thanks for her "courage and concern" in the face of the favourite princess' death.⁸⁰ However, although to be conferred the title and land were a great honour, Leonowens recorded that she considered this action on the king's part "ridiculous".⁸¹ She further riled her detractors by noting in her memoirs that she was concerned that the newly painted chair on which she was required to sit during the ceremonial proceedings may have dirtied her white dress. Wibun considered this to be a totally inappropriate concern in the circumstances, and yet further evidence of her base rudeness.⁸²

Leonowens wrote:

My chair of office had freshly been painted a glaring red, and on the back and around the arms and legs fresh flowers were twined ... I submitted quietly, but not without misgivings on my own part and positive opposition on Boy's [her son, Louis], to be enthroned in the gorgeous chair, whereof the paint was hardly dry ... Then, [the King] bidding me "remain seated", much to the detriment of my white dress, in the sticky red chair ... proceeded to wind them [unspun cotton threads] round my brow and temples.⁸³

Although it may well have been customary for the king to hand out all manner of titles and small parcels of land and other such honours to the myriad of people with whom

⁸⁰Leonowens, *Governess*, p. 100.

⁸¹Leonowens, *Governess*, p. 100.

⁸²Wibun, *Chiwit nai adit... [Life in the past...]*, p. 242.

⁸³Leonowens, *Governess*, p. 100.

he came into contact, it was certainly good manners to display gratitude on their bestowal. I suspect that on the surface Anna Leonowens did behave graciously and gratefully because of the king's action, even if she herself gave little weight to his action. However, later, when she was writing her memoirs in the relative cultural familiarity of the United States of America, she felt able to call the king's earlier actions "ridiculous". By the time of the *Fa-Ying's* funeral Anna had been residing in Bangkok for over one year. She would have had access to advice regarding appropriate etiquette on such occasions from the women of the king's harem, and it seems far-fetched to suggest that she had no idea of the behaviour considered appropriate to the occasion.

Anna Leonowens' also displayed what her detractors have interpreted as ingratitude by enquiring about a raise in salary after three years service. The audacity of the enquiry is what seems to have offended her critics. However, it must be noted that there are some potential cultural misunderstandings at work here. The king did not understand why the English governess he had hired should ask for a raise in salary, even though he had mentioned to her that her salary would be reviewed after the completion of one year's service. Leonowens felt that she was performing her duties well under the circumstances, and that she deserved to be rewarded for this. As the king had not raised the matter of an increase in salary in the preceding three years, she decided to initiate the discussion. This was a bold move for anyone dealing with the king, let alone a widowed European woman of the lower middle class. But her courage was to no avail. The king refused her request and reportedly stated that she had not given him satisfaction and that she was stupid if she was not making the most of her position within the royal palace, implying that her access to himself, the king, could be an extremely profitable commodity.

The king possibly assumed that Leonowens, like the many other of his employees who petitioned him on a range of issues, would charge a commission for her services. She,

however, claimed that she had been motivated to act out of pure concern for the isolated, and in her opinion, disadvantaged way of life of the king's harem, and that she had been charging no fees at all for her interventions with the king on their behalf. This illustrates yet another misunderstanding between English and Thai culture. Leonowens may well have thought it corrupt to charge a fee to intervene with the king on someone's behalf, whereas King Mongkut was of the opinion that an employee of his was stupid not to capitalise on their position of proximity to the king, and demand a fee for service.

Further 'evidence' of her ingratitude was the fact that soon after her arrival in Bangkok Anna Leonowens had insisted on being lodged outside the Inner Palace and had then complained about the house allocated to her by the king. She was offered a second home after one of her servants, Moonshee, was bashed by persons unknown but suspected to be her neighbours, but she continued to be dissatisfied with her lot. This did not go down well with the king, who expected that people in his employ would behave in a respectful and grateful manner towards him. Wibun mirrored this expectation, claiming that Leonowens was very ungrateful for the assistance the king extended to her. She was basically no more than a *pu liang* [nanny] or *pu rab chai* [servant] and an ordinary English teacher.⁸⁴ "As we Thais would say", Wibun argued, she was 'a slave who bit her own master'.⁸⁵

An argument with King Mongkut over correspondence was to prove to be one of the final straws for Leonowens. She incurred the king's anger when she refused to write on the king's behalf to British trade envoy, Sir John Bowring, withdrawing the king's offer for him to act as ambassador on Siam's behalf in trade negotiations with France. She reported that he was so angry that she "was in real fear" for her life.⁸⁶ It appeared to be another case of Leonowens articulating her own opinion, and the king being

⁸⁴Wibun, *Chiwit nai adit...[Life in the past...]*, p. 217, 220.

⁸⁵Wibun, *Chiwit nai adit...[Life in the past...]*, p.229

⁸⁶Leonowens, *Governess*, p. 229.

outraged that she dare state her dissenting views to him. Her 'outsider' status may have allowed her to express opinions to the king in this forthright manner, a luxury not afforded to many of the king's officials and advisers. As an outsider in Thai society, Leonowens had little or no social status to lose by expressing her opinion, only her job, but it did inhibit her mixing with the fledgling European community in Bangkok, most of whom were very keen to receive the king's approval.

Anna Leonowens' separation from Bangkok's European community has been previously noted, and it has been hinted that she was not accepted within the community not only because of her outspokenness but also because of her class origins. Her origins came to light after Bristowe devoted much scrutiny to her while researching a book on Leonowens' son Louis, and found that much of what she had claimed about her past life was in fact fabricated. Not only did this strengthen the argument that Anna Leonowens was an outsider because of her class origins and should remain so, it also confirmed her reputation as an inventor of stories. In effect, it was the final nail in the coffin of her being a reliable historical source.

The discrepancies in Anna's personal life

Anna Leonowens had claimed a background of middle-class English gentility for herself. According to Anna, she was born in Caernarvon, Wales in 1834, to middle class parents, Major Thomas Crawford and Selena Edwards.⁸⁷ She claimed that at age six, (in 1840) her parents departed for India for her father to take up a high-ranking post in the British military.⁸⁸ She remained with relatives in England until completing her education, when she rejoined her mother, who had remarried on her father's death, in Poona, India.⁸⁹

⁸⁷Margaret Landon, *Anna and the King of Siam*, p. 4.

⁸⁸Margaret Landon, *Anna and the King of Siam*, p. 5.

⁸⁹Margaret Landon, *Anna and the King of Siam*, p. 6.

Bristowe found that Anna Leonowens was in fact born Ann Harriett Edwards, the second daughter of the decidedly lower-class Sergeant Thomas Edwards and his wife, Mary Anne Glasscock, in Ahmednagar, India on 5 November 1831.⁹⁰ Bristowe traced the Glasscock family back one generation to discover that Leonowens' grandfather had been a bachelor on arrival in India with the British army, and as he had been a soldier of low rank and Anna's mother's birth certificate indicated the name of her mother (Anna's grandmother) only as Anne, she "*may have been* either Eurasian or Indian in origin". [my emphasis]⁹¹ Some later critics, for example Wibun, have taken these aspersions to mean that Leonowens *was* part-Indian and Wibun went as far as to claim that this made her no more than "white trash".⁹² Whether Anna Leonowens was of mixed race or not is unknown, but quite plausible. What is certain is that Leonowens herself had not hinted at it, and in the climate of thinking about racial hierarchy which was emerging in contemporary Europe, it would not have been in her interests to do so, if in fact she was of mixed race.

Bristowe also found that soon after the death of Leonowens' father, her mother remarried another low-ranking soldier, a Corporal Patrick Donoughey (later demoted to Private). It appeared that both Anna and her elder sister Eliza were sent to their deceased father's relatives in England for some time for their education, unusual given their low social class, and that they returned to India in their early teens.⁹³ Leonowens had claimed she arrived in India in 1849 and that two years later, at the age of 17, she married a young officer named Major Thomas Leonowens. She said they settled in an elite area of Bombay.⁹⁴ Bristowe disputed this, alleging that on the return to India of Leonowens and her elder sister, Eliza, the girls were pressured by their step-father to marry as soon as possible. Eliza complied while Anna resisted, but in 1846 she accompanied a suitor, Mr Badger, to the Middle East for nearly one year. Leonowens

⁹⁰Bristowe, *Louis and the King of Siam*, p. 26.

⁹¹Bristowe, *Louis and the King of Siam*, p. 26.

⁹²Wibun, *Chiwit nai adit... [Life in the past..]*, p. 252.

⁹³Bristowe, *Louis and the King of Siam*, p. 27.

⁹⁴Margaret Landon, *Anna and the King of Siam*, p. 10.

had mentioned she had spent almost a year travelling in Egypt in 1850 with family acquaintances, the Badger *family*, visiting the pyramids, Luxor, Thebes and Karnak.⁹⁵ Bristowe disputed the existence of a family, claiming that she had accompanied a single man, placing her in quite a compromising situation for a young unmarried woman.

Bristowe noted:

No money for an educational tour could possibly have come from Private Donougey or Anna's mother so we must draw the conclusion that everything was paid for by Mr Badger.⁹⁶

In his sensationalist style, Wibun claimed that Leonowens lost her virginity to Mr Badger on the trip to the Middle East, and that on their return to India, Badger discarded her for an 11 year old English girl.⁹⁷ Bristowe mentioned that on return to India Badger had married an English girl three years Anna's junior. However, if Leonowens and Mr Badger returned to India in 1847 (as Bristowe alleged), she would have been 17 or 18 years old, making Badger's young wife at least 14 years old. It appears in this example that Wibun has taken a few liberties with the truth himself (a practice of which he continually accuses Leonowens) in translating Bristowe's allegations into Thai.

Bristowe also found that Leonowens had not been totally honest in her account of her marriage. He reported that Anna Edwards married Mr Thomas Leon Owens (a clerk, rather than an officer in the British Army, as she had claimed) in Poona on Christmas Day, 1849. However, Leonowens had countered this possible criticism in her *Life and Travel in India*, claiming:

⁹⁵Margaret Landon, *Anna and the King of Siam*, p. 10.

⁹⁶Bristowe, *Louis and the King of Siam*, p. 28.

⁹⁷Wibun, *Chiwit nai adit...[Life in the past]*, p. 237.

So great is the prestige attached to the word "officer" in the East that every man is an officer of some sort or another, from the brigadier to the private soldier.

A civilian, consequently, is an uncovenanted officer...⁹⁸

Her husband, an "uncovenanted officer", appeared to have been a drifter, and held a variety of jobs in India, Australia, the United Kingdom and Malaya. The family moved to the British colony of Penang in 1856 where Leon Owens ran a hotel and saved a modest amount of money. He died of apoplexy on 8 May 1859.⁹⁹ Anna Leonowens had claimed that after some time in England, the family again went east when Major Leonowens was posted to his regiment in Singapore in 1856,¹⁰⁰ and that her husband had died of heat exhaustion after returning from a tiger hunt.

Thankfully, there are fewer discrepancies in the events in Anna Leonowens' later life. She gave birth to four children in her short marriage to Thomas Leon Owens, whose names she merged after his death and renamed herself and her children Leonowens. Only two were to survive infancy: a daughter, Avis (born in 1854) and a son, Louis (born 1855),¹⁰¹ but no official birth records could be found for her children. Her firstborn child, a daughter named Selena died in India several months after birth, while a son survived only a few hours in 1853.¹⁰²

After the untimely death of her husband in 1859, Leonowens moved from Penang to Singapore with her two children and established a small school for the children of British officers with the money her husband had saved. She claimed to have lost the fortune her father had left her after the Indian Mutiny of 1857 provoked the failure of the Agra Bank, but this money in fact never existed. She taught in Singapore until early 1862, when the Siamese consul resident in Singapore contacted her through the

⁹⁸Leonowens, *Life and Travel in India*, p. 33.

⁹⁹Bristowe, *Louis and the King of Siam*, p. 29.

¹⁰⁰Margaret Landon, *Anna and the King of Siam*, p. 18.

¹⁰¹Margaret Landon, *Anna and the King of Siam*, p. 13.

¹⁰²Margaret Landon, *Anna and the King of Siam*, p. 17.

Borneo Company, and proposed to her the position of English teacher at the Thai royal palace. After initial indecision, Anna Leonowens accepted the offer of the Siamese consul, and sailed for Bangkok within a matter of weeks.

Although Bristowe succeeded in exposing many as yet unknown facts about Anna Leonowens, he displayed a degree of empathy for her, noting that there were understandable reasons why she had fabricated much of her previous life. Morgan suggests that Leonowens may have felt compelled to lie about her past because of her class origins, her dubious racial background and her early loss of reputation, all factors that mattered a great deal to the small, cliqueish European community in 1860s Bangkok. Morgan stated:

My own outrage on the subject of Leonowens' lies is minimal. Disliking the cultural ideologies that would evaluate and treat people according to their family, breeding, class and sexual experience more than I dislike lies that individuals tell to protect themselves from being victimized (sic) by this cultural evaluations and treatments, I think Leonowens' response could well be practical, sensible, possibly even courageous.¹⁰³

Anna Leonowens' lies seem to have served their purpose to a certain extent during her stay in Bangkok, although her most pressing problem outside the palace walls was that of loneliness. During her stay, she was not accepted by Bangkok's European community. She paid her first visit to the British Consul, Mr Thomas George Schomburgk, nine days after her arrival. Bristowe reported that it was expected that new arrivals visit their consul much more quickly than this. He also noted that the Borneo Company, the British trading company which had recommended Leonowens to the Siamese consul in Singapore and organised her passage to Bangkok, were notable in their avoidance of her after her arrival, and indeed for the duration of her stay in

¹⁰³Morgan, 'Introduction', p. xv.

Bangkok. She was "to find that inexperience in the social graces natural to Victorian ladies was ... a handicap"¹⁰⁴ and she "must have been quite unable to sustain her pretences of breeding either in her manner of speech or in her manners" towards the staff at the British Consulate, many who were from 'good' English families.¹⁰⁵

Ignored by the majority of the European community, Anna Leonowens had only the American missionaries to fall back on for friendship and support. However, their brand of Christianity was far more rigid than that of hers. Dr Dan Beach Bradley complained that although he found Anna Leonowens to be a person of "signal honor", he wished that she would attend church more regularly.¹⁰⁶

Towards the end of her five years in Siam, Leonowens' enthusiasm for her work began to flag. She also became increasingly aware of the degree to which she was monitored both inside and outside the palace, which can be draining at the best of times. She wrote:

I also began to perceive how continually and closely I was watched, but how and by whom it seemed impossible to discover.¹⁰⁷

Coupled with her loneliness, the knowledge that her every action was being constantly monitored must have been the last straw.

Leaving Bangkok

Anna Leonowens departed Bangkok on 5 July 1867, after having arranged a leave of absence to organise the schooling of her son Louis in England. She did not return to

¹⁰⁴Bristowe, *Louis and the King of Siam*, p. 30.

¹⁰⁵Bristowe, *Louis and the King of Siam*, p. 31.

¹⁰⁶Bradley, *Siam Then*, p. 103.

¹⁰⁷Leonowens, *Governess*, p. 226.

Siam as she had led the king to believe, but instead travelled from Singapore to England and Ireland, and then on to the United States of America. She lived for some time in the New York, before moving to Halifax, Nova Scotia in 1878 with her daughter, Avis and her husband, a Scottish banker named Mr Thomas Fyshe, and their children. Leonowens apparently left Siam with some bitterness as Dr Dan Bradley, a long-term American missionary in Bangkok, reported that she wrote to him in 1870 from Staten Island, New York, signing off: "Bangkok is the most hideous word I have ever written or uttered."¹⁰⁸ In her own books she had claimed that she was tempted to describe her time in Siam as 'captivity',¹⁰⁹ no doubt remembering the closeness with which she was monitored in all that she did by unknown spies.

No longer employed by the Siamese king, Anna Leonowens earned her living by giving lectures and writing books inspired, but hardly based on, her experiences in Siam and India. She also freelanced for a number of journals, including *Atlantic Monthly* and *The Youth's Companion*. In fact, the latter sent her to Russia in 1881 to write a series of articles.¹¹⁰ She made friends within the East Coast arts community, and was a keen supporter of the decorative arts.

Despite never returning to Siam, Anna Leonowens continued to have an association with Siam long after she left its shores. She received letters from King Mongkut until his death in 1868, and reportedly both she and her son Louis were beneficiaries of the late King's will.¹¹¹ She received letters from her friend, Lady Son Klin until at least 1872 and in 1884 Prince Nares, one of her former pupils and the son of Lady Son Klin, visited her in New York in his capacity as envoy to Britain and the United States. Leonowens claimed Prince Nares had told her at their meeting that King Chulalongkorn had specially asked him to meet with her as she was his former

¹⁰⁸Bradley, *Siam Then*, p. 104.

¹⁰⁹Leonowens, *Governess*, p. 239.

¹¹⁰Margaret Landon, *Anna and the King of Siam*, p. 355.

¹¹¹Margaret Landon, *Anna and the King of Siam*, p. 351.

teacher,¹¹² and she had the opportunity to reacquaint herself with her most well-known former student, King Chulalongkorn himself, in Britain in August 1897, who at the time was making his first grand tour of Europe.¹¹³

Leonowens' son, Louis, returned to Siam in 1881, after a restless youth spent at boarding school in Ireland, and then a variety of jobs in the United States and the British colonies of Queensland and South Australia. After a brief stint as a mercenary soldier for King Chulalongkorn he became one of the pioneering teak traders in the north of Siam, for a long while based in Lampang. Moreover, he married Caroline Knox, one of the daughters of the British Consul, Sir Thomas Knox, a long-time member of Bangkok's European community who had snubbed Anna Leonowens during her time in Siam.¹¹⁴ Louis spent the bulk of 1881-1914 in Siam, where Bristowe claims he was highly regarded. And in the early 1900s, one of Anna's grandsons, James Fyshe (Avis' child) was appointed an Assistant Medical Officer to the Siamese government.¹¹⁵ Anna Leonowens died in Canada in 1915, survived by both her children, and eight grandchildren (Avis' six children and Louis' two children, George and Anna). At the time of her death, she had established a family connection with Siam that spanned at least three generations.

Anna Leonowens was a single woman undaunted by the world that surrounded her. She conducted her life outside of the control of a man (except for her employer, the king), thus subverting the ideology of the day dominant in the small European communities dotted around the world. There was little room for the likes of Anna Leonowens in the small European settlement that existed in Bangkok in the 1860s, and she was shunned there, as well as on paper by subsequent generations of historians of

¹¹²Margaret Landon, *Anna and the King of Siam*, p. 355.

¹¹³Margaret Landon, *Anna and the King of Siam*, p. 355.

¹¹⁴Bristowe, *Louis and the King of Siam*, p. 73.

¹¹⁵Bristowe, *Louis and the King of Siam*, p. 126.

Thailand. Landon described Leonowens' years in Siam as "the most difficult years of her life",¹¹⁶ and Anna may well have agreed with this.

As Keay summed up:

It took real courage for a solitary Englishwoman to live and work in a strange country with only her child for company, and it took real courage (it still does) to stand up to the Supreme King of Siam.¹¹⁷

Conclusion

Anna Leonowens has proven to be a contested figure in Thai history. She has been both celebrated and unduly denigrated by those who have attempted to dismiss her contribution to Thai history, and the impressions to be gained from her writings of the conditions within the Inner Palace. The majority of the criticism directed against her conspicuously fits that typically directed to the stereotype of 'the gross mem-sahib' or, rather the pathologised presence of an independent woman living outside the general and acceptable framework of patriarchal Victorian society. Anna Leonowens was a widowed sole parent of lower-class origin who worked as a teacher in Singapore and Bangkok, and later wrote books, to support herself and her children. Her independence threatened Victorian ideals of femininity, whilst her published books on Siam threatened that country's positive image abroad.

Although Anna Leonowens has been denounced for inventing details of her own life and that of her experiences while working in the Siamese royal palace, she appears to have been a complex, courageous individual who had a long association, both

¹¹⁶Margaret Landon, *Anna and the King of Siam*, p. 356.

¹¹⁷Keay, *With Passport and Parasol*, p. 56.

personally and indirectly, with the people of Siam. She was amongst the earliest generations of white European women to spend an extended period of time in Siam, and certainly one of the very few to have such intimate knowledge of and experience within the royal palace, and the Inner Palace in particular. No doubt her presence in the royal palace had an effect on the way white European women have since been portrayed in Thai history. As such, she deserves to be given more serious recognition by historians, notwithstanding the factual discrepancies in her romantically presented books.

CHAPTER 4

TOLERATING MARY

Mary Lovina Cort, American missionary resident in Siam 1874-1891

The second *maem* I wish to examine is Mary Lovina Cort, an American Presbyterian missionary and educator. She differs from Anna Leonowens and Katherine Desnitsky in that neither she, nor the missionaries in general, were regarded as a threat to Thai identity because of the strong tendency of Thai people to retain their Buddhist faith as an essential part of their Thai identity. The spectacular failure of Christian missionaries in Thailand, both Catholic and Protestant, to convert even a negligible proportion of the population of Siam meant that Cort and her work were not perceived as subversive. Consequently, no one has felt the need to either attack or defend Cort's personal or professional reputation as they did that of Leonowens, and there is only scant information available about her life and her work. Still, Mary Cort warrants attention as an interesting representative of one of the largest and most influential groups of white, European women in the history of Thailand, the women missionary workers. By teaching and supervising some of the earliest schools for girls in Siam, she played an important individual role in the history of girls' education in Thailand.

Rather than posing a religious threat, Mary Cort and her fellow missionaries were tolerated by the Thai kings of the nineteenth century as useful conduits of Western knowledge and technology. Early in the century the Thai court employed missionaries as interpreters with visiting European merchants and diplomats. Crown Prince, later King, Mongkut, had used them as tutors of European languages (English, French and Latin), and of Western science, and discussed engineering, geography and astronomy with them. The Protestant missionaries are also remembered by Thais for introducing the first printing press, in 1835, as well as Western medicine and surgery. In the second half of the nineteenth century they won favour among the Thai ruling elite by

pioneering public schooling in Siam, establishing separate schools for boys and girls which taught English, amongst other subjects.

Christian missionaries in Siam in the early nineteenth century, both Protestant and Catholic, were privileged in that they had access to the men of the Thai social and political elite. In most other areas of Asia during the same time, missionaries mainly had access only to the lower classes and ethnic minorities.¹ However, the Reverend Dr Dan Beach Bradley, one of the most prominent and long-serving of the early Protestant missionaries in Siam, was to state that the Protestant missionaries played their strongest role in Thai history in the period 1833-1844.² Ironically, this is the period in which they did very little religious work, but rather aided the Thai princes with translation and Western-style scientific knowledge and technology.

Despite their offers of Western technology and education being eagerly accepted by the Thais, the missionaries' offer of religion was resoundingly rejected by Thai people of all social classes, and the majority of converts were drawn from ethnic minorities like the Chinese and the Laos. Thai Buddhists who came into contact with the Christian missionaries of the nineteenth century were much more gracious and tolerant in the face of other religions than were the Christian missionaries. The missionaries had a tendency to be patronising and condescending in their views of non-Christian, 'heathen' people, whom they believed could never be truly 'civilised' unless they converted to Christianity and adopted suitable modes of Christian piety. The Protestant missionaries of nineteenth century Thailand, as elsewhere in the world, equated Christian piety with European models of domesticity.

Mary Cort was part of the Protestant drive to Christianise, domesticate and therefore civilise Asia and the Pacific. She was a teacher and educator, instrumental in running

¹Wyatt, *Thailand. A Short History*, p. 177.

²Bradley, *Siam Then*, p. xiv.

some of the first schools for girls ever established in Thailand. Cort, a member of the Presbyterian mission, arrived in Siam in 1874, seven years after the departure from Bangkok of Anna Leonowens, and 30 years before the arrival of Katherine Desnitsky. She was stationed at the Presbyterian mission in Phetburi, and remained working there until 1891.³ She returned to the United States on leave in 1886, after twelve consecutive years of missionary work in Siam, but her leave over, returned to continue her missionary work in Phetburi.

The Reverend J. A. Eakin, a colleague of Mary Cort's, described her as "a bright-faced, genial and practical Christian with great good sense" and "kindness of heart".⁴ He went on:

She used to speak of going to heaven with a jolly little laugh as though that was the most delightful thing she could think of. She opened day schools here and there in the city and surrounding villages and carried them successfully; but it was hard for those who came afterward to follow in her steps and maintain the work.⁵

The Reverend Eakin's description of Cort differs from that of traveller Carl Bock, who described a visit he made to the Phetburi mission in the early 1880s. There he met "Mr and Mrs McClelland, and two evidently disappointed ladies of middle age, [who] were doing some good Christian work in the way of teaching a few young Siamese."⁶ Mary Cort was almost certainly one of the 'disappointed ladies of middle age'.

³It is unclear what happened to Mary Cort after 1891- whether she died, or whether she retired to the U.S.A. Wells' history states only that she worked at the Phetburi mission station from 1874-1891. Kenneth E Wells, *History of Protestant Work in Thailand, 1828-1958*, (Bangkok, Church of Christ in Thailand, 1958), p. 118.

⁴Rev. J. A. Eakin, 'The Narrative of Petchaburi', in George Bradley McFarland (ed.), *Historical Sketch of Protestant Missions in Siam, 1828-1928*, (Bangkok, The Bangkok Times Press Ltd, 1928), p. 101.

⁵Eakin, 'The Narrative of Petchaburi', p. 101.

⁶Carl Bock, *Temples and Elephants*, (Bangkok, White Orchid Press, 1985, [1884]), p. 81.

Mary Cort was a teacher and writer like Leonowens, but has not been the centre of a polarised debate as to her personal character and the worth of her written work. Although she played a prominent role in the development of education for girls in Thailand, Cort is remembered not as an individual, but rather as one among a group of missionary women with similar goals and ideals. Belonging to a corporate collectivity (although all still part of the category, *maem*) was a luxury not extended to Leonowens or Desnitsky, who occupied rather painfully unique positions in Thai society. As a missionary based on a mission station, Cort had a ready circle of acquaintances, and had the option of sheltering within the group if subject to external censure. Ironically, the protection afforded her by group membership has led to her time in Siam being politely tolerated, but over one hundred years later, her role in Thai education has been all but forgotten. Religious tolerance⁷ from the Thai kings allowed her and her missionary colleagues to complete their work in peace, but it did little to recognise Cort as a pioneer of education for girls in Thailand.

Mary Cort taught at the main girls' school in Phetburi as well as managing the operations of a number of smaller Presbyterian schools within Phetburi province. The girls' schools she taught in and supervised aimed to improve the lives of the local girls they taught by introducing them to Christian values and European models of domesticity, that is, Western-style sewing, cleaning, cooking, and child-rearing. Despite the schools' inappropriate concentration on European domesticity for village

⁷There have been occasional incidents of religious intolerance in Thailand, for example, in 1775, when the Catholic bishop, Mgr Lebon, clashed with King Taksin of Thonburi over Christian converts employed in senior royal service taking the ritual oath of allegiance to the King, by drinking water blessed by the Buddhist monkhood. Mgr Lebon administered holy water to three Catholic converts himself, and they refused to take part in the ceremony conducted by the King, arguing that it went against their Christian principles. Mgr Lebon, two of his missionary priests and the three Catholics working within the Thai royal administration were gaoled for almost a year, until they backed down from their stand. Mary Cort also claimed missionaries were persecuted at the end of King Rama III's reign (1824-1851). Local Christian teachers trained by the missionaries were imprisoned, the missionaries were prevented from buying land in Bangkok or its surrounds, their servants fled and few vendors would sell food to them. See Terweil's *A History of Modern Thailand*, pp. 53-54; and Cort, *Siam*, p. 290.

girls in the province of Phetburi, Cort's efforts in the pioneering days of girls' education were part of the impetus which spurred the Thai government to establish public schools for all children in Thailand in the 1920s.

Apart from the domestic training in the school curriculum, Mary Cort also contributed a chapter, 'Housekeeping in Siam', to the 1884 missionary compilation entitled, *Siam and Laos: As Seen by our American Missionaries*.⁸ In this chapter, she lamented that Thai housekeeping was "simple and primitive".⁹ She also takes her readers on an imaginary tour of a Thai house, warning the reader:

The Siamese have no godliness, and the next thing to it, cleanliness, is entirely lacking. So please step carefully or you may soil your clothes against a black rice-pot or come in contact with drying fish.¹⁰

Mary Cort also wrote *Siam; or the Heart of Farther India*,¹¹ in which she gave her detailed impressions of Thai social, cultural and religious life in general, as well as more specific information relating to her own experiences living and working in Siam as an unmarried white woman and as a Christian missionary teacher. This book, which the Rev. Eakin claimed was "for many years the standard authority on the mission enterprise" in Siam,¹² belongs to the genre of missionary testimony, its objective being to encourage the fund-raising of parishes 'back home' in the United States of America, and to reassure parishioners of the cultural superiority of the American way of life. Margaret Jolly has commented on the popularity of this style of missionary testimony emanating from the Pacific, claiming that the style abetted both the financial and ideological promotion of missionary efforts.¹³ Testimonies from Siam, of which there

⁸Mary Lovina Cort, 'Housekeeping in Siam', in Backus (ed.), *Siam and Laos as seen by our American Missionaries*.

⁹Cort, 'Housekeeping in Siam', p. 182.

¹⁰Cort, 'Housekeeping in Siam', p. 175.

¹¹Cort, *Siam*.

¹²Eakin, 'The Narrative of Petchaburi', p. 101.

¹³Jolly, 'Colonizing Women', p. 113.

were several in the late nineteenth century, appear to have been meeting a similar demand.

Unfortunately, little is known about Cort apart from the information she gives in her missionary testimony. Details of Cort's early life, and also of the later years of her life are difficult to obtain within the time and resource constraints of this thesis. Therefore, I have not been able to sketch her life in such a well-rounded way as I have the lives of Anna Leonowens, featured in the preceding chapter, and Katherine Desnitsky, featured in the following chapter. However, I will present an outline of as much of her life as can be gleaned from her book, and also from complementary material about the American Protestant missionaries in Siam in general.

What is known is that Mary Cort came from the mid-western American state of Colorado. She described her long and eventful journey from Denver, Colorado to Phetburi (Cort referred to it as Petchaburee), via San Francisco, Yokohama, Canton, Hong Kong and Saigon, before arriving in Bangkok.¹⁴ She made the last leg of the journey on a houseboat by canal to the small town of Phetburi, one hundred and sixty kilometres south west of Bangkok, arriving in November 1874 in the company of two other single women teachers, Misses Coffman and Grimstead.¹⁵

Cort did not mention how old she was when she arrived in Siam, nor whether she had been previously married. However, she gave her title as Miss, so she evidently arrived in Siam a single woman, unaccompanied by any children. She took up residence in the Presbyterian mission compound in Phetburi, along with several other missionary workers, teachers, servants, and family members of all of the above.

¹⁴Cort, *Siam*, p. 1-12.

¹⁵Eakin, 'The Narrative of Petchaburi', p. 97.

Cort taught in the mission school for girls in Phetburi, established in 1865. She produced some of the first school text books for Thai students, often based on Biblical stories and teaching lessons about Christian morality, for example *Stories of Jesus*, which was published in the 1880s.¹⁶ Cort was a healthy, active woman, and apart from her teaching duties, she went on many excursions in and around her home base in the province of Phetburi, which she recounted in *Siam*. She also boasted of her good health 'despite' ten years continual residence in Siam, attributing it to her personal habits of "care and temperance".¹⁷

Unlike the recently widowed Leonowens and the orphaned Desnitsky, we do not know whether going to Siam 'rescued' Cort from harder times in the United States. It is not known who or what persuaded Mary Cort to become a missionary and travel from her home in the mid-west of the United States of America to Siam. She gave little explanation of it in *Siam*. However, before she set out, she had decided that Siam was to be her destination, and although she was much taken by other cities and nations along her journey, she did not deviate from her original plan to live and work in Siam.

Growth of philanthropy and missionary work

The motivations of other Western missionary women during this period shed light on what may have spurred Cort to live out her ambition as a missionary teacher in a far away land. Many middle-class American women were attracted to missionary work by the wave of religious revivals and awakenings sweeping the United States in the early decades of the nineteenth century, which were focussing on issues such as temperance, abolitionism and missionary work.¹⁸ Pat Grimshaw pointed out that women played central roles in the religious revivals, and were prominent in teaching children, attempting to reform slum dwellers, organising temperance movements, rescuing

¹⁶Cort, *Siam*, p. 334.

¹⁷Cort, *Siam*, p. 17.

¹⁸Bradley, *Siam Then*, p. xi.

prostitutes and campaigning for abolitionism.¹⁹ She remarked in her work on American missionary women in Hawaii that many of the missionary women were "energetic, intelligent and well-educated women, daughters of farmers or small-businessmen".²⁰

Originally missionary work was conducted close to home, amongst the indigenous peoples of America and the working classes in Britain. However, by the 1820s both American and British Protestant missionaries were expanding their missions into Asia and the Pacific. Jane Haggis noted that missionary women working in colonial environments, and with an awareness of their gender, constructed "missions of sisterhood" between themselves, the colonising women, and the local, colonised women.²¹ Margaret Jolly has argued that this woman-to-woman work across cultures, social classes and ruling groups was in no way an exchange of equals, and she has termed the process 'maternalism', likening it to a mother-daughter relationship, rather than one between sisters.²²

Underlying the ideology of missionary work and its close relative, 'philanthropy',²³ was the belief that middle-class, European people were superior to all those they worked amongst, and that their work constituted 'help'. Haggis claimed that the belief of superiority was based on an assumed authority of race, which conferred expert civil, moral and spiritual influence on the missionaries.²⁴ Despite the racial and political overtones, missionary work allowed middle class European women to take an active role in society without contravening the principles of the Victorian ideal of womanhood current at the time. The Victorian ideal decreed that 'ladies' had a moral,

¹⁹Grimshaw, 'New England Missionary Wives, Hawaiian Women and 'The Cult of True Womanhood'', p. 21.

²⁰Grimshaw, 'New England Missionary Wives, Hawaiian Women and 'The Cult of True Womanhood'', p. 21.

²¹Haggis, 'Good wives and mothers' or 'dedicated workers?', p. 101.

²²Jolly, 'Colonizing women', p. 114.

²³Ware, *Beyond the Pale*, p. 67.

²⁴Haggis, 'Good wives and mothers' or 'dedicated workers?', p. 118.

spiritual and civilising role to perform within their own homes and the wider community. Diane Langmore noted that although all missionaries aimed to improve the lives of their subjects, they disagreed as to what constituted 'improvement'.²⁵ Ware stated that the British saw their philanthropic role as being to primarily liberate the indigenous, colonised people from their uncivilised habits and replace them with the 'benefits' of British education and 'decent Christian values', and it appears American aspirations were similar. The Americans also concentrated on imparting Western education and Christian values to those who were not 'fortunate' enough to be born American.

It is quite likely that as a missionary, Mary Cort ascribed to the values outlined above. Her missionary work was a kind of philanthropy. Her primary aim in Siam was the conversion of 'heathen', non-Christian (ie: Buddhist, Muslim, animist) souls to Christianity through the benefits of Western education, which was pervaded by Christian values. A strong advocate for women's rights, Cort believed that Christianity was the only religion with the ability to improve the lot of women. Therefore, her aim to convert souls also translated into an aim to liberate Thai women (her "sisters") from what she perceived to be the oppression of their current lives.

Cort described the work of missionary women in Siam as follows: teaching, conducting Bible and prayer meetings, visiting house to house, translating and distributing books, teaching Christian women Western ways, and convincing the local people to wear clothes!²⁶ The work mirrored that of missionary women in Hawaii to a remarkable extent. Grimshaw informs us that in Hawaii missionary women attempted to change the morality of the Hawaiian family and therefore society through the figure of the mother. They provided local women with Western education to enable them to become good, pious Protestants in both the cultural and religious sense, and

²⁵Langmore, 'The Object Lesson of a Civilised, Christian Home', p. 89.

²⁶Cort, *Siam*, p. 328-9.

encouraged them to cover their undressed bodies!²⁷ British and American Protestant missionaries of the nineteenth century appear to have had similar concerns, despite the local conditions, wherever they worked!

Cort's home and workplace in Siam was the Presbyterian mission compound in Phetburi. The compound was set on several acres, "very pleasantly situated on the bank of the river, and a little below the city", according to Cort.²⁸ The compound comprised three large brick houses. Two of the houses served as living quarters for missionary families, while the third house was designated the Petchaburee [Phetburi] Home for Siamese Girls.²⁹ It housed the boarding school for girls established by the missionaries in 1865, rooms for teachers and also the chapel. A smaller brick building within the compound was added in 1881 to house the hospital established by missionary Dr Sturge. The compound also contained a cluster of Thai-style houses belonging to Thai preachers, teachers, and servants, who evidently had not adopted their religious colleagues' domestic ways and still lived in the Thai style.

The compound was separated from the surrounding Thai villages and countryside by a perimeter fence, and also by the appearance of its brick houses at a time when most Thai houses were built of wood and thatch. Interestingly, the Presbyterian church, also of brick, and cemetery were not located within the compound, but rather a half mile walk from the compound, making them more accessible to the curious or those interested in the religion of the missionaries.

The mission station at Phetburi had begun to be built in 1861, when the governor of Phetburi province invited the Presbyterians to establish a mission station there. It seems that the governor was quite taken by the Presbyterian boys school already

²⁷Grimshaw, 'New England Missionary Wives, Hawaiian Women and 'The Cult of True Womanhood'', p. 26-29.

²⁸Cort, *Siam*, p. 323.

²⁹Cort, 'Housekeeping in Siam', p. 112.

operating in Bangkok and was keen to have a similar school established in his province. The Presbyterian Board took up the governor's offer, and in June 1861 two couples, the Reverend and Mrs McGilvary and the Reverend and Mrs McFarland moved from Bangkok to establish the new mission station,³⁰ ninety miles south-west of Bangkok and a thirty-hour trip by canal boat.³¹ When Mary Cort arrived thirteen years later, Phetburi mission was well-established and was administering many smaller churches in addition to the main church adjacent to the mission compound, and nine schools in the surrounding area.³²

The Presbyterians and Girls' Education in Siam

The Presbyterians had become the major Protestant mission working amongst the local population in Siam by the second half of the nineteenth century. They received royal authorisation to venture outside of Bangkok in 1861, and in that year had expanded their operations to Phetburi at the invitation of the local governor. They also established missions in Chiang Mai, referred to as 'Laos' by the missionaries of the day, in 1867, and in Ayutthaya, the former Thai capital. In addition to their missions, the Presbyterians established schools and later Western-style hospitals for the local people. When they had secured a minimum number of converts, they also organised churches. For example, when Cort arrived, the Presbyterian church in Phetburi had been in existence eleven years, since 1863.³³ Despite not receiving their first Thai convert until 1859,³⁴ there had been a Presbyterian church in Bangkok since 1849.³⁵ The year after her arrival a Presbyterian church was organised in Ayutthaya in 1875,³⁶ and a second church was organised in Bangkok in 1878.³⁷

³⁰Daniel McGilvary, *A Half Century Among the Siamese and the Lao; An Autobiography*, (New York, Fleming H Revell Co, 1912), p. 53.

³¹Wells, *History of Protestant Work in Thailand*, p. 50.

³²Cort, *Siam*, p. 310.

³³Cort, *Siam*, p. 296.

³⁴Wells, *History of Protestant Work in Thailand*, p. 2.

³⁵Cort, *Siam*, p. 294.

³⁶Cort, *Siam*, p. 295.

³⁷Cort, *Siam*, p. 295.

Jane Hunter, writing about American missionary women in China, noted that before the American Civil War mission boards had not encouraged single women to participate in overseas missionary work.³⁸ Since then, there had been a groundswell of interest in sending and supporting single women missionaries overseas, and specific periodicals devoted to the cause had appeared, for example, the Presbyterian *Woman's Work for Woman*.³⁹ Certainly, since 1865 when the Presbyterians opened the first girls' school in Siam, a stream of single missionary women teachers arrived in Siam to work in the schools operated by the Presbyterian mission stations in Phetburi, Bangkok and Chiang Mai (Laos). Mary Cort was part of this stream of single women teachers who, in fact, pioneered education for girls in Siam.

Traditionally, Thai boys were educated by Buddhist monks within the monasteries, and girls from privileged families sometimes had access to private lessons with privately engaged tutors.⁴⁰ However, there had been no formal provision of education for girls until the Presbyterian missions began establishing girls' schools. They opened the first girls' school, a boarding school, in Phetburi in 1865. Later, in 1873 the Presbyterian missionaries opened a girls' school in Bangkok, behind the Grand Palace and therefore called the *Wang Lang* [Rear palace] school. While in the early days the majority of missionaries had medical or theological qualifications, these were now supplemented with a growing number of missionaries possessing teaching qualifications. It also opened up the opportunities for single women, like Mary Cort, to engage in missionary work without necessarily marrying a fellow missionary before departure from America.

³⁸Jane Hunter, *Gospel of Gentility*, p. 11.

³⁹Jane Hunter, *Gospel of Gentility*, p. 12.

⁴⁰For example, Anna Leonowens was engaged as an English language teacher to teach the women and children of the Inner Palace, 1862-1867. Other tutors were employed to teach the more traditionally Thai subjects.

Judging from Cort's writings, one would have to say that she derived satisfaction and maintained much hope for the outcome of her educative and proselytising efforts in Siam. However, at the beginning of her book Cort lamented:

I have found nothing but God's disappointments in all my Siam experiences...⁴¹

It is difficult to know exactly what she may have meant by this statement. Did it mean that she was disappointed with what she found in Siam, or was she referring to the Buddhists of Siam as "God's disappointments" because, despite their tolerance of Christian missionaries in Siam, they maintained a seeming reluctance to convert to Christianity?

Thai ambivalence to Christianity

There is a long history of Thai ambivalence to Christianity, grounded in the fact that adherence to Buddhism is one of the major unifying factors of being 'Thai'. Tinzar Lwyn commented that a similar dynamic was evident in colonial Burma, where "Buddhism became an expression of Burman nationalism" against the imperial British.⁴² Despite Siam not being under the same degree of colonial threat, and Protestant missionaries being present in Siam for over forty years when Cort arrived in 1874, and Catholic missionaries for several hundred years, neither had made significant progress in the conversion of souls. Christianity in Siam dated back to the arrival of Portuguese traders in Ayutthaya, who had been guaranteed trade and settlement rights, including religious freedom, in a treaty with the Thai kingdom as early as 1518,⁴³ and the first Portuguese Catholic priest reportedly set foot in Ayutthaya in 1606.⁴⁴ Later, French Jesuit priests led a French diplomatic and trading venture into Siam in 1662,

⁴¹Cort, *Siam*, p. 2.

⁴²Tinzar Lwyn, 'Stories of Gender and Ethnicity: Discourses of colonialism and resistance in Burma', *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*, vol. 5, nos. 1&2, 1994, p. 63.

⁴³de Campo, *Early Portuguese Accounts of Thailand*, p. 13.

⁴⁴George V. Smith, "The Dutch East India Company in the Kingdom of Ayutthaya", p. 68.

and in 1673 a French Catholic mission brought letters to King Narai from King Louis XIV of France and from Pope Clement IX. Another French Catholic mission led by Mgr Pallu arrived in Ayutthaya in 1682, its chief objective to convert King Narai to Christianity.⁴⁵ A Persian delegation was attempting to win the king over to Islam at the same time. Needless to say, neither party was successful.

The Jesuits made little influence on the Thai population, but when the first Protestant missionaries arrived in Bangkok in 1828, they found a small Roman Catholic community in existence. There were a number of Catholic churches in operation: four in Bangkok, one in Ayutthaya and one in Chantaburi.⁴⁶ There was also a small Catholic village of Santa Crux in Bangkok located on the right hand bank of the Chao Phraya river. Many adherents were of mixed race: "Portuguese and French half-castes" as Cort termed them,⁴⁷ Chinese and people from other ethnic minority groups. Notably, there were few ethnic Thais amongst the Christians of Siam.

Nothing changed in the wake of the London Missionary Society's first, exploratory visit to Bangkok in 1828. The Thai ambivalence to Christianity did not waver as the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions' (A.B.C.F.M.) initial representatives transferred to Siam from their missions in Burma in 1831, followed in 1833 by the American Baptist Board's representatives, who also transferred to Siam from Burma. Mary Cort's sponsors, the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the United States sent their first representatives to Siam direct from the United States in 1840. Thirty four years later, Mary Cort found that the Thais were still only interested in the Western knowledge and technology that missionaries had to offer, rather than in their religion.

⁴⁵Wyatt, *Thailand. A Short History*, p. 113.

⁴⁶Wells, *History of Protestant Work in Thailand*, p. 5.

⁴⁷Cort, *Siam*, p. 281.

Thai resistance to Christian conversion caused the missionaries a great deal of frustration, especially as they believed that their religion and their way of life was superior to that of the Buddhist Thais. Cort was obviously an educated and politicised woman of her generation, who also held many of the American prejudices and beliefs of the time about other peoples, cultures and religions. When writing about her experiences in Siam her views come to the fore quite unreservedly. She possessed strong opinions on race, gender and religion, believing that Christianity and the European race were superior to all others, and that the situation of women could only be improved by the adoption and practice of Christianity. She was particularly concerned about the morality of both the Thai and the *farang* communities in Siam, the status of nineteenth century Thai women, including the effects of polygamy, and the advantages she believed Thai women would experience in their status and their daily lives if they converted to Christianity. As such, Cort was by no means as accommodating as Anna Leonowens in respect of Buddhism, and she gave some harsh criticisms of it.

Cort also had strong views on slavery and personal freedom. As such, she was typical of many first wave feminists who compared and linked the cause of abolitionism with feminism, mentioned by Ware and discussed earlier in this thesis.⁴⁸ Cort seems strongly influenced by the abolitionist movement in the United States, and was therefore very much in favour of promoting the equality of individuals, including of course, the equality of women with men, although she had trouble with the concept of equality between Europeans and Thais. She was critical of the Thai system of social hierarchy, commenting thus:

⁴⁸See p. 36 of chapter 2 of this thesis, for a discussion of Ware on the link between abolitionism and the development of first-wave feminism.

Although they call their land 'Muang Thai', the 'Kingdom of the Free', all are slaves; all have masters, from the highest to the lowest, except the king upon his throne.⁴⁹

Cort's support for abolitionism and belief in equality helped foster her strong feminist ideals. As such, she was greatly concerned about the predicament of Thai women, or "our sisters" as she referred to them, in keeping with Haggis' "mission of sisterhood". Cort believed, as did many feminists of her generation, that the status of women in any given society indicated the level of civilisation that society had reached. She warned:

The nation [Siam] can never 'arise and shine' while the mothers, wives and sisters are trodden underfoot.⁵⁰

Cort conceded that Thai women enjoyed "greater liberty than in almost any other Oriental land", and that "Motherhood is considered honourable, so infanticide is rare, and even little daughters are loved and cherished almost as tenderly as sons."⁵¹

However, she also claimed:

Still they [Thai women] are down-trodden, and considered infinitely inferior to men.⁵²

She noted that on several occasions when she was invited, along with other missionaries, to attend formal ceremonies of the Thai royalty and/or nobility that there were only ever European women in attendance, never any Thai women. She believed this situation could be explained by the fact that polygamy was one of the customs practised by much, if not all, of the Thai upper class at the time. Of course, polygamy

⁴⁹Cort, *Siam*, p. 19.

⁵⁰Cort, *Siam*, p. 109.

⁵¹Cort, *Siam*, p. 167.

⁵²Cort, *Siam*, p. 168.

as such does not explain away the absence of Thai women at formal functions with the missionaries. Perhaps Cort was actually referring to the existence of the Inner Palace, where the king's many wives and concubines lived a sequestered existence, and did not appear in public except at important ceremonial events.

Cort commented frequently on the situation of women in the custom of polygamy.

She asked the reader:

Is it not dreadful to think that women, our sisters, are ... crowded together like stalled cattle, and kept for the sinful pleasure of one man.⁵³

She went on to explain:

We must pity more than blame these poor, blind, helpless women for living as we find them ... t'is only because these poor creatures know of no other life that they submit to it with a sort of dumb patience.⁵⁴

Cort's sentiments on polygamy differed from those of Leonowens. Whereas Cort spoke of the ignorance of women in polygamous marriages, Leonowens referred more sympathetically to the submission of the women. Cort decreed that " ...polygamy fills the house with immorality, bitter jealousies, and strife, and thus *there are no homes* [in Siam]!"⁵⁵

Cort wanted to create happy, fulfilling Christian homes for the women of nineteenth century Siam, so that they could live as American women lived, which she believed was better than their present existence in Buddhist families. The faith that knowledge

⁵³Cort, *Siam*, p. 51.

⁵⁴Cort, *Siam*, p. 52-53.

⁵⁵Cort, *Siam*, p. 172.

of American domesticity would help young Thai women see the light was carried so far as to teach quilting to the female students in the Presbyterian schools!⁵⁶

Some of Cort's frustration about the lack of converts was undoubtedly expressed as criticism of Buddhism. Cort reveals herself in her writings to be well-informed about the basic tenets of Buddhism, and some of the practices and rituals associated with it in Thailand. Interestingly, Cort made criticisms about the sexist nature of Buddhism which paralleled an academic debate that ran through Thai studies one hundred years later, in the 1980s. Her main grievance was that Buddhism offered "no salvation for woman."⁵⁷ According to Cort, all that Buddhist women could hope for was to be reborn as a man in their next reincarnation. She criticised the practice of Buddhist monks not accepting objects directly from the hands of women, seeing this as yet another slight against women.⁵⁸ She was also of the opinion that:

Like all man-made religions Buddhism was at first opposed to the admission of nuns, considering women too inferior to enter the pale of the sacred order.⁵⁹

Although Cort criticised the lack of opportunity for Thai women to play an influential role in Buddhism, she reserved her harshest criticism for Buddhist monks. At times, her disdain for Buddhist monks seems to be equally directed at Catholic priests. On many occasions, she criticised their habits and their lifestyle, possibly because she believed that, as professional religious entities, they should have worked amongst the local community in much the same way as she did as a missionary worker, delivering many of the same services she did.

⁵⁶Loos, "Engendering Siam", p. 14.

⁵⁷Cort, *Siam*, p. 53.

⁵⁸Cort, *Siam*, p. 144.

⁵⁹Cort, *Siam*, p. 118.

Although Cort displayed some understanding and appreciation for Buddhism, she displayed little respect for it by her continual criticism of monks. She thought of Buddhist monks as lazy itinerants or "drones" lurking everywhere, and compared them to pariah dogs "both alike, in great measure, the meanest of their kind, for every man who is too lazy to work enters the priesthood, where he is always sure of a living..."⁶⁰ She claimed devout Buddhists foolishly donated food each morning to the monks, who she described as "self-righteous, proud, yellow-robed figures".⁶¹ And as for the Buddhist temples where Buddhist monks and novices lived, she described them as:

...a resort for the most able-bodied men and boys of the community, who are there supported in idleness and sin.⁶²

As a very committed Protestant missionary and teacher, Cort believed her denomination and religion to be not only superior to all other denominations and religions, but in fact to be *the only* 'true' religion. She took a few swipes at Roman Catholicism as she criticised Buddhism,⁶³ as well as relegating Buddhism to the rank of a 'false' religion. Throughout *Siam* she variously described Buddhism as pagan, false, heathen, and, most extremely, in the service of Satan.⁶⁴ Strong words although these comments are, they are not surprising from a woman who decided to travel a quarter of the way around the world, and to devote her life to educating and converting the people of Buddhist Thailand. Despite her uncompromising Protestant Christian beliefs, Cort was also able to make some concessions to the 'false' religion of Buddhism. She conceded:

Buddhism is undoubtedly the best of all heathen religions.⁶⁵

⁶⁰Cort, *Siam*, p. 30.

⁶¹Cort, *Siam*, p. 144.

⁶²Cort, *Siam*, p. 235.

⁶³Cort, *Siam*, p. 67, 126.

⁶⁴Cort, *Siam*, p. 98, 105, 106 and 151 respectively.

⁶⁵Cort, *Siam*, p. 125.

Although living and working in a missionary compound, Cort was not entirely isolated from contact with the Buddhist faith. She had listened to Buddhist sermons in Buddhist temples, and had studied the stories of the Buddhist scriptures. As such, she thought that on occasion, she appeared to know more about Buddhism than some native Thais who had been notionally Buddhist their entire lives. She also stayed overnight in *sala* (shelters, pavilions) customarily provided in Buddhist temples for the use of travellers, and on occasion would question the resident monks about their beliefs.

Cort also noted the curiosity white European missionary women who visited Buddhist temples generated amongst the monks. She declared:

...although they consider it a sin for a Buddhist priest to look at a woman, they watched us a great deal more, I think, than we did them.⁶⁶

Cort appeared to have a genuine affection for the Thai people that she worked amongst, although she judged them harshly on moral grounds. She described the Thai people, or Siamese as she called them, as pleasant and good-natured. However, she also believed them to be "lazy and indolent to the utmost degree, and vain, shallow and self-conceited." She claimed their greatest vices were "lying, gambling, immorality and intemperance..."⁶⁷ Her concerns parallel those of missionaries in Hawaii who complained that the Hawaiians' leisure activities were linked to gambling and licentiousness.⁶⁸

⁶⁶Cort, *Siam*, p. 261.

⁶⁷Cort, *Siam*, p. 168.

⁶⁸Grimshaw, 'New England Missionary Wives, Hawaiian Women and 'The Cult of True Womanhood'', p. 28.

Cort was no less harsh in her moral judgements of Siam's small European community. She was not impressed with the small circle of *farang* she found on arrival in Siam. They resided mainly in Bangkok, but as Cort was based only one hundred and sixty kilometres from the city, she often had the opportunity to mix in *farang* circles. She noted:

...it is a sad fact that many Europeans who came hither [to Siam] did not bring a blessing with them, but a curse, and were a disgrace to their native lands.⁶⁹

The Protestant missionaries, of course, were an exception. They had brought Western civilisation, good morals and "the purity of the holy Word of God" to Siam, according to Cort.⁷⁰ The missionaries were "earnest-hearted and persevering",⁷¹ as she described them, and were well-accepted by the Thai princes and nobles, and in fact by King Chulalongkorn himself. They were invited to formal garden parties along with foreign diplomatic representatives, and foreign business people.

The Chinese, according to Cort, were "very clannish ... industrious and enterprising".⁷² As such, Cort obviously drew sharp distinctions between the races, but saw the Protestant missionaries, who were by the 1870s and 1880s almost exclusively Americans, and the Chinese people resident in Siam as possessing similar qualities. A factor which possibly influenced Cort's view of the similarities between Chinese people and Protestant missionaries is that a large percentage of the few Christian converts won over by the missionaries were of Chinese ethnicity.

Although Cort was frustrated at times with the lack of progress the mission made with converts, at times she displayed an appreciation of the position of Thai lay people. She

⁶⁹Cort, *Siam*, p. 20.

⁷⁰Cort, *Siam*, p. 21.

⁷¹Cort, *Siam*, p. 107.

⁷²Cort, *Siam*, p. 32.

understood the difficulties they faced when attempting to convert from Buddhism to Christianity. For example, she stated:

It is very hard for them [Christian converts] to rid themselves of all the old ideas and superstitions.⁷³

Cort also appreciated the irony in the field of mutual understanding of people of differing cultures and religions. For example:

The natives think we are very cruel to bury our dead friends, and then leave them in the grave forever. Cremation, to us so horrible, is to them the last service of love they can render the departed ...⁷⁴

Despite her understanding of the obstacles towards conversion, many of the views Cort expressed in her writings reflect a very strong identification with her Christian, mid-western American origins rather than with her Thai surroundings. This may partly be a result of the audience she had in mind while writing both her own book of 1886 and the chapter on housekeeping in the Presbyterian compilation of 1884. However, despite subscribing to the strong Christian ideals of a nineteenth century, American missionary, and linking them with ideas of middle-class American domesticity, Cort was also undoubtedly attracted by the people around her. The comments above, sometimes scathing of Thai beliefs and practices, at other times sympathetic, are attempts on her part to reconcile the discrepancies between her ideology and her feelings, although both are coloured with the prejudices of the time.

⁷³Cort, *Siam*, p. 65.

⁷⁴Cort, *Siam*, p. 71.

Conclusion

Mary Cort loved Siam and the Thai people in her own way, racist though it was, and she devoted many years of her life to improving the range of education options available to Thai children, and girls in particular. In many ways a nameless missionary, Mary Cort has slipped from the historical memory in part because there was no controversy or debate surrounding her or the missionaries in general. Had there been such a debate, it might have marked her out for further attention.

Missionaries in nineteenth century Siam imparted Western knowledge and technology to the Thai ruling elite (eg. Western medicine and education, and the printing press), but constituted little threat to Thai identity by proselytising their religion. Theravada Buddhism was, and still is, firmly entrenched in Thailand as central to one's identity as Thai and as one of the basic unifying factors of the Thais. Consequently both Protestants and Catholics made few converts among the local population, and although Mary Cort contributed significantly to the establishment of girls' education in Thailand, she has attracted little attention by historians because of the Thai resistance to Christian conversion.

CHAPTER 5

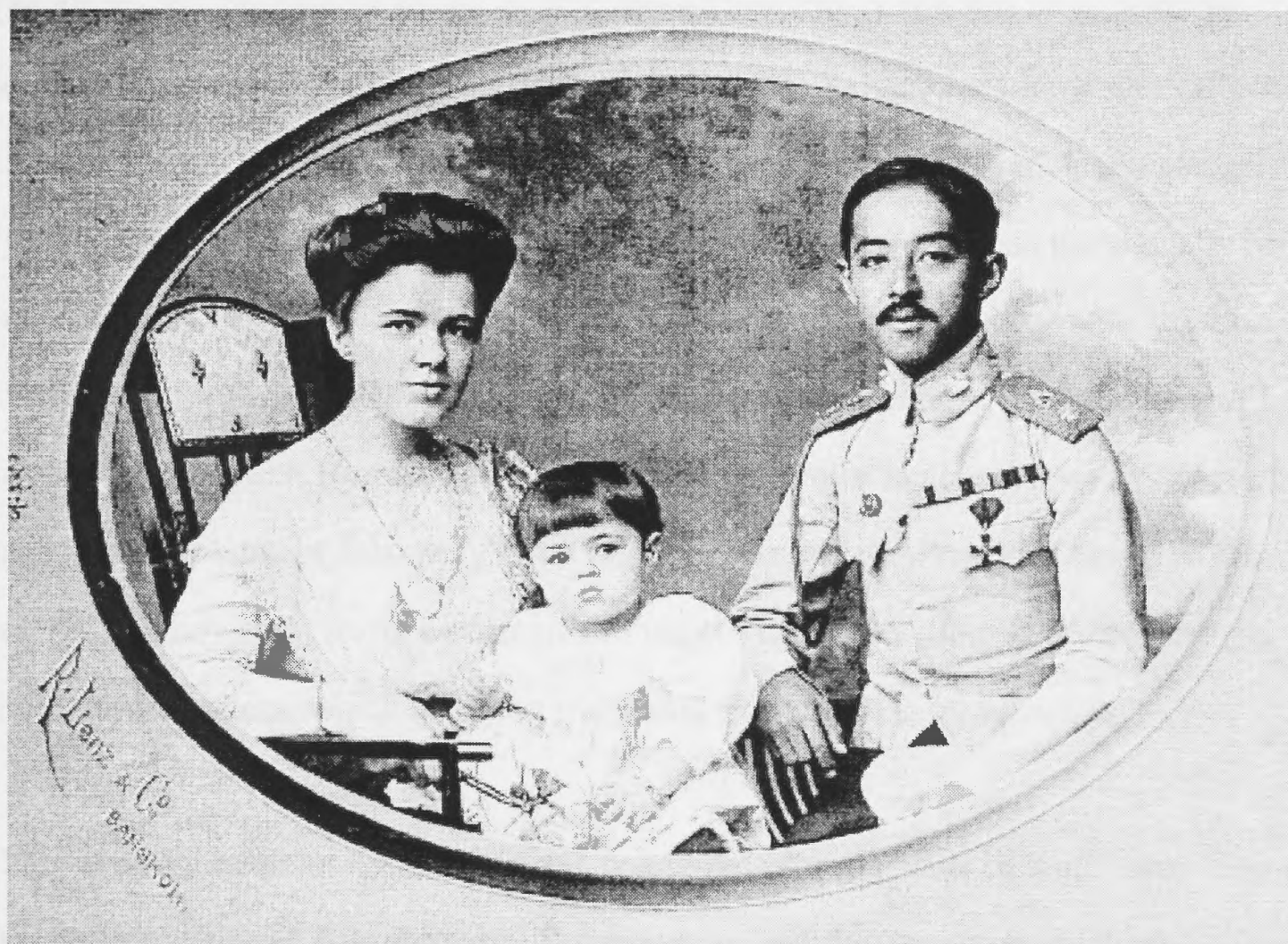
IGNORING KATHERINE

Katherine Desnitsky, Russian wife of Prince Chakrabongse resident in Siam

1906-1919

The attention historians have devoted to Katherine Desnitsky, the young Russian bride Prince Chakrabongse of Phitsanulok brought back from St Petersburg in 1906, is surprisingly infrequent for a woman whose marriage caused such a sensation in Thai society. Never before had a European woman married into the royal family of Siam. Her marriage with Prince Chakrabongse raised a number of controversial issues that were more comfortably ignored by Siamese royalty - the future of the Chakri line of succession, including the possibility of Eurasian children in direct line of succession, the disadvantages, as well as the benefits, to be had from a Western education in Europe, and a dramatic interrogation of what it was to be 'Thai'. However, rather than tackle these troubling issues raised by the mixed race marriage of Prince Chakrabongse and Katherine Desnitsky, key members of Thai royalty including King Chulalongkorn, totally ignored her by refusing to ever meet her, hoping that they would wake from the bad dream of her marriage to Prince Chakrabongse to find that she had gone, or better still, had never arrived.

Katherine Desnitsky presented a much greater threat to Thai identity and independence than did either Anna Leonowens or Mary Cort. While Leonowens worked within the Inner Palace and then portrayed Siam fictitiously in her books, thus influencing Western impressions of Thailand's history, and Cort laboured to educate and convert young Thai women to American domestic habits and ultimately Christianity, both posed external, and less potent, threats to Thai identity. In contrast, by marriage into the Thai royal family, Desnitsky posed a dangerous internal threat striking at both the heart of the Thai family, and the Thai reverence for their royal family.



Katherine Desnitsky with her husband and child.

Katya in Thai dress during the early years in Bangkok.



The ability of Thai royalty to ignore Katherine Desnitsky in the first decade of this century has been equalled by historians of Thailand, who have mentioned her only in passing, if at all, as the woman who dared to marry a Thai prince and nearly caused a dynastic crisis. Most information available about Desnitsky has been provided by her only child, Prince Chula Chakrabongse, in his many books on the history of the Thai royal family.¹ More recently *his* only child, Narisa Chakrabongse, with the help of her maternal aunt, Eileen Hunter, has also added to the available sources, with a glossy but unacademic volume of Desnitsky's life, titled, *Katya and the Prince of Siam*.² This volume did, however, feature excerpts of many of Desnitsky's letters to her husband and family members, which had been translated from Russian into English.

There is also a range of indirect sources concerning the marriage of Katherine Desnitsky to Prince Chakrabongse. Prominent among the literature which hints at the problems raised by the mixed marriage of a Thai prince of the highest order to a European commoner bride is Mom Rachawong (M. R.) Kukrit Pramoj's popular novel of the 1950s, *Si Phaendin [Four Reigns]*.³ The novel, which charts the many generations of a respectable upper-middle class Thai family throughout the course of four reigns, is recognised as having dramatised Desnitsky and Chakrabongse's romance and marriage and discussing its merits and drawbacks under the guise of fiction. In the novel Katherine Desnitsky was renamed Lucille and given another nationality (French), while her husband was known as An, and belonged to a family of lesser nobility rather than to the principal royal family. Two earlier novels by Mom Chao (M.C.) Akat Damkoeng Raphiphat, *Lakhorn haeng Chiwit [The Circus of Life]*⁴ and *Phiew Leuang*,

¹H. R. H. Prince Chula Chakrabongse. *Brought up in England*, (London, G. T. Foulis, 1943); *The Twain Have Met. Or an Eastern Prince Came West*, (London, G. T. Foulis, 1956); *First-class ticket, the travels of a prince*, (London, A. Redman, 1958); and the already-cited *Lords of Life*.

²Eileen Hunter with Narisa Chakrabongse. *Katya and the Prince of Siam*, (Bangkok, River Books, 1994).

³M. R. Kukrit Pramoj. *Si Phaendin [Four Reigns]*, (Bangkok, Editions Duang Kamol, 1980, [1953/54]).

⁴M. C. Akat Damkoeng Raphiphat. *Lakhorn haeng Chiwit [The Circus of Life]*, (Bangkok, Phrae Pittaya Press, 2524 [1981][first printed 1929]).

Phew Khao [Yellow Skin, White Skin],⁵ also discussed the benefits and drawbacks of mixed race marriage between Thai men and European women. Although these novels do not suggest such an overt link with the romance of Chakrabongse and Desnitsky as did *Si Phaendin*, the link is present. In fact, the author Akat was closely related to Chakrabongse's mistress. In this chapter, however, I do not examine Akat's novels as I have reserved them for the next and final chapter.

Despite the royal family's extreme disappointment and disapproval of the mixed marriage between Chakrabongse and Desnitsky, and King Chulalongkorn's refusal to ever meet her, Desnitsky lived in Bangkok with her husband for a period of thirteen years. Their marriage did not last due to the vast array of social, cultural and political pressures to which it was subjected, and they divorced in 1919. Desnitsky departed Siam after the divorce, and spent the rest of her life in Shanghai and later Paris, where she maintained contact with the Thai embassy. Although no longer part of the Thai royal family, Desnitsky left behind a very visible reminder of her Thai marriage: a high-ranking prince of mixed race, her son Prince Chula Chakrabongse.

Katherine Desnitsky's marriage to Prince Chakrabongse came at a time of increasing tensions between Siam and European nations with colonial interests in the Southeast Asian region, and elicited a stream of negative, emotional reactions from the Thai royal family. There had been recent border disputes with British Malaya and French Indochina, and a number of European nations had signed treaties which accorded them extraterritorial rights, and therefore a great degree of independence, in Siam. In its struggle to remain independent, the Thai kings had instituted a policy from the mid-nineteenth century onward that the men of the Thai ruling elite receive Western-style education to enable them to negotiate with the encroaching Europeans on an equal

⁵M. C. Akat Damkoeng Raphiphat, *Phiew Leuang, Phew Khao [Yellow Skin, White Skin]*. (Bangkok, Phrae Pittaya Press, 2516 [1973][first printed 1930]).

footing. Thus, Prince Chakrabongse's military education in Russia was part of this policy, although his marriage to a Russian woman was certainly not!

The Thai royal family were incensed that a European woman had married into the family. Prince Chula Chakrabongse reported that "the King's grief was acute" and that his wife and the mother of Prince Chakrabongse, Queen Saowabha, was "both furious and sad".⁶ Queen Saowabha's English physician, Malcolm Smith, likewise reported that both parents were "furious" and that their son's marriage had caused them "bitter disappointment".⁷ Hunter claimed that the King and Queen displayed "undisguised anger" on learning of the marriage, and that the Queen "stormed and raged for hours" after hearing the news,⁸ while Prince Chakrabongse's younger brother, Prince (later King) Prajadhipok, described the marriage as "a national dynastic catastrophe".⁹

Both the King and Queen refused to meet Katherine, because they had such difficulty accepting that Prince Chakrabongse had married a European woman. Prince Chula Chakrabongse explained that once King Chulalongkorn and Queen Saowabha "had overcome their anger and disappointment .. [they] .. chose to ignore the whole thing."¹⁰ Hunter's assessment of the event was similar. She suggested that the King and Queen "had presumably decided that if they ignored their son's marriage it might somehow turn out to be untrue."¹¹ As Smith explained:

... Catherine [sic] Desnitsky was another problem altogether. She was not a Siamese and that a foreigner should become Queen of the country had not been allowed for in the King's plans.¹²

⁶Chula Chakrabongse, *Lords of Life*, p. 259.

⁷Malcolm Smith, *A Physician at the Court of Siam*, p. 115.

⁸Eileen Hunter, *Katya and the Prince of Siam*, p. 66.

⁹Chula Chakrabongse, *The Twain Have Met*, p. 155.

¹⁰Chula Chakrabongse, *Lords of Life*, p. 259.

¹¹Eileen Hunter, *Katya and the Prince of Siam*, p. 66.

¹²Malcolm Smith, *A Physician at the Court of Siam*, p. 115.

The unpopular marriage of Prince Chakrabongse and Katherine Desnitsky was paralleled in the storyline of Kukrit Pramoj's novel, *Si Phaendin* [Four reigns], first published in serial form in 1953/54. The storyline resembled that of the relationship of to a remarkable extent. It detailed the life of a Thai woman, Mae Ploi, through the reigns of four Thai kings. Most interestingly, however, the novel portrayed a mixed marriage between Mae Ploi's eldest son, An, who was sent to study in France and a young French woman named Lucille. Like Prince Chakrabongse, An was "a young man with a bright future. He had everything going for him, they said: he was well-bred, well-educated, purposeful, as clever as he was hard-working."¹³ And Lucille, not unlike Katherine Desnitsky was described as having "white and pink skin, hair colour of copper, eyes pale blue almost like glass - pretty in a very striking way ..." ¹⁴ and also as being of a "frank and outgoing nature".¹⁵

Some members of the royal family mellowed in their views towards mixed race marriage of Thai princes to European women, others did not. King Chulalongkorn died not having reconciled himself to the idea and having never met his son's wife. Queen Saowabha gradually relented, met Desnitsky and was pleasantly impressed by her daughter-in-law, as did King Vajiravudh, Chakrabongse's elder brother, who officially recognised the marriage between Chakrabongse and Desnitsky after ascending the throne in 1910. However, Prajadhipok did not alter his official view on mixed race marriage for members of the Thai royal family, granting Chula Chakrabongse's cousin, Prince Birabongse "reluctant" official approval to marry Englishwoman, Ceril Heycock, in 1938.¹⁶ In fact, a generation after the marriage of Chakrabongse and Desnitsky, a number of young Thai princes married European women. Prince Chakrabongse's half-brother, Prince Thongrod, who also studied in St Petersburg, married a Russian woman named Ludmilla,¹⁷ Prince Rangsit married a

¹³Kukrit, *Si Phaendin*, p. 213.

¹⁴Kukrit, *Si Phaendin*, p. 176.

¹⁵Kukrit, *Si Phaendin*, p. 211.

¹⁶Chula Chakrabongse, *The Twain Have Met*, p. 220.

¹⁷Eileen Hunter, *Katya and the Prince of Siam*, p. 131.

German woman called Elisabeth,¹⁸ Prince Chula Chakrabongse married an Englishwoman, Elisabeth ('Lisba') Hunter, and Prince Birabongse remarried an Argentinian woman, Chelita Howard, in 1951.¹⁹ Several generations later still, the current king's eldest daughter, Princess Ubol Rattana, married an American man she met while studying at university in the United States, and in consequence slipped from public view.

Ironically, while Prince Chakrabongse's marriage to Katherine Desnitsky had been so frowned upon by his family, it was the undesirable sequelae of King Chulalongkorn's strong commitment to provide his sons with European education in the late nineteenth century. King Chulalongkorn himself had received a Western-style education delivered by Anna Leonowens within the Inner Palace in Bangkok, but he wanted his sons to receive their Western education firsthand, and so he began sending them to study in Europe in the 1880s. Prince Chakrabongse and a Thai companion and classmate, Nai Poom, a commoner and brilliant student, were sent to England in 1896 for education. However, after King Chulalongkorn's friendly visit to Tsar Nicholas II during his European tour of 1897, it was agreed that Prince Chakrabongse and Nai Poom transfer to St Petersburg to complete their education in Russia under the watchful eye of the Tsar. The two boys arrived in St Petersburg in the summer of 1898, and were provided with a modest apartment at the Winter Palace. They studied at the prestigious Russian military cadet school, the Corps des Pages, and both Prince Chakrabongse and Nai Poom proved to be excellent students, passing their final exams with top marks in September 1901.²⁰ They graduated as sub-lieutenants in the Hussar Guards, and in 1904 entered the Russian Staff College. They passed out of the college as officers nearly two years later.

¹⁸Chula Chakrabongse, *The Twain Have Met*, p. 229.

¹⁹Chula Chakrabongse, *The Twain Have Met*, p. 248.

²⁰Chula Chakrabongse, *Lords of Life*, p. 237.

Having been away from Siam since 1896, and having spent their formative years from 1898 until 1905 studying in St Petersburg, Prince Chakrabongse and Nai Poum were as familiar with Russian society and manners, as they were with their native Thai customs, if not more so. They were fluent in Russian and English, as well as Thai, and promising careers as military officers in Russia beckoned. It is hardly surprising then that both young men fell in love with Russian women and were reluctant to return home when the order came.

For Nai Poum, the disadvantages of returning to Siam outweighed the benefits. In addition to being in love with a Russian woman, Madame Chrapovitzkaya, he had many career opportunities offered to him in Russia that would not be available to him as a commoner in Siam. He applied to King Chulalongkorn for leave to extend his stay in Russia, but this was denied. Consequently he 'deserted' the Thai army by refusing to return to Siam, was baptised into the Russian Orthodox Church with Tsar Nicholas as his godfather, and took out Russian citizenship.²¹

Prince Chakrabongse was also reluctant to return to Siam because he too had fallen in love with a Russian woman, but for him the consequences of not returning, or returning with a Russian bride, were much more serious than they were for Nai Poum. Prince Chakrabongse was a high-ranking member of the royal family, and as such was expected to adhere to certain codes of conduct. Falling in love, let alone marrying a European woman, even if she was of a decidedly upper-middle class background, was not part of the appropriate code of conduct, and he knew it would cause great displeasure to his family. The danger of Prince Chakrabongse falling in love with a Russian woman had been considered previously, and the Siamese Minister stationed in St Petersburg, Phraya Suriya, had monitored the private life of the prince to help guard against this happening. At one time he had been sufficiently concerned about a friendship between the prince and a popular ballerina, Mathilde Kchessinskaya, to alert

²¹Eileen Hunter, *Katya and the Prince of Siam*, p. 55.

King Chulalongkorn to its existence.²² But he had not noticed, or was too late to divert the friendship between the prince and the young Katherine Desnitsky who held the prince's attention in early 1906. The couple had met a year earlier in the home of Nai Poum's friend, Madame Chrapovitzkaya, and by early 1906 were determined to marry. Chakrabongse was twenty three years old, Desnitsky only seventeen.

Katherine Desnitsky, also known by the Russian form of her name, Ekaterina, and the diminutive, Katya, had been born to middle class parents on 10 May 1888 in the Ukraine. Her father was Chief Justice of the Lutsk Tribunal in the west of the Ukraine, and her mother was from a family of Ukrainian landed gentry.²³ Raised in Kiev, Desnitsky's upbringing was comfortable and middle-class. On the death of their mother in 1903 she moved to the Russian capital, St Petersburg to study nursing. She lived with her aunt while she trained at the Princess Marie Hospital on the Fontanka canal,²⁴ and she later served in the Russo-Japanese war as a nurse in a hospital train on Lake Baikal in Siberia. Prince Chakrabongse wrote to her frequently while she was nursing in Siberia, and their courtship continued in earnest on her return to St Petersburg.

Control over Marriage

It was standard practice for the Thai monarch to give official consent for all marriages involving members of the royal family, just as it was standard in all Thai families for parents to approve of marriages contracted by their children. In the case of royal marriages, alliances between neighbouring countries, as well as between various factions within the country could be partly controlled by the king as the contracting parties had to first consult with him. However, Prince Chakrabongse diverged

²²Eileen Hunter, *Katya and the Prince of Siam*, p. 37. Evidently Prince Chakrabongse also had other Russian woman friends. In his personal diaries he referred to a young woman named Natasha, of whom he was very fond, and on a later tour of Europe he met up with a suspected old flame, Tina.

²³Eileen Hunter, *Katya and the Prince of Siam*, p. 47.

²⁴Eileen Hunter, *Katya and the Prince of Siam*, p. 44, 52.

substantially from royal tradition by not informing King Chulalongkorn of his desire to marry Katherine Desnitsky, as did the fictional An of *Si Phaendin*. Like Prince Chakrabongse, An had married overseas without informing his family. He introduced his new wife to his unsuspecting parents on arrival in Bangkok:

'This is my wife Lucille. We got married after I'd passed my exam. I didn't tell you before because ...' He went on saying something about not wanting to worry them and knowing they would love her like a daughter and so on - irrelevancies adding nothing to, nor detracting from, the significance of the main issue. That succinct phrase 'This is my wife' was enough to make Ploi feel faint with disappointment. No, not because Lucille was a Maem. The operative word here was wife rather than *Maem*.²⁵

Returning to real-life characters, Chakrabongse was determined to marry Desnitsky and take her with him on his return to Siam, despite the hostile reception he correctly anticipated would greet them. Chakrabongse knew that if he mentioned his plans to marry a European woman to his father the king, and the king objected, he would have no choice but to follow his father's wishes and leave Katherine behind in Russia. Hence, Chakrabongse avoided this problem by mentioning to no one but his closest confidantes in Russia (Poum, Madame Chrapovitzkaya, and Katherine's brother, Ivan) his intention to marry Katherine.

The climate of secrecy meant that the couple did not marry in St Petersburg surrounded by friends, in case Tsar Nicholas found out and informed King Chulalongkorn. Rather they travelled by train to Constantinople, the first leg of their journey to Siam, and were married there in the Greek Orthodox Church of St Trinity on Pera Street in late January/early February 1906,²⁶ after the prince had hastily

²⁵Kukrit, *Si Phaendin*, p. 171.

²⁶Eileen Hunter, *Katya and the Prince of Siam*, p. 56.

converted to the Orthodox Church. They continued their journey, honeymooning in Egypt, before sailing for Singapore on 19 February 1906 accompanied by Prince Chakrabongse's aide-de-camp, Surayudh, his Russian wife, Elena Nicholaievna, and their two children.

Prince Chakrabongse continued his departure from tradition by not informing his parents of his marriage, even after it had taken place. When the couple reached Singapore, Prince Chakrabongse went ahead to Bangkok to 'break the news' while Katherine remained in Singapore. She wrote the unhappy letters of a lonely woman to Madame Chrapovitzkaya in St Petersburg, complaining that she had been waiting in Singapore for three weeks for word from her husband to travel on to Bangkok, and that she was growing tired of her Russian travelling companion, Elena Nicholaievna.²⁷ She also revealed her worries about her future reception in Bangkok as the European wife of a Thai prince:

I have a terrible feeling that a terrible scandal will break out on my arrival in Bangkok and *Lek* [Prince Chakrabongse's affectionate nickname] is obviously afraid that it will be worse than we expected.²⁸

She also complained about the bathrooms in the top class hotel where she was staying in Singapore, informing Madame Chrapovitzkaya that, "No matter what they say, the East is not civilised yet",²⁹ revealing both a latent racism, and that her frustration was mounting during her extended stay in Singapore as her husband delayed informing King Chulalongkorn of his unorthodox (no pun intended) marriage. The king finally asked Chakrabongse if the rumours circulating about a European wife waiting in Singapore were true. The prince confirmed the rumour, much to his father's dismay, and sent for Katherine to join him.

²⁷Eileen Hunter, *Katya and the Prince of Siam*, p. 62.

²⁸Desnitsky quoted in Eileen Hunter, *Katya and the Prince of Siam*, p. 62.

²⁹Desnitsky quoted in Eileen Hunter, *Katya and the Prince of Siam*, p. 62.

A Russian romance, a Constantinople wedding and an Egyptian honeymoon may well have been exciting events for the young and orphaned Katherine Desnitsky, still only seventeen on her arrival in Siam. However, the realities of life as the shunned and officially ignored Russian wife of a high-ranking prince gradually unfolded. Although described as "a charming woman",³⁰ "kind and tactful" and "animated and gay",³¹ Desnitsky found her life in Bangkok difficult to bear. She spent much time alone as her husband, Prince Chakrabongse was busy in his new position as the Commandant of the Military College, and his family, most notably her father-in-law (the king) and her mother-in-law (the queen) ignored her and refused to meet her. As a result, Desnitsky spent 1906 living a secluded life in her new home at Paruskavan Palace, meeting few people and brooding on her future life. She filled her days with piano playing, reading and gardening within the grounds of Paruskavan Palace, gradually adapting to Thai manners and customs, and learning to speak Thai. As there was no Russian community to speak of in Bangkok, except for the Russian wife of Phraya Suriyudh, and later Mom Ludmilla, the wife of Prince Thongrod, Desnitsky was also obliged to learn English, the language the European community in Siam had adopted. Before her arrival in Siam she had only spoken Russian and French.³²

It was not until April 1907, when King Chulalongkorn departed for a seven month trip to Europe, that Queen Saowabha began making discreet enquiries about her son's Russian wife. Her recognition of Desnitsky sanctioned other members of the royal family to visit Paruskavan Palace. Subsequently, the Crown Prince and elder brother of Prince Chakrabongse, Vajiravudh, visited, as did Prince Rabi, the Minister for Justice and father of novelist Akat Damkoeng, who will be discussed in the following chapter. Queen Saowabha assisted in the Thai-ification of Desnitsky, suggesting that she wear Thai dress, and providing silks for the clothes to be made. The queen met

³⁰Malcolm Smith, *A Physician at the Court of Siam*, p. 116.

³¹Chula Chakrabongse, *First-Class Ticket*, p. 30.

³²Chula Chakrabongse, *Lords of Life*, p. 259.

Desnitsky several weeks later, who was by this stage attired in Thai dress, speaking Thai reasonably fluently, and familiar with Thai royal etiquette. The queen was suitably impressed, and developed quite an affection for Desnitsky over the years to follow, despite the 'scandalous' nature of her unsanctioned marriage.

The softening in Queen Saowabha's attitude towards Desnitsky was not reflected by King Chulalongkorn. He refused to ever meet her, or acknowledge her publicly, although he did begin to ask after his daughter-in-law, and later his grandson, Prince Chula Chakrabongse (who at first was named Prince Pong Chak, the inversion of his father's name, Chakrabongse), born on 28 March 1908. Desnitsky felt the king's disappointment and disapproval keenly, confiding to her brother that she had hoped having children would "make up for *Lek's* marriage to a European woman".³³ However, King Chulalongkorn did not alter his policy of not acknowledging her or her child for at least eighteen months after Prince Chula Chakrabongse's birth. Writing to her brother Ivan in 1909, Katherine confided:

At the moment the King is good with *Lek* but pretends to have no interest in me or *Nou* [Prince Chula Chakrabongse's affectionate nickname]. This is his policy, although I know that with other people he enquires about us a lot ... I feel threatened. It is as if my child and I do not exist.³⁴

King Chulalongkorn finally met his grandson, Prince Chula Chakrabongse in 1910 and is recorded as having commented with a note of relief that: "there are no European looks about him at all".³⁵ Desnitsky was devastated when King Chulalongkorn died on 23 November 1910, as she had never met him, and now all chance of a meeting and reconciliation was gone. She mourned:

³³Eileen Hunter, *Katya and the Prince of Siam*, p. 70.

³⁴Desnitsky quoted in Eileen Hunter, *Katya and the Prince of Siam*, p. 80.

³⁵Eileen Hunter, *Katya and the Prince of Siam*, p. 81.

...I completely lost my appetite and this lasted for a week. I lost weight and became pale. I stayed in bed and tried not to think about anything ... now the fact that the King did not accept me will last forever.³⁶

Paradoxically, King Chulalongkorn, the Thai king who is remembered as the first to have embraced the West, having visited Europe on two separate occasions, and having sent so many of his sons to study there, refused to ever meet his European daughter-in-law. Katherine Desnitsky remained an ignored outsider within the Thai royal family until the very end of Chulalongkorn's reign.

Belated acceptance

Katherine Desnitsky's marriage to Prince Chakrabongse was however officially recognised by the new king, King Vajiravudh. He bestowed upon Desnitsky the Order of Chulachomklao and the title of "Mom", the title given to all commoners (whether Thai or foreign), who marry a Thai prince.³⁷ Moreover, her son, Prince Chula Chakrabongse, was given the title Mom Chao, the second highest ranking of 'prince'.

Now officially recognised, Desnitsky held open house and began to enjoy a much fuller social life than previously. Her social circle widened. She paid the Queen Mother, Saowabha regular visits, and formed a strong friendship with Prince Mahidol of Songkla, a half-brother of her husband's, who was "extremely fond" of her.³⁸ She also befriended the Queen Mother's English doctor, Dr Malcolm Smith, who dedicated his wonderfully insightful book, *A Physician at the Siamese Court*, to her.

Despite the belated acceptance of the royal family, Desnitsky found life as a European woman in Bangkok frustrating and difficult. In *Si Phaendin*, Kukrit revealed that Mae

³⁶Desnitsky quoted in Eileen Hunter, *Katya and the Prince of Siam*, p. 82.

³⁷Chula Chakrabongse, *Lords of Life*, p. 268.

³⁸Chula Chakrabongse, *Lords of Life*, p. 285.

Ploi anticipated changes and possibly problems in the household situation because "the presence of a European daughter-in-law in a Thai household was bound to bring forth a special domestic situation."³⁹ Soon after Lucille's arrival in Bangkok, Khun Prem told his wife, Ploi, that he was writing to Awd, their younger son studying overseas, to tell him that "one Maem daughter-in-law is enough for me and if he brought another it would shorten my life ... If he insists on bringing one back he is no longer my son - that's all there is to it!"⁴⁰

Awd replied favourably, in his parents' opinions, to his father's exhortations not to marry a European woman. He calmed their worries by stating:

You may rest assured there'll be no foreign wife for me. Too many problems for all concerned and I'm a coward and don't like problems.⁴¹

Unfortunately, Kukrit did not go into detail as to what the presumably problematic "special domestic situation" constituted, nor the "too many problems" that concerned Awd. Desnitsky, however, attempted to explain the situation of mixed race marriages in Siam in a letter to her brother, perhaps throwing more light on the potential "problems" of having a European wife. She discussed the pressures she was subjected to as a European woman in Siam thus:

The husband being European is one thing, but the European wife of a Siamese man is even worse and more difficult. Apart from the weather, which is very enervating, there is the attitude of Siamese people towards such people and small actions which are not done with any malicious intent whatsoever. They are quick to pick on things and see them in the wrong light so that they can say,

³⁹Kukrit, *Si Phaendin*, p. 172.

⁴⁰Kukrit, *Si Phaendin*, p. 180.

⁴¹Kukrit, *Si Phaendin*, p. 181.

"You think she's great because she's a European, but actually she did such and such wrong."

I have felt like this for six years now and it has only reduced slightly recently because I have been here for a long time now.⁴²

She also wrote:

... they love me but at the same time they don't trust me. And it will be like this forever and there is no one who I can talk to who understands me.⁴³

The unnerving manner in which Thai people constantly watched her, waiting for her to make mistakes, suggests that they wanted to confirm that she was not a good European, and certainly not the kind of wife a Thai man, let alone a Thai prince, required. Anna Leonowens had made similar mention of being constantly watched and monitored while in Siam, and later called her years there "captivity"⁴⁴. However, despite this low level of ever-present criticism, Desnitsky pressed on with her hobbies: breeding Leghorn chickens (as had King Chulalongkorn), keeping a small zoo which included baby elephants, and owning a stable of race horses, several of which were successful in the races held at the Royal Bangkok Sports Club. Her racing colours were hyacinth blue, later to be known as 'Bira blue' when her son's cousin, Prince Birabongse, became a successful motor-racing driver in Europe in the 1930s.⁴⁵ Desnitsky devoted a lot of attention to establishing a garden at Paruskavan Palace, and later the house at Ta Tien (known as Chakrabongse House), and the beach house at Hua Hin. She strolled the tree-lined avenues of Bangkok with her husband in the evenings, developed her own photographs, and regularly went to the cinema with friends.

⁴²Desnitsky quoted in Eileen Hunter, *Katya and the Prince of Siam*, p. 131.

⁴³Desnitsky quoted in Eileen Hunter, *Katya and the Prince of Siam*, p. 132.

⁴⁴See p. 82, chapter 3 of this thesis for a discussion of Leonowens' impressions of life in Siam as a European woman.

⁴⁵Chula Chakrabongse, *First-class ticket*, p. 20.

Although Desnitsky tried very hard to enjoy her life in Bangkok in spite of its difficulties, it becomes apparent when reading about plans for her forthcoming trips to Europe that these were her lifeblood. In Europe she could be herself, she could relax safe in the knowledge that there were no watching eyes waiting for her to slip up. Even before she had reached Siam for the first time, she was hankering for the familiarity of her homeland. She wrote to her brother, Ivan, from Cairo: "...Already we are both looking forward to our trip to Moscow in two years time."⁴⁶ This trip was evidently delayed by the birth of their son, Prince Chula Chakrabongse.

Chakrabongse and Desnitsky made two trips to Europe, in 1911 and 1913. On the first journey they travelled overland to Russia by way of the Chinese Northern Railway, the South Manchurian Railway and the Russian Railway. Desnitsky travelled as far as St Petersburg with the prince, and while he went on to London to attend the coronation of King George VI, she visited her relatives in the Ukraine. Chakrabongse rejoined his wife in Kiev after two weeks in London, and spent time with her Russian relatives, who incidentally approved of their marriage. The couple then embarked on a European holiday, visiting Warsaw, Budapest, Vienna, Berlin, Paris, Hamburg and London.⁴⁷

Their second visit to Europe, in 1913, came at a time when Desnitsky was experiencing physical and possibly mental health problems. She had a weak heart, was coughing blood, and experiencing fainting spells. Desnitsky travelled ahead of her husband and on their reunion in Naples in September 1913 he commented that she had put on weight and "look[ed] very fat".⁴⁸ This visit to Europe was not as happy as their first, and their marriage was appearing strained.⁴⁹

⁴⁶Desnitsky quoted in Eileen Hunter, *Katya and the Prince of Siam*, p. 58.

⁴⁷Eileen Hunter, *Katya and the Prince of Siam*, p. 116-118.

⁴⁸Eileen Hunter, *Katya and the Prince of Siam*, p. 134.

⁴⁹Eileen Hunter, *Katya and the Prince of Siam*, p. 135.

Their planned 1917 visit to Russia at the invitation of the Tsar was cancelled as a result of the Russian Revolution. Desnitsky's family lost its two remaining estates in the Ukraine in the aftermath of the revolution, her brother, Ivan, who had been employed as a diplomat in Beijing lost his position, and Nai Poum and his partner, Madame Chrapovitzkaya, fled St Petersburg on his Siamese passport. They settled in the south of France, where Poum worked in a bank in Monte Carlo until Madame Chrapovitzkaya's death, earning a very modest income to support the two of them.

Desnitsky had lived in Siam for twelve years and had been under a lot of strain when her mental health faltered. She was understandably upset about the fate of her friends and family in Russia in the wake of the revolution, as well as by her deteriorating marriage. Although Desnitsky had been shunned on arrival in Bangkok, as time went on ~~and~~ she was accepted by a greater circle of people, including the Queen Mother. Paradoxically, from this time on the attention of her sole initial supporter, Prince Chakrabongse, drifted elsewhere. He was increasingly away on business or socialising with young Thai friends. Her son stated years later, "...it was obvious she was close to a breakdown."⁵⁰ Hunter was more to the point, disclosing that Desnitsky *did* suffer a "severe nervous breakdown" in 1917/1918.⁵¹ She embarked on an extended overseas holiday to China, Japan and Canada in the hope that it would jolt her out of her depression, accompanied by her maid, Cham, and a British companion, Mr Edward Healey. She was away for ten months.

During Desnitsky's absence from Bangkok, her 33 year old husband began an affair with an attractive 15 year old Thai princess named Chavalit. Although the affair was widely known of in Bangkok circles, no one suspected that its existence would challenge the long-standing, monogamous marriage of Prince Chakrabongse and

⁵⁰ Chula Chakrabongse, *Lords of Life*, p. 291.

⁵¹ Eileen Hunter, *Katya and the Prince of Siam*, p. 140.

Katherine Desnitsky, especially in a society where polygamy was accepted to such an extent. They were wrong.

Desnitsky was not able to tolerate polygamy, unlike some Thai women of the day who tolerated the practice even if they did not agree with it. Notably, polygamy was recognised by Thai law when Chakrabongse began what Desnitsky considered to be his affair in 1918, although it was replaced in law in 1935 with an official endorsement of monogamy as the only recognised marital relationship.⁵² On her return to Bangkok Desnitsky issued her husband with an ultimatum: end the affair with Princess Chavalit or the marriage would end. She had little experience of polygamy as practised in Siam as King Chulalongkorn had been the last polygamous Thai king. His successor, King Vajiravudh, had announced his intention of following the European custom of being monogamous. However, historians have recently revealed that King Vajiravudh was homosexual, and so an Inner Palace of wives and concubines would have held little interest for him! Under pressure to produce an heir to the throne, Vajiravudh did in fact marry two women prior to his death, one of whom bore a child.

Desnitsky's ultimatum to Prince Chakrabongse resulted in an attempted reconciliation, but it failed. While taking time out at Hua Hin, she wrote to her husband:

You say that you want to be yourself but over the past 12 years, have I made you feel so uncomfortable? ... In the past we were truly one, sharing all our thoughts and feelings together. Of course I am heartbroken to learn that you want to live in a different way, but I have never stopped you doing anything, because I have no right to stop you ...⁵³

⁵²Craig Reynolds, 'A Nineteenth Century Thai Buddhist Defence of Polygamy and Some Remarks on the Social History of Women in Thailand', *Proceedings of the Seventh LAHA Conference, 22-26 July 1977*, vol. II, Bangkok, Chulalongkorn University Press, 1979, p. 927.

⁵³Desnitsky quoted in Eileen Hunter, *Katya and the Prince of Siam*, p. 147.

Although Desnitsky pleaded for him to reconsider his decision, Chakrabongse continued the affair and so she moved from Paruskavan Palace into the guest house within the same compound. The couple divorced in July 1919, much to Queen Mother Saowabha's sorrow and to the opposition of King Vajiravudh. Prince Chula Chakrabongse reported that Queen Saowabha "loved Catherine"(sic), and became angry and hurt when the divorce went through.⁵⁴ This appears to have been her reaction when she first heard about their marriage thirteen years previously. One is tempted to wonder if the Queen had a limited range of emotional responses, or if the authors are so emotionally involved in the subject matter that they are masking their involvement with a predictable selection of adjectives to describe all possible situations. I suspect the latter may be closer to the truth.

Believing that she could not win a custody battle against the might of the Thai royal family, Desnitsky agreed to leave her son, Prince Chula Chakrabongse, now 11 years old, in the care of his Thai relatives. The King would ensure that his nephew was brought up in line with his future role as a high-ranking member of the royal family. Katherine was expected to gracefully withdraw from her role as his mother and primary care-giver, and this she did, although Prince Chula Chakrabongse was later to hold it against her.

Kukrit's comparison in *Si Phaendin* of the divorce of An and his French wife Lucille is strikingly similar to that of Chakrabongse and Desnitsky. As literary critic Mattani Modjara Rutnin explained:

This unexpected intermarriage caused much awkwardness and frustration within the family. Though Lucille, his French wife, tried to adapt herself to Thai society and was well-received and loved by Phloi's family, the marriage

⁵⁴Chula Chakrabongse, *Lords of Life*, p. 294.

finally failed, not so much because of Lucille or the in-laws, but because An became tired of his farang wife and neglected her.⁵⁵

An's younger brother Awd had previously outlined the potential problems of mixed race marriages as he saw them:

...we come back to live in Muang Thai [Thailand]. Before long she finds life in our country not as colourful and exciting as in that fabulous land of her imagination. In fact she finds it not only unglamorous but uncomfortable, if not downright unsanitary ... and she misses her Farang friends ... I begin to compare her with the Thai girls and discover flaws in her manners, her complexion, her figure, her temperament, etc., and while she tries vainly to tolerate the smell of shrimp paste I start to get fed up, as it were, with the flavour of milk-and-butter ... It all adds up to a climate not exactly favourable to marital bliss, to my way of thinking.⁵⁶

Awd's view of the pitfalls of a mixed marriage go a long way towards a very probable explanation of the failure of An and Lucille's fictional marriage, as well as the real-life failure of Prince Chakrabongse and Katherine Desnitsky's marriage. Once the initial allure of the relationship had worn off, An began socialising outside their home and neglecting Lucille. This she greatly resented, and Ploi understood why, and Lucille's dissatisfaction with her life in Siam began to be manifest.

...in the beginning everything had lived up to her expectations. She had had the time of her life and An had been the most adoring of husbands. Now the novelty had worn off ... She felt so lonely. She was homesick. She also complained about the mosquitoes and the heat and other inconveniences -

⁵⁵Mattani, *Modern Thai Literature*, p. 97.

⁵⁶Kukrit, *Si Phaendin*, p. 182.

complained, in fact, very much like that imaginary Farang woman living in Muang Thai as depicted in Awd in one of his letters to Ploi.⁵⁷

The marriage of An and Lucille deteriorated. They fought in front of Mae Ploi. An persuaded Lucille to return to France to visit her family, although she was unwilling to go and believed that as a wife her place was now wherever her husband was. An informed his mother that Lucille would be away for six months. Once she had departed, Ploi was amazed at the change in her son. He appeared more relaxed and cheerful. It was a total transformation.⁵⁸ Lucille did not return to Siam. However, it was not until the outbreak of the Second World War that Ploi thought to ask her son, An, when his wife was returning. An informed her:

"Lucille and I are divorced, Mother. We decided on it not long after she left."

"Why didn't you tell me, son? Oh why didn't you tell me? Oh my poor Lucille ..."

It was as much Lucille's decision as his, An assured his mother; they had agreed on it being the best solution; he had meant to let sufficient time elapse before telling Mother, wishing to break it to her gently ...⁵⁹

The marriage, doomed by Awd's analysis, had ended despite the good intentions of Lucille and An's family, especially his mother, Ploi. This was not unlike the marriage of Prince Chakrabongse and Katherine Desnitsky, where, after a period of Katherine's extended absence overseas, they agreed to divorce, although much to the dismay of the Prince's mother, Queen Mother Saowabha. However, despite the similarities, it must be noted that the fictional family had been more welcoming in its embrace of the European daughter-in-law than had the royal family.

⁵⁷Kukrit, *Si Phaendin*, p. 212.

⁵⁸Kukrit, *Si Phaendin*, p. 245.

⁵⁹Kukrit, *Si Phaendin*, p. 384.

Mattani believed that the fashion of intermarriage amongst Western-educated Thais and Europeans, which began when Thai men began travelling to Europe for their education in the fashion of Prince Chakrabongse and the fictional An, "was a problem that has created many social problems up to the present - maladjustment, incompatibility, unsuitability and frustration. In most cases the intermarriages do not succeed and the Eurasian children suffer from lack of identity."⁶⁰ Although not always the case, her comment highlights the tensions surrounding mixed race marriage in Thailand.

The attention devoted to Lucille in *Si Phaendin* ended on her return to France, as did the interest of Thai historians in Katherine Desnitsky after her divorce from Prince Chakrabongse. However, Desnitsky was still a young woman at the time of her divorce (only 31 years old), and she led a long and full life after her departure from Siam in 1919.

After their divorce in 1919, Prince Chakrabongse continued his royal life in Bangkok much as before. Princess Chavalit moved into Desnitsky's former home, Paruskavan Palace. Official duties occupied the prince during the week, and his weekends were often spent at the beach house at Hua Hin with house guests and Chavalit. His brother, King Vajiravudh refused him permission to marry Chavalit, but their affair continued.

However, while taking a holiday to Singapore with Princess Chavalit and his son in the wake of Queen Mother Saowabha's cremation ceremony, Prince Chakrabongse developed a fever which quickly worsened. On arrival in Singapore an English doctor diagnosed Spanish influenza, and within a matter of days, on 13 June 1920, the prince was dead at the age of 37. His body was transported from Singapore to Bangkok by

⁶⁰Mattani, *Modern Thai Literature*, p. 98.

train, and he was cremated in October 1920. Katherine Desnitsky attended the cremation ceremony in Bangkok, and remained there until December 1920, when she departed Siam for the final time.

Desnitsky wrote to her son in 1932, describing her departure from Bangkok:

I left Siam with a smile on my lips when my heart was perfectly broken ... But the suffering made my will very strong and Chakrabongse was, for me dead, the day I left Paruskavan.⁶¹

Information about Katherine Desnitsky's life once she passed out of the orbit of the Thai royal family is scarce. There appears to be little information concerning the years she lived in Shanghai or her thirty four years in Paris. Desnitsky led a quiet life in Shanghai, working as a volunteer for the Russian Benevolent Society amongst Russian refugees who had settled in the city after the revolution, and marrying American business man, Harry Clinton Stone.⁶² Stone, known by his step-son Chula Chakrabongse as *Hin* (the Thai word for stone), was reported to have been a rather dull, boring man, originally from Portland, Oregon and quite the opposite of Prince Chakrabongse. Although she was the mother of a Royal Highness of the Chakri dynasty, and the ex-wife of a (deceased) Royal Highness, Desnitsky was now in fact no more than a housewife married to a businessman.

Desnitsky missed her son, (her only link with her life in Siam), who was now studying in England. He entered Harrow School in 1923, and later read history at Trinity College, Cambridge. After visiting Prince Chula Chakrabongse in Europe in 1922 and 1925, Desnitsky and Stone moved to Paris in 1926 to be nearer him. He reported that he spent every school holiday and university vacation with them for the next eight years in

⁶¹Desnitsky quoted in Eileen Hunter, *Katya and the Prince of Siam*, p. 151.

⁶²Eileen Hunter, *Katya and the Prince of Siam*, p. 164.

a flat in the more modest Rue Parmentier,⁶⁴ where Katherine lived for many years.⁶⁵ She also had a small country house called 'Le Mesle', near Rambouillet, not far from Paris, which her son had bought for her in the mid-1930s, after inheriting his father, Prince Chakrabongse's fortune in its entirety.⁶⁶

Prince Chula Chakrabongse visited his mother frequently in Paris, and Desnitsky and Stone, and later also Poum, Desnitsky's private secretary since the death of Madame Chrapovitzkaya, were regular visitors to her son's home Tredethy, in Cornwall. However, the relationship between mother and son does not appear to have been particularly affectionate. Hunter, in particular, referred to the misgivings of Prince Chula Chakrabongse regarding his childhood and what he saw as his mother's desertion of him as an 11 year-old boy, when she left Bangkok without saying goodbye. The prince himself hinted at the emotional distance between him and his mother by dedicating a chapter in *First-class Ticket on Scandinavia* to his mother, a seemingly affectionate gesture given that his parents had met in St Petersburg. However, he confessed in the opening lines of the chapter that his knowledge of Scandinavia was meagre on account of his brief visits to the region.⁶⁷

Desnitsky became a grandmother on 2 August 1956, when Prince Chula Chakrabongse's English wife, Lisba, gave birth to her daughter and only child, Narisa.⁶⁸ Desnitsky died in Paris three and a half years later, on 3 January 1960, aged 71, and was buried at a small Russian Orthodox cemetery in Paris. Her son, Prince Chula Chakrabongse died of cancer in 1964.

⁶⁴Street maps of Paris list 'avenue' Parmentier, but no 'rue' Parmentier.

⁶⁵Eileen Hunter, *Katya and the Prince of Siam*, p. 178.

⁶⁶Eileen Hunter, *Katya and the Prince of Siam*, p. 184.

⁶⁷Chula Chakrabongse, *First-class ticket*, p. 232.

⁶⁸Chula Chakrabongse, *First-class ticket*, p. 208.

Despite the fact that Katherine Desnitsky departed Bangkok in July 1919, and again in December 1920 (after the cremation of her ex-husband), and did not return, she is notable in that hers is unquestionably the most controversial mixed marriage in Thai history between a Thai and a European. Literary critic Mattani, writing in 1975, summed up: "The Thais seem to be very broad minded about this matter [racial intermarriage], particularly when it does not concern their own families. In general, however, there is still a strong prejudice against it."⁶⁹ The marriage of Prince Chakrabongse and Katherine Desnitsky was a perfect illustration of this statement.

Conclusion

Katherine Desnitsky's marriage to Prince Chakrabongse posed a real threat to Thai identity, and to the lineage of the Thai royal family in particular: a mixed race heir and the possibility of a European queen of Siam! Chakrabongse's position as second-in-line to the throne, behind his elder brother Vajiravudh, was thrown into doubt by his marriage to a European woman and was only solved by his untimely death in 1920.

Because Desnitsky's marriage was perceived as so threatening to the Thai royal family and the line of succession, and therefore the Thai nation, she was ignored for many years by key members of the royal court. Most notably, King Chulalongkorn, never met her in the four years she spent in Thailand before his death. On his death, official attitudes to her softened and she was recognised within the royal family.

Paradoxically, as Desnitsky was increasingly acknowledged by those around her, her husband, until then her only supporter, began to increasingly ignore her. When he took a young Thai princess as a mistress Desnitsky demanded a divorce.

⁶⁹Mattani, *Modern Thai Literature*, p. 98.

The divorce of Prince Chakrabongse and Katherine Desnitsky served to galvanise at the time and for many years to come an opinion that relationships between European women and Western-educated Thai men were doomed and unworkable. A number of Thai literary works have since been based on this theme, including Kukrit Pramoj's well-known novel *Si Phaendin* and the novels of Akat Damkoeng, to be discussed in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 6

A THAI RESPONSE TO WHITE EUROPEAN WOMEN: NOVELS OF THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

The previous three chapters have shed some understanding on the realities of white European women's lives in Siam in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and have gone some way towards exploring their views and impressions of Siam shaped by the prevailing European social attitudes of the day. However, the chapters rely mainly on Western constructions of knowledge shaped by European language sources and impressions. This is because there is very little Thai language material concerning Anna Leonowens, Mary Lovina Cort or Katherine Desnitsky, suggesting that Thai historians have been preoccupied with issues other than the experiences of white European women in Thailand.

However, although Thai historians may not have been so intrigued by white European women and how they fitted into Thai society, Thai novelists have been. To enable a Thai perspective to emerge in this chapter, I turn away from Thai historical sources where the references to white European women are scant to a source where they are plentiful: Thai novels of the early twentieth century.

Lucille, Maria Grey, and Lady Moira Dunn, among others, are white European women possibly more widely-known to the readers of Thai fiction than are the real-life personae of Anna Leonowens, Mary Lovina Cort and Katherine Desnitsky examined in the previous chapters. The former are principal female characters who appeared in the first wave of modern Thai novels which emerged in the late 1920s and continued into the following decades. This early wave of Thai fiction included the works of, among others, Mom Luang (M.L.) Bupha Kunjara Nimmanhemin, better known under her pseudonym of Dok Mai Sot, Mom Chao (M.C.) Akat Damkoeng Raphiphat, and his

classmate Kulap Saipradit, who wrote under the pseudonym of Si Burapha. These three authors have been credited as the "founders of modern Thai fiction".¹

The female characters listed above appeared in M.C. Akat Damkoeng's two novels, *Lakhorn haeng chiwit* [*The Circus of Life*]² and its sequel, *Phiew Leuang, Phiew Khao* [*Yellow Skin, White Skin*],³ and Mom Rachawongse (M. R.) Kukrit Pramoj's already discussed *Si Phaendin* [*Four Reigns*]. These novels, well-known and widely read in Thailand, provide chronicles of the generations and the social changes experienced in Siam during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

'Modern' Thai fiction

The Thai debate about the benefits and disadvantages of white European women in Thailand, either in relationships with Thai men, or as actors in Thai society in their own right, was carried out primarily in the realm of novelistic fiction. Ironically, this was a literary genre brought to Siam by Thai princes returning from European education abroad during the same period that European women were beginning to appear in Siam in small but increasing numbers. But although the debate was carried out in the European-influenced genre of fiction, the genre was not an exclusively European construction.

Thai fiction was one of several recognised genres to emerge from 'modern' Thai literature. The term 'modern' Thai literature denotes that the traditional body of Thai literature, comprised of classical and folk literature written or orally recounted mainly in poetry, and influenced by the earlier Indian, Chinese, Javanese and Pali literatures,

¹Benedict R. O'G. Anderson & Ruchira Mendiones, *In the Mirror. Literature and Politics in Siam in the American Era*, (Bangkok, Editions Duang Kamol, 1985), p. 15.

²M.C. Akat Damkoeng Raphiphat, *Lakhorn haeng chiwit* [*The Circus of Life*], (Bangkok, Phrae Pittaya Press, 2514 [1981][first printed 1929]).

³M.C. Akat Damkoeng Raphiphat, *Phiew Leuang, Phiew Khao* [*Yellow Skin, White Skin*], (Bangkok, Phrae Pittaya Press, 2516 [1973][first printed 1930]).

was being reshaped by European literary influence. Thai literary scholars and historians have identified this process of influence and change as having its origins during the reign of King Mongkut (1851-1868).⁴ Literary influence and change did not mean that classical Thai literature was to be lost for future generations. In fact, some of the most well-known classical Thai literary works are based on the Buddhist scriptures. The *Tripitaka*, the Buddhist *jataka* tales which recount the previous lives of the Lord Buddha, the Ramayana story (called the *Ramakian* in Thai) and the popular Javanese dance drama, the *Inao*, are still taught in government schools and universities, and form a cornerstone of national identity, symbolising the beauty and grace of the Thai past.⁵ Rather, a fusion took place between enduring classical Thai literary traditions and the newly arrived European literary customs, for example, the novel, the spoken dramatic play and the short story, with the resultant mix termed 'modern' Thai literature.

European influence at this time was being felt not only in literature, but in the allied field of education. Wibha claimed that a Thai reading public did not exist before the 1860s.⁶ However, the expansion of Western-style schools in Siam, such as those supervised by Mary Cort, complemented the existing Buddhist monastery schools, and ensured that more people had access to education and were thus able to read and write. Increased access to education in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries formed a Thai readership, admittedly small but also influential, as it comprised not only princes, noblemen and Buddhist scholars but also the small, educated, middle-class community.

⁴See Wibha Senanan, *The Genesis of the Novel in Thailand*, (Bangkok, Thai Wattana Panit, 1975); Herbert P. Phillips, *Modern Thai Literature. With an Ethnographic Interpretation*, (Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 1987); and the already-cited Mattani, *Modern Thai Literature*. Srisurang Poolthupya, in contrast, reasons that 'modern' Thai literature could be argued to have commenced in a number of different periods, depending on what one's definition of 'modern' is. See Srisurang Poolthupya, 'Social Change as Seen in Modern Thai Literature', in Tham Seong Chee (ed.), *Essays on Literature and Society in Southeast Asia*, (Singapore, Singapore University Press, 1981).

⁵Phillips, *Modern Thai Literature*, p. 14.

⁶Wibha, *The Genesis of the Novel in Thailand*, p. 112.

The formation of a 'modern' Thai literary culture was also aided by the introduction of the first printing press in 1835 by American missionaries. The missionaries printed a range of journals and periodicals, not solely of a religious nature.⁷ Prince (later King) Mongkut installed a printing press at Wat Boworniwet while he was abbot there (from 1837-1851), and a printing press was later installed at the royal palace.

The European literary forms of the novel, the spoken dramatic play and the short story were adopted and adapted to the Thai literary environment of the day by young Thai men returning to Siam from educations in Europe. Prince (later King) Vajiravudh was one of the most high-profile conduits of Western literary customs and conventions to the Thai literary sphere. He returned from study in Europe with a strong love of Western theatre and writing, and himself wrote many plays and short stories. He also published a small, internal newspaper for his courtiers in the early 1900s. Out of this mixture, a hybrid of Western literary culture and Thai literary tradition was born: 'modern' Thai fiction,⁸ able to be popularised because of the number of printing presses installed in the country and the size of the literate Thai community.

The growth of a Thai readership and the predominantly European-style education created a demand for Thai fiction. Towards the close of the 1920s this demand began to be met with original Thai novels written by Thai novelists. Akat Damkoeng's *Lakhorn haeng chiwit*, recognised as the first Thai novel, appeared in 1929, despite the fact that Kulap Saipradit's first novel, *Luk Phuchai* [*The Son*], was published in 1928, and the months June through September 1929 saw the appearance in instalments of Dok Mai Sot's *Sattru khong Chao Lon* [*Her Enemy*].⁹ Prior to the appearance of these home-grown fictional works, the Thai reading public had had to content itself with

⁷Mattani, *Modern Thai Literature*, p. 6; Anderson & Mendiones, *In the Mirror*, p. 12.

⁸When I use the term 'modern' in reference to Thai literature or fiction, I am referring to the period after 1851, whereas when I use the term to refer to Thai women I refer to the early twentieth century process, whereby Thai women were encouraged to adopt certain cultural traits from the West to enhance their Thai femininity.

⁹Wibha, *The Genesis of the Novel in Thailand*, p. 82.

translated fiction from abroad, mainly from Europe and China.¹⁰ The fledgling cinema industry also began publishing magazines, e.g: *Phaphayon Sayam* [*Siamese Cinema*], which printed the storylines of the silent, English-language films that were being exhibited in Bangkok movie houses at the time.¹¹

Wibha Senanan, still the authority on the genre of the Thai novel, linked the phenomenon of emerging Thai literary fiction with the changing views and interests of Thai society, and the ascendancy of the new social class, that is, the Western-educated bureaucrats and politicians, rather than the royal princes of old. By 1930 there were nearly 300 Thais studying in England, the United States and France. They were a small group, but one that exercised a disproportionate amount of influence once they returned to Siam.¹² The new, non-royal social class was to gain increased power after the 1932 bloodless revolution which overthrew the absolute monarchy of Siam and replaced it with a constitutional, parliamentary democracy headed by the monarch. The revolution of 1932 was followed by a period of burgeoning literature, from which emerged the poetry of ideas and the novel of social awareness.¹³

M.C. Akat Damkoeng Raphiphat, "the father of Thai novels"

Although recognised as "the father of Thai novels",¹⁴ Akat Damkoeng represents but another link in the long line of Thai literary accomplishment dating from the formation of the first Thai kingdom of Sukhothai in the mid-fourteenth century. Akat was one of the first young writers to seize the Thai literary imagination in the early decades of this century. He wrote two novels under the pseudonym, Woraset: *Lakhorn haeng chiwit*

¹⁰Wibha, *The Genesis of the Novel in Thailand*, p. 66-68.

¹¹Wibha, *The Genesis of the Novel in Thailand*, p. 67. Scot Barmé has done more recent research on the early years of cinema in Thailand, in a PhD still in progress.

¹²John L.S. Girling, *Thailand. Society and Politics*, (Ithaca & London, Cornell University Press, 1981), p. 57.

¹³Nitaya Masavisut (ed.), *Thai PEN Anthology. Short Stories and Poems of Social Consciousness*, (Bangkok, PEN International - Thailand Center, 1984), p. 10.

¹⁴Montri Umavijani, *The Domain of Thai Literature*, (Bangkok, Prachandra, 1978), p. 2.

and *Phiew Leuang*, *Phiew Khao*, which were published in 1929 and 1930 respectively, and have since been reprinted many times. These novels were unusual in that they involved the same characters during the same period. Therefore the second novel was more a retelling of the original story from a slightly different perspective, rather than a sequel in the usual sense of the term. Akat also authored two volumes of short stories, *Wimarnthalai* [*Broken Daydreams*] and *Khrob Chakrawarn* [*The Whole Universe*]. *Wimarnthalai* was published in 1931, and *Khrob Chakrawarn* appeared posthumously.

Akat, the sixth of twelve children of Prince Rabi, Prince of Ratburi and a son of King Chulalongkorn, and Mom Orn was born on 12 November 1905.¹⁵ Akat's family enjoyed high prestige in Bangkok society, primarily due to his father's career. Prince Rabi was one of the first Thai princes sent to study in Europe in 1885, and he earned a Bachelor of Arts at Oxford University. He returned to Siam a respected member of the extended royal family, and went on to head the Ministry of Justice, as well as founding the Law School and the Bar Association.¹⁶

Like many other sons of the Thai nobility in the early decades of this century, Akat completed his secondary schooling in Bangkok, and in 1924 went to England to study law as his father had done. Akat did not pursue this plan though, and after a brief time practising his English in the United Kingdom, he moved to the United States of America to study medicine. Akat returned to Siam in 1928 without having gained a university degree, and was employed briefly by the Post Office, and later by the Department of Public Health within the Interior Ministry. It was during his time in the civil service that Akat wrote his novels and short stories. He is said to have developed an uncontrollable passion for gambling, like his mother, and it was gambling that proved to be his downfall. Akat fled Siam for Hong Kong in January 1931 to escape gambling debts. He died there at the age of 26 years, on 14 May 1932. Thai

¹⁵Chali Iamkrasin, *Mom Chao Akatdamkoeng gap ngarn praphan* [*Mom Chao Akatdamkoeng and his Work*], (Bangkok, Bammakit Press, 1976), p. 19.

¹⁶Chula Chakrabongse, *Lords of Life*, p. 240, 340; Chali, *Mom Chao Akatdamkoeng*, p.17.

newspapers at the time reported that he had died of malaria, although Chali stated that many of Akat's friends and acquaintances found this difficult to believe. Rather, they suspected that he had "escaped from the world", possibly from his gambling debts.¹⁷ Recent research by Orrasom Sutthisakorn confirms this suspicion, concluding that Akat suicided in Hong Kong.¹⁸

Schweisguth, in a general study of the development of Thai literature, stated that there was nothing particularly notable about Akat's writing style, or the way in which he composed his novels, but rather he was noteworthy "because he is the first modern Thai novelist".¹⁹ Mattani made similar comments on Akat's writing style, concluding that his use of "overly romantic cliches" and his "awkward English-Thai language structure" did not distinguish him as the most exemplary of creative writers.²⁰ More recently Marcel Barang, while introducing *Lakhorn haeng chiwit* to an English readership in 1994, praised Akat's writing for its "astonishingly modern, simple and direct" style.²¹ More importantly in my opinion, as Mattani has stated, Akat's two novels brought to attention "racial and social conflicts among the Western-educated Thais who came in contact with the Western way of life and value system."²²

Akat's novels, *Lakhorn haeng chiwit* and *Phiew Leuang, Phiew Khao*, published only two and three years respectively before the end of the absolute monarchy, offer telling insights into Thai efforts to come to terms with the increasing contact with Europeans and the emerging power relations between the two regions during this period.

Although the threat of European colonisation and colonial influence from England,

¹⁷Chali, *Mom Chao Akatdamkoeng*, p. 25.

¹⁸Orrasom Sutthisakorn, *Lakhorn chiwit chao chai nak praphan, bueang lang jark chiwit khong Mom Chao Akatdamkoeng Rapiphat* [*The Circus of Life of a Princely Writer, Prince Akatdamkoeng Rapiphat's Life Behind the Scenes*] (1987), as cited by Marcel Barang in the 'Preface' to Akat Damkeung Rapheephat, *The circus of life*, (translated by Phongdeit Jiangphattanarkit)(Bangkok, Thai Modern Classics, 1994), p. 17.

¹⁹P. Schweisguth, *Etude sur la litterature siamoise*, (Paris, 1950), p. 363.

²⁰Mattani Rutnin, 'Modern Thai Literature', *East Asian Cultural Studies*, vol. 17, nos. 1-4, March 1978, p. 31.

²¹Barang, 'Preface', p. 8.

²²Mattani, 'Modern Thai Literature', p. 31.

France and the United States of America, in particular, was gradually receding in the early decades of this century, a colonisation of consciousness had taken place, with Siamese royalty and later the military rulers of Thailand portraying European ways more and more often as being 'modern' and 'civilised', and a standard to which Thai people should aspire.²³ Some young Thai men, educated and influenced by their education in Europe and/or the United States, fictionalised their experiences and thoughts on European ideas and modes of living in novels and short stories, the 'modern' literary forms of the day. Relations between Thais and Europeans were played out in such fictions, and not surprisingly the matter of mixed-race marriage was much addressed.

Barang suggested that the popularity of *Lakhorn haeng chiwit* in 1929 Bangkok was based on its scandalous subject matter, the fact that it crystallised the concerns of the time so well, both those that were openly discussed and those that lurked in the collective psyche, and because it was an early Western-styled, literary masterpiece. He also claimed:

Although not an outright political novel, *The circus of life* [sic] denounced the evils of polygamy, arranged marriage and interracial marriage - by far the dominant bones of contention among the young generation then and prevailing themes in Thai literature for years to come.²⁴

As such, *Lakhorn haeng chiwit* is a good place to start an examination of Thai responses to the social and cultural environment of the West. The novel's concerns were resonant with those of its readers, unlike the subject matter of classical Thai literature, which was often lyrical in quality, and concentrated on the beauty of language and imagery (both aural and conceptual), rather than on the originality or

²³Terweil discussed General Phibun's cultural mandates of 1939, which proscribed ways for Thai people to behave in their private and daily lives. Terweil, *A History of Modern Thailand*, p. 343-344.

²⁴Barang, 'Preface', p. 12.

profundity of the message or story. Akat's portrayal of white European women in his novels reveals one early twentieth century Thai view of European women. His portrayals were important, having the power to influence readers' opinions of European women, offering an acquaintance with them in the absence of actual contact.

Fictional characters provided Akat (and to a lesser extent, Kukrit Pramoj) with a way of debating the advantages and disadvantages of white European women in the lives of Thai people, especially Thai men, both overseas and in Siam. Significantly, the white female characters tended to be celebrated in their home environments in Europe, where they were seen to act with social freedom, autonomy and independence, but were regarded as potential problems in Siam, where they might not get along with their husband's Thai family, nor adapt to Thai ways of living and behaving, nor feel at home and instead hanker to return to Europe.

It was in the early decades of the twentieth century that middle-class, educated, socially privileged women in the West were recreating themselves as 'new' or 'modern' women. They were demanding the right to vote in England and the United States,²⁵ demanding increased access to the professions and higher education, as well as shunning long, voluminous dresses in favour of knee-length sheaths. Female behaviour of this sort appeared exciting, 'modern' and desirable to young Thai men studying in Europe. They saw middle and upper-class white European women exercising not only the financial and physical autonomy of their Thai sisters, but a social autonomy relatively free from their families.

As noted in chapter one, anthropologists and historians of Thailand, and Southeast Asia in general, have commented on the freedom Thai women were seen to enjoy to

²⁵Women aged over 30 were enfranchised in England in 1918, a right which was extended to all Englishwomen in 1928. American women were enfranchised in 1920. See Johanna Alberti's *Beyond Suffrage. Feminists in War and Peace, 1914-28*, (London, Macmillan, 1989), for a discussion of suffragist actions in Britain during this period.

conduct their own businesses in the market place, to own and control their own money, and to move freely around towns and villages. However, 'freedoms' of this nature were extended to women because they were in the realm of worldly life, rather than the more highly valued spiritual realm. Despite their financial and physical freedoms Thai women, whether mothers, wives or daughters, rarely strayed far from the family home, because they were largely dependent on their menfolk for the accumulation of spiritual merit, an important factor in their lives as Buddhists.²⁶

European women, models of 'modernity' to young Thai men, appeared able to decide the course of their own lives, independent of their families. They were out in the world, working, studying, and more importantly travelling at home and abroad, fending for themselves without the protective shield of their parents. However, marrying and bringing a white European woman back to Siam from abroad was regarded as laden with potential difficulties, and was not encouraged by authors such as Akat Damkoeng or Kukrit Pramoj, nor by the Thai families sending their sons overseas for education, most notably the Thai royal family.

On the same topic, Thamora Fishel remarked that, paradoxically, while Western women were not portrayed as suitable partners for young Thai men studying abroad, "ideal women" in Thai novels of the early twentieth century continued "to have thoroughly Westernized characteristics",²⁷ suggesting that the ideal woman was actually a hybrid of Siam and the West. The ideal woman was consistently portrayed as a Thai woman displaying European characteristics of personal independence, rather than a European woman who had adapted to the social and cultural ways of Siam.

The ideal women characters appearing in the novels of this period were the models for the 'modern' woman of Siam, a woman who was informed about the world, and lived

²⁶See chapter one, pages 14-15, for a fuller discussion of these points.

²⁷Thamora Fishel, "Nationalism and Sexuality in Thailand, 1910-1925", unpublished paper, 7 June 1993, p. 31.

her life with a degree of independence, while still retaining her training in Thai grace and hospitality, and deferring to the important male figures in her life, most significantly, her father and her husband. Of course, the majority of young white European women also deferred to their fathers and husbands, but this was less readily apparent to the gaze of young Thai students newly arrived in a different country and culture.

Akat attempts to create an ideal female character for his readers, but ultimately offers only a stereotypical and shallow portrayal of a 'modern' Thai woman. Kukrit, on the other hand, grounds himself firmly in the past by offering his central character, Mae Ploi, as the ideal woman, a woman possessing the traditional, courtly Thai skills and graces of a bygone era. In comparison, he discards Lucille, the French wife, as irrelevant to the scheme of life and offering little of worth to the traditional Thai way of life.

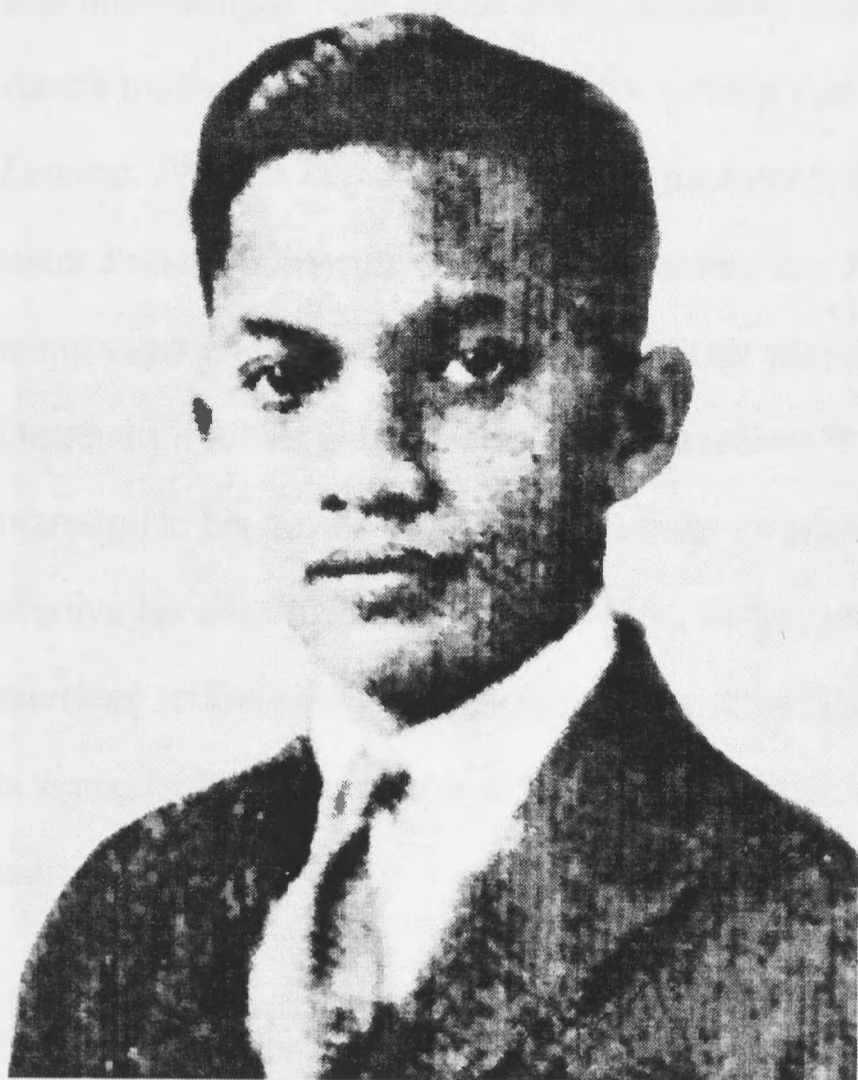
The autobiographical style of Akat's novels especially impressed Thai readers, and there was much debate in Siam about just how autobiographical they were. This incident recalled the earlier confusion in 'modern' Thai literature between autobiographical fiction and real life, illustrated by the first instalment of a story called *Sanuk Neuk* [*Fun Thinking*], and published in 1886 in *Wachirayan Wiset*, a journal edited by a small group of Thai princes. *Sanuk Neuk*, written by Prince Phichitprichakon, told the story of a fictional conversation between four young monks at Wat Boworniwet who were about to leave the monkhood. The realistic nature of the fictional conversation was too much for the elite Thai reading public in 1886. The abbot of Wat Boworniwet petitioned the king to request that no more of the story be published, as its subject matter had the potential to be damaging to the cause of Buddhism. *Wachirayan Wiset* complied with the king's request on behalf of the abbot, and *Sanuk Neuk* came to an end after only one episode. The problem of how closely fiction can or should resemble real life, however, is an ongoing one in Thai literature.

It cannot be denied that both *Lakhorn haeng chiwit* and *Phiew Leuang, Phiew Khao* are, in essence, very autobiographical novels by the young Akat. The life of the novels' principal character, Wisut Supalak na Ayutthaya, parallels that of Akat's to a remarkable extent. Akat explained in the forward to *Phiew Leuang, Phiew Khao* that although there were similarities between himself and Wisut, they were not the same person. *Lakhorn haeng chiwit* was a work of fiction, a product of his thoughts and dreams. If there was a striking similarity between his own experiences and those of Wisut, it was because he had written about things with which he was most familiar.

As the story of *Lakhorn haeng chiwit* unfolds, Wisut travels to England as a young man to study law, but ends up seduced by the newspaper business and a beautiful young English/Italian journalist called Maria Grey. This parallels Akat's life to a certain extent, in that he was sent to England to study law, and later while in America fell in love with Maria Vanzini (who is also quite possibly of Italian parentage). The appearance of a photograph of Maria Vanzini at the beginning of the novel *Lakhorn haeng chiwit*, which Akat dedicated to her, "was too much for the Thai readers", according to Montri Umavijani, and they immediately identified the character Maria Grey as being the fictional equivalent of Maria Vanzini.²⁸

Responding to the allegation that the novel was not fiction but rather an in-depth exposé of his life and that of his family, Akat also felt it necessary to explain in the forward to *Phiew Leuang, Phiew Khao* that his family had not distanced themselves from him after the publication of the first novel. He argued that his family appreciated that his novel was a work of fiction and not an intimate revelation of his familial relations.

²⁸Montri, *The Domain of Thai Literature*, p. 11.



M. C. Akat Damkoeng and
the woman to whom he
dedicated his novel,
Lakhorn haeng chiwit,
Maria Vanzini.



It is interesting to note at this point, however, that there is another angle from which Akat's motivations and inspiration for writing *Lakhorn haeng chiwit* and *Phiew Leuang, Phiew Khao* may have been questioned, but appear not to have been. Akat's sister Princess Chavalit, two years his elder, was Prince Chakrabongse's mistress for many years and it was their relationship that played a significant role in Katherine Desnitsky's subsequent divorce from the prince.²⁹ Akat's opposition to mixed race marriage in his novels may well have been an attempt, albeit an unconscious one, to absolve his sister from any responsibility in the termination of Prince Chakrabongse's marriage to Desnitsky. If this is the case, then Akat could have had a personal stake in bringing before Thai people the potential difficulties in mixed race and cross cultural marriage.

Gender and race in Akat's novels

Both of Akat's novels are rich sources of representations and ideas about race, gender and class. Akat pays particular attention to women, Thai, European and in *Phiew Leuang, Phiew Khao*, also Indian women. Interestingly, it is the European women who dominate in the novels, both in numbers and the amount of text devoted to them. Not surprisingly, Akat introduces the reader initially to some important Thai women in Wisut's life, but they are quite stereotypical in their representation. We meet Wisut's mother, his best friend Pradit's younger sister, Lumjuan, as well as his childhood friend, a Thai/Chinese girl called Bunhiang.

Bunhiang, a small, intelligent and talkative Chinese girl, is a childhood playmate, but we learn little of her apart from the fact that her family are poor and she must work, while Wisut is from a privileged family and so is able to go to school. Likewise, the

²⁹Chali reproduces a family tree of the Raphiphat family, which lists Princess Chavalit as being born in 1903. Chali, *Mom Chao Akatdamkoeng*, p. 19. This information corresponds with Eileen Hunter's study, which mentions that Princess Chavalit, the daughter of Prince Rabi (an abbreviation of Raphiphat) Prince Chakrabongse's half-brother, was 15 years old in 1918. Eileen Hunter, *Katya and the Prince of Siam*, p. 140, 144.

reader learns little about Wisut's mother, although she lurks in the background of the early chapters of *Lakhorn haeng chiwit* and we gather that she is not a happy woman. She married Wisut's father, a senior bureaucrat in the Ministry of the Interior, but their marriage turned sour and her husband was keen to find a new, younger wife.³⁰

The reader learns more about Lumjuan, the younger sister of Wisut's close school friend, Pradit. As teenagers in Thonburi (effectively a Bangkok suburb on the right bank of the Chao Phraya river), the three of them spent a lot of time together, and Wisut described his relationship to Lumjuan as being one of brother and sister. There is also a suggestion that she is a childhood sweetheart, Wisut describing her as:

... one of the most beautiful young ladies I had ever met. She had a soft white complexion, a beautiful oval face with big eyes at once coy and sharp, and long hair rolled in a rather pretty bun.³¹

Wisut noted on their first meeting that she was modest and demure in her demeanour,³² desirable qualities in a well-bred Thai girl, and that she wore a *pasin* [a Lao-style, hand-woven, wrap-around skirt] rather than the traditional *panung* [wrap-around knee-length pants favoured by the older generation], an indication of her modernity. Despite the platonic nature of their friendship, Wisut was very upset when Lumjuan fell for Kamon, a Thai student recently returned from England. As Lumjuan's relationship with Kamon developed, Wisut felt abandoned.³³ On his return from overseas, Wisut meets up with Lumjuan again. She looked older, he notes, and has two children from her marriage to Kamon. Wisut assessed that seven years of marriage had moulded her into a "modern woman", and although he is stunned to learn

³⁰Akat, *Lakhorn haeng chiwit*, p. 45.

³¹Akat, *The circus of life*, p. 48.

³²Akat, *Lakhorn haeng chiwit*, p. 41.

³³Akat, *Lakhorn haeng chiwit*, p.79.

that Kamon has just died, Wisut expects that, true to the modern woman that she is, "she will probably marry quite soon ... for the second time!"³⁴

Lumjuan plays an important role in the novels because she is the Thai ideal against whom all the subsequent, and predominantly white European, women are measured. We are also introduced to Jurai Suwanwanit, a young Thai medical student whom Wisut meets in the United States. She is quite Westernised, as she has lived in America for over half her life, and therefore is a cultural hybrid of sorts, exhibiting both Thai and American mannerisms and ways of thinking. Wisut described Jurai as "pale, beautiful and free" in Thai,³⁵ and as "beautiful and unattached" in Phongdeit's English translation,³⁶ both descriptions suggesting that Wisut was attracted to her as a possible marriage partner. However, despite their mutual attraction, Wisut is unable to shake his affection for the English/Italian Maria Grey.

White European women in Akat's novels

Akat's treatment of the white European women in the text differs quite starkly from the way he portrays the Thai women characters. The reader meets a far greater diversity of European women, and they are less caricatured. Akat treats the reader to many delightful characters residing in England, France and the United States of America. They vary in age, social class, beauty and their relationships to Wisut. There are young sisterly types (Stephanie Andrew), mother figures (Mrs Andrew), landladies (Mrs Frindriss³⁷ and Mrs Harris³⁸), true loves (Maria Grey), colleagues (Lady Moira Dunn), friends (Lady Humphrey and her divorced daughter Polly Derword), Parisian bargirls (Odette and Yvonne), casual lovers (the Hungarian countess he meets in Monte

³⁴Akat, *Lakhorn haeng chiwit*, p. 410.

³⁵Akat, *Lakhorn haeng chiwit*, p. 349.

³⁶Akat, *The circus of life*, p. 220.

³⁷Akat, *Lakhorn haeng chiwit*, p. 189.

³⁸Akat, *Lakhorn haeng chiwit*, p. 201.

Carlo)³⁹ and the friends of his Thai acquaintances in London (for example, Kathleen Miles,⁴⁰ and sisters Frida and Irene Steel).

Despite the variety of characters, Akat is a little repetitive in his descriptions of some European women. For example, eleven-year-old Stephanie Andrew "had a creamy-white, oval face with sparkling blue eyes, rosy cheeks and a well-shaped mouth and nose ... [and] curly blond hair that flowed down to her waist",⁴¹ while teenager Kathleen Miles was "pretty, had golden hair and blue eyes and looked like a doll".⁴² A third woman, Frida Steel, is described as tall, with golden hair and pale blue eyes.⁴³

Maria Grey, the love of Wisut's life, is undoubtedly the focal female character for the length of *Lakhorn haeng chiwit*, although in *Phiew Leuang, Phiew Khao* she must share the limelight with a new character, the Indian noblewoman Aruyah (discussed later). She and her work colleague Lady Moira Dunn are morally respectable, unmarried, middle-class Englishwomen who work as journalists on *The London Times*. Maria names Wisut "Bobby" in memory of her older brother who died in World War One, and for the remainder of the two novels Wisut is referred to by this new, adopted, English name. Even Jurai calls him Bobby on one occasion, a rather odd slippage given that she is Thai and calls him Wisut on all other occasions.⁴⁴

According to Wisut/Bobby, Maria was a beautiful young woman, a trait shared by nearly all women he met in Europe. He described her thus:

³⁹Akat, *Lakhorn haeng chiwit*, p. 306-308.

⁴⁰Akat, *Lakhorn haeng chiwit*, p. 191.

⁴¹Akat, *The circus of life*, p. 95.

⁴²Akat, *The circus of life*, p. 135.

⁴³Akat, *Phiew Leuang, Phiew Khao*, p. 37.

⁴⁴Akat, *Lakhorn haeng chiwit*, p. 378; Akat, *The circus of life*, p. 237.

Though she was a bit plump, she was indeed beautiful and charming. Her eyes were black and large and shone brightly. She had a fairly long nose and healthy skin and was dressed conservatively.⁴⁵

Maria and Wisut were immediately attracted, and within four days of their first meeting they have confessed their love for one another. These confessions, not surprisingly, are initiated by Maria, the liberated Western woman, rather than by Wisut, the timid Thai schoolboy. The two hold hands, take early morning walks alone together on the beach, and pledge to always love each other. Maria tells her Bobby:

...time and duty may force us to be apart from each other but love will bind our hearts together forever.⁴⁶

Wisut appears quite beside himself with excitement and happiness as he tells the reader he is overjoyed because a woman loves him and she is "of a different nationality, of a different language and a different skin colour" [*Tang chart, tang phasa, tang phiew*].⁴⁷ Maria is portrayed as financially independent, morally scrupulous, endlessly patient and devoted in her love for Wisut. And although she keeps asking Wisut throughout the course of the two novels when they are going to get married, she does not display anger when they do not. They disagree occasionally, have the odd fight, but on the whole their relationship is very civilised, very reserved.

The pitfalls of a mixed race relationship become apparent before long, and Lady Moira Dunn was the first person to voice her dissatisfaction at the intimate nature of Wisut and Maria's friendship. Ten years Maria's senior, Lady Moira was an impressive character, and Wisut was in awe of her career and intellect, recounting:

⁴⁵Akart, *The circus of life*, p. 104.

⁴⁶Akart, *The circus of life*, p. 119.

⁴⁷Akat, *Lakhorn haeng chiwit*, p. 164.

Lady Moira Dunn was not merely a citizen of England or of any particular country; she was a citizen of the world and her thoughts were of the world.⁴⁸

Lady Moira was fiercely protective of Maria, acting as her personal and professional guardian of sorts. As soon as she became aware that Maria and Wisut were attracted to one another, she warned Wisut off continuing the relationship and asked that he never visit them in London. Her motivation was that she did not want to see Maria hurt. She had previous experience of mixed race marriages which had ended tragically, she informed Wisut.

I had a relative who married an Indian prince four years ago. She committed suicide about six months ago. A few weeks before her death, she wrote me a letter telling me what she was going through. But, oh, Bobby, I can't tell you what she wrote. It was too sad.⁴⁹

Paradoxically, Lady Moira also convinced Wisut to become a journalist rather than a law student as he had intended in England. By becoming a journalist and working for the same newspaper as Lady Moira and Maria Grey, of course there were going to be many opportunities for Wisut and Maria to meet. Lady Moira's role in their affair is thus rather ambiguous.

Remarkably, Maria and Wisut's love for each other survives the course of the two novels, a period of several years, despite or perhaps because of its unconsummated nature and Wisut's resignation to its cultural impracticality. Barang notes in his review of *Lakhorn haeng chiwit* that the unconsummated relationship between Wisut and Maria proved to be a crowd-pleaser with both Thai and European readers, because it

⁴⁸Akart, *The circus of life*, p. 112.

⁴⁹Akart, *The circus of life*, p. 125.

avoided confronting the matter of miscegenation head-on by allowing the relationship to continue on a pure, virginal and doomed basis.⁵⁰

But although Wisut's relationship with the respectable Maria Grey was unconsummated, he had several other more transient liaisons with European women. Wisut justified these liaisons by the fact that Maria had stated she wanted him to be "free" as he travelled around Europe, and not to wait for her. Wisut took advantage of this "freedom", a little to Maria's dismay, having passing sexual relationships with a bargirl in Paris and an adulterous Hungarian countess in Monte Carlo. These women no doubt provide a moral contrast to the more conservative and respectable Maria and Lady Moira.

During a stay of several months in Paris, Wisut indulged in a casual relationship with a young Frenchwoman, Odette. That she was French and not English may well have been so as not to upset the sensibilities of English people to whom Akat obviously became quite close during the short time he spent in England. Even Wisut noted that he did not go out with prostitutes in London out of respect for his English 'parents', the Andrew family. Moreover, he had heard that there was a very strong strain of incurable venereal disease circulating in London!⁵¹

Odette, who Wisut met in a Parisian café, was described as having "the most beautiful figure of all the light women [*phuak ying nak sa-port*] in Paris. She had black hair and dark eyes, was rather tall, had an oval face and a sweet voice."⁵² On their first encounter, Wisut had been surprised that she did not mention the matter of money. When he handed her a 200F note at the end of the evening, she had exclaimed that she "was not that kind of girl".⁵³ Notwithstanding this, she moved into the flat Wisut was

⁵⁰Barang, 'Preface', p. 13.

⁵¹Akat, *Lakhorn haeng chiwit*, p. 208.

⁵²Akat, *The circus of life*, p. 180; Akat, *Lakhorn haeng chiwit*, p. 275.

⁵³Akat, *Lakhorn haeng chiwit*, p. 277.

sharing with newspaper colleague Arnold Barrington four days later. Arnold already had a live-in lover/housekeeper, another bargirl named Yvonne. She had moved in on their first date. This occurrence no doubt confirmed for Wisut that his was standard bachelor behaviour in Paris. After all, Wisut told the reader that Arnold was one of the nicest Englishmen one could ever hope to meet. And Arnold had suggested that if Odette came to stay, she would be able to keep his "wife" (as they called the women) company during the day while the men were at work.⁵⁴

Wisut was at pains to explain to the reader that Odette was not just any bargirl, but a very nice one with good manners, who could cook and clean. She served Wisut well until he left Paris to travel on to Monte Carlo, where he had an affair with a flirtatious Hungarian countess. With his departure from Paris, the arrangement with Odette ceased. When he returned to Paris several months later and enquired about her at the bar where they had first met, he was told that she had died.⁵⁵ This was untrue, but it signalled that she no longer wanted any contact with him.

When the respectable Maria Grey and Lady Moira Dunn visited Wisut unexpectedly in Paris, he was a little shy of them knowing of the arrangement with Odette. For their part, the Englishwomen discreetly acknowledged the situation, and although they did not approve, neither did they protest. In fact, Akat presented the situation of taking Odette and Yvonne to be temporary wives as a very understandable thing for young bachelors to do in Paris, and thus as unreasonable for the Englishwomen to object. Maria was jealous, though, and made this clear by way of snide comments later in the novel that she was glad Wisut could distinguish between the cheap French perfume worn by Odette and Yvonne, and her own perfume, *Mon boudoir*.⁵⁶

⁵⁴Akat, *Lakhorn haeng chiwit*, p. 280.

⁵⁵Akat, *Lakhorn haeng chiwit*, p. 312.

⁵⁶Akat, *Lakhorn haeng chiwit*, p. 315.

The argument against mixed race marriage

Small-time rivalry between Maria and the French bargirls makes way for full-blooded racism in *PhiewLeuang, Phiew Khao*, the second of Akat's two novels, which is a retake of *Lakhorn haeng chiwit* from a different and more didactic line. In *Lakhorn haeng chiwit* the matter of race was never addressed directly, and although Wisut's recurring prejudice against South Asian people emerges, this was not focal to the novel.

In *PhiewLeuang, Phiew Khao* matters of differing races and cultures come to the fore, and in many ways Akat's use of 'race', as in the novel's title, appears to be interchangeable with 'culture'. The problems and reservations Akat's characters face are as much about the different cultures in which they have been raised as they are about the colour of their skins. In fact, the colour of their skins serves as a useful marker of their cultural difference, rather than any other purpose.

Akat introduces the readers to a new character, Aruyah, an Indian princess, born and bred in England to aristocratic Indian exiles. Akat uses the character of Aruyah to present an argument about why the Eastern and Western peoples are destined always to be separate, which Aruyah does by way of her strong ideological stance on matters of colonialism, independence, equality and racism. In particular, Aruyah's analysis of relations between the English and Asians helps to reinforce Wisut's 'responsible' decision that he and Maria cannot marry because of their racial difference.

Ironically, Aruyah helps to justify Wisut's stance in relation to Maria by constantly emphasising the similarities between herself and Wisut as Asian people living in England. Wisut has never before considered himself to be at all similar to Indians, whom he has looked down upon and towards whom he has been openly hostile and untrusting. When Wisut left Siam for Singapore and then Marseilles, he told us of the

mixed race people in Penang and Singapore, and the miserable and wretched appearance of South Asian labourers on the wharves in Colombo. The prejudice against Indians is again taken up in England, when Wisut claimed that the many Indian students boarding in Mrs Frindriss' boarding house were all Bolsheviks and untrustworthy. Captain Andrew, who had served in India for a period of time, agreed with Wisut's opinion of the situation, and affirmed that there were no good Indians to be found in England. He advised Wisut that if he wanted to meet a decent Indian he would have to travel to Delhi, Bombay or Madras.

Aruyah discloses her opinions about race matters to Wisut because, as she sees it, they are in the same situation. They are both "yellow skins" as the book's title suggests, and they are both subject to the same treatment by English people. According to Aruyah, they are accepted by the English on the surface, but at heart they are not treated as equals. Her political arguments and colonial analysis enable Wisut to see English people and life in England in another light, but he never actually agrees with what she has to say. He feels that she is being too harsh on her friends, in particular, and reminds her that they both owe gratitude to the many English people who have helped them.

Aruyah, however, does not back down from her criticism of the English. She argues that through their colonial exploits, often misrepresented by the English version of history, one can see the real nature of the English people. She is convinced that the English do not consider people of colour (i.e., anyone who is not 'white' and European) to be their equals, and warns that for this reason they will not seriously consider marrying a person of another race. This is the line of argument used by Aruyah to predict that contrary to Wisut's assumptions, English attitudes to racial difference will prevent the marriage of the Thai student Prince Woraphraphan, and the lively and wealthy Irene Steel.

Aruyah predicts that although Woraphraphan is in love with Irene, and the pair are attracted to one another, Irene would never consider marrying a man who was a "foreigner, a negro, an Asian".⁵⁷ Aruyah's opinion, which Wisut finds extreme at first, is proven correct. Irene is overheard speaking to her English lover Jerome, denying that she ever loved anyone else, and assuring him that she sees nothing in Woraphraphan apart from an innocent friendship. She did not even suspect that Woraphraphan would dare to love her, given their racial difference.⁵⁸ It is shattering news for Woraphraphan, and a revelation for Wisut about the depth of feeling regarding race relations in England.

Despite Wisut finding Aruyah's assessment of race relations and discrimination in England hard to accept, he sticks to his resolve that he and Maria cannot marry because of their racial difference. In the earlier novel, Wisut explains to Maria that their love is forbidden [*rak ti mai mi sitth*].⁵⁹ When Maria questions him as to what he means, he replies:

... you are European, living in a cold country with certain customs. I am Thai, I come from a very warm country with other customs - very different from yours. You would not be able to get along with my relatives and friends in Siam and - I am poor, Maria. Where would you find happiness?⁶⁰

These sentiments are more strongly developed in the second novel, where Akat goes into much greater detail about the possible outcomes of relations between the races. His basic premise is that although people of different race can live together, work together, study together and even love one another, they should not marry, or even contemplate marriage, because only heartache will follow.

⁵⁷Akat, *PhiewLeuang, Phiew Khao*, p. 118.

⁵⁸Akat, *PhiewLeuang, Phiew Khao*, p. 131.

⁵⁹Akat, *Lakhorn haeng chiwit*, p. 161.

⁶⁰Akart, *The circus of life*, p. 119.

Wisut states repeatedly that he is a poor nobody in Siam and as such, will not be able to make Maria's life as happy as he thinks she deserves, thus deflecting his class difference into one of racial difference. Maria pleads with Wisut to stay in Europe with her where they can be together, and when he leaves she follows him - to New York, Tokyo and on to Shanghai. In Shanghai Maria and Wisut say their final farewells. Maria must return by ship to the United States; Wisut is soon returning to Siam. It is a sad, tearful farewell, but one that Akat has given the reader to expect. Wisut has claimed from the start that unless he was prepared to remain in Europe as a journalist, he could not spend his life with Maria. And because he is Thai and not European, he feels that he must at some point return to live in Siam. Wisut justifies this impossible, tragic situation as being caused by the fact that there is much suffering and sadness in his life, this is his fate, and it would be unfair to ask Maria to share his fate with him.

Maria has expressed much earlier in the novel quite different sentiments, when she says:

I know that this world is full of mercy for the two of us. God will not allow us to feel hurt.⁶¹

And again later:

We must be separate but we won't be parted forever, Bobby. God, the world, life itself can't be so cruel. We'll certainly meet each other again, to love and stay together like this. Maybe you'll get bored in Siam after a while and want

⁶¹Akat, *The circus of life*, p. 119.

to meet us again and go back to the journalistic life you used to enjoy so much, Bobby.⁶²

Wisut's reluctance to enter into a mixed race marriage is also based on his concerns about the way any of their future mixed race children may be treated, a sentiment echoed by Sir Percival Humphrey, an antique dealer friend of Wisut's. As Wisut recounts, Sir Percival had expressed his opinion that marriage between Wisut and Maria "would not be proper".⁶³ Sir Percival warned Wisut not to take Maria to Bangkok because her presence will create a hassle, or as Phongdeit translates, "or else you'll be in a pickle".⁶⁴ Wisut relates Sir Percival's views to the reader:

Maria was a European; I was just a poor Thai citizen, and I should be concerned as well about the fate of our future progeny. Think of the terrible situation of half-caste children [*phuak khreung chart*] in Singapore and Penang! Foreigners there were narrow-minded and hated half-castes. It would be alright if I had title or wealth, but as I was an ordinary man, so it would not be wise to let my fancy run ahead of me. Sir Percival urged me to consider Maria's happiness and that of the children that would be born from our union.⁶⁵

Many characters throughout *Phiew Leuang, Phiew Khao* state their beliefs about mixed race marriage. Wisut himself believes that white blood and yellow blood do not mix well together.⁶⁶ He says to Prince Woraphraphan that both he and Maria have travelled a lot in their chosen field of journalism, and they have seen enough to know that even if they married, they would not be happy.⁶⁷ At one point, he confides that his relationship with Maria is not one of "true love" but rather one saddled with the burden

⁶²Akart, *The circus of life*, p. 244.

⁶³Akart, *The circus of life*, p. 230.

⁶⁴Akart, *The circus of life*, p. 245.

⁶⁵Akart, *The circus of life*, p. 230.

⁶⁶Akat, *Phiew Leuang, Phiew Khao*, p. 47.

⁶⁷Akat, *Phiew Leuang, Phiew Khao*, p. 67.

of being an interracial relationship.⁶⁸ Wisut warns Woraphraphan that the blood of different races cannot mix "closely" or perhaps "well enough".⁶⁹ Aruyah declares that nature does not want the races to mix,⁷⁰ although this may be sour grapes at the failure of a relationship between her and a young Englishman. Irene Steel's mother believes that while Westerners and Asians can be friends, if they marry they will only meet with disappointment.⁷¹ These several concurring voices ensure that there is a lot of support for Wisut's decision not to enter into a mixed race marriage with Maria, thus clearly linking the line of moral argument in the narrative of the two novels.

The dilemma of Maria's happiness is left uncertain at the end of *Lakhorn haeng chiwit*, but is resolved in *Phiew Leuang, Phiew Khao*, when Akat reveals that she has married a German businessman some months after Wisut's return to Siam. This somehow sidesteps the 'problem' of intermarriage with the English, for it must be remembered that Maria is half Italian, and that her skin colour is "only slightly paler than Wisut".⁷² She writes to Wisut, informing him that she now has a child and assuring him that her husband is very kind and has made her very happy.

In contrast, the mixed race relationship between An and Lucille which featured in Kukrit Pramoj's *Si Phaendin* discussed in the previous chapter, differed from the mixed-race relationships in Akat's two novels (Wisut and Maria, Woraphraphan and Irene) only in that their love was consummated and a marriage eventuated. Yet in Akat's novels the possibility of love and compatibility across racial and cultural lines is entertained but ultimately dismissed as unworkable.

⁶⁸"*Reuang khong rao mai dai kio kap khwam rak ti taa ching ... tae kio kap reuang phiew leuang phiew khao*", Akat, *Phiew Leuang, Phiew Khao*, p.54.

⁶⁹"*Rao mai cheua wa, leuad khong phiew khao lae phiew leuang ja phasom kan dai sanit lae pen suk mahk nak*", Akat, *Phiew Leuang, Phiew Khao*, p. 68.

⁷⁰Akat, *Phiew Leuang, Phiew Khao*, p. 119.

⁷¹Akat, *Phiew Leuang, Phiew Khao*, p. 100.

⁷²Akat, *Phiew Leuang, Phiew Khao*, p. 162.

However, not all interracial relationships in Akat's novels were marred by colour distinctions and concerns. Wisut confesses that race was never an issue between him and his work colleague and flatmate Arnold Barrington.⁷³ He never thought about who was white and who was yellow in his close friendship with Arnold. But it is fair to point out that they were also of the same sex, and therefore were not in any danger of producing mixed race offspring. Much the same could be said of Prince Vajiravudh, who by all accounts, led a very full homosexual life while studying in England. Although the Thai court was concerned about the royal dynastic line in Vajiravudh's case, their concern was more about whether there would be a dynastic line, rather than whether it would be of mixed race. Therefore, because the male-to-male friendships and relationships of both the fictional Wisut and the real-life Vajiravudh did not have the potential to leave a trail of mixed race human beings for generations to come, they were regarded as unproblematic. It therefore emerges that gender was a major factor in the viability and success of mixed race friendships and relationships.

The incidence of mixed race marriages in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Siam brought to the fore contemporary concerns about racial hierarchy and racial purity. The late nineteenth century Thai sliding scale of racial difference was applied to mixed ethnicity and/or race marriages, with Chinese and Mons considered as quite similar to the Thais and therefore not posing a threat to Thai identity.⁷⁴ Europeans, however, were considered very different to the Thais in every way (looks, religion, habits, customs, manners, smell). Europeans had the added stigma of coming from colonising nations in the Southeast Asian region and beyond, who did not necessarily regard local people as their equals. As such, marriage with Europeans was frowned upon.

⁷³Akat, *Phiew Leuang, Phiew Khao*, p.19.

⁷⁴There was a strong anti-Chinese sentiment apparent in Siam in the early decades of this century, when they were referred to in political writings as 'the Jews of the East'.

On the whole, unions of Thai women with European men seemed to be more tolerated by both the Thai and European communities, than marriages between Thai men and European women. This is possibly because the latter tended to involve people of higher social rank. While Europeans were somewhat puzzled by the fact that a white European woman could be attracted to Thai man, they were not scandalised in the same way as if she had been attracted to a local man in Africa or Papua New Guinea, for example. Thais, for their part, warned of the difficulties to be expected from marrying a white woman, drawing her away from her own culture and into the Thai domestic, family environment.

Mattani noted twenty years ago that although Thai people appeared very accepting of interracial marriage in general, they were in fact, strongly prejudiced against it.⁷⁵ She claimed:

This fashion of intermarriage with *farangs* among the Western-educated was a phenomenon that has created many social problems up to the present - maladjustment, incompatibility, unsuitability, and frustration. In most cases, the intermarriages do not succeed and the Eurasian children suffer from lack of identity.⁷⁶

Thais feared that white European women would bring their mixed race, half-Thai children up to be ignorant of their proud Thai roots, and that as a result they would suffer from lack of identity. Europeans seemed more afraid that a white European woman's preference for an Asian husband indicated that there was something wrong with her, that she was not who she claimed to be, that she could not be a *genuine* white woman and still prefer an Asian husband to a white, European man.⁷⁷ Such fears

⁷⁵Mattani, *Modern Thai Literature*, p. 98.

⁷⁶Mattani, *Modern Thai Literature*, p. 97.

⁷⁷See Stoler's argument in 'Mixed Bloods and the cultural politics of European identity in colonial Southeast Asia'.

echoed those present in the highly politicised debate about race and *métissage* Stoler examined in turn of the century French Indochina and the Netherlands Indies.

As previously stated, Stoler claimed that debates about miscegenation, although couched in terms of race, often hinted at class distinctions, gender prescriptions and cultural knowledge, as well as 'racial membership'.⁷⁸ Stoler discussed the Netherlands Indies' Pauperism Commission's fears of a poor white class developing in the colonies as a result of mixed race cohabitation, thus detracting from the image of European wealth, 'civilisation' and superiority,⁷⁹ and it is curious to wonder if Akat's character, Wisut, may have entertained similar considerations when contemplating marriage with his English/Italian sweetheart Maria. Like the debates occurring in French Indochina and the Netherlands Indies, Wisut also couched his argument against mixed race marriage in terms of class, arguing that he could not provide Maria with a comfortable life in Siam, because he was a poor nobody. He worried about the social treatment any prospective children he might have with Maria would receive at a time when colonial administrations elsewhere in Southeast Asia were locked in debate about how to legally categorise people of dubious race and class. Stoler highlights the absence of a legal category for those of mixed race in both French Indochina and the Netherlands Indies, where 'European', 'Vietnamese/Cambodian/Lao' and 'Indonesian' were legal categories. She also notes that the redrawing of boundaries was the result of nationalist forces in both Europe and the colonies. Though Thailand was never colonised, the fears of miscegenation and the novel pressures of creating national identities pervaded Thai-European relationships in that period. Thus, Akat saw fit to steer Wisut away from dilemmas such as mixed race, cross-national unions by sending him home to Siam a single man.

⁷⁸Stoler, 'Sexual Affronts and Racial Frontiers', p. 521.

⁷⁹Stoler, 'Mixed Bloods and the cultural politics of European identity in colonial Southeast Asia', p. 135.

Conclusion

It seems that in fiction as in real life, white European women and Thai men were not destined to share their lives together because of their difference - comprised of the particular intersection of culture, race, class and gender. Friendships and relationships between men of different races and cultures did not pose problems: most notably problems of personal and national identity, and racial purity. Perhaps to ensure the popularity of his novels, or possibly to absolve his sister of any lingering responsibility in the divorce of Prince Chakrabongse and Katherine Desnitsky, Akat acknowledged the temptation of mixed race marriages, but ultimately steered his characters away from marriages of this sort.

The inescapable moral conclusion of Akat's novels is that intimate and satisfying relationships between Thai men and white European women cannot work, and therefore, should not even be attempted. Although the characteristics of the white female characters are portrayed by the novelist as attractive, enviable, even desirable for 'modern' Thai women to adopt, the novels do not portray white European women possessing characteristics compatible with Thai men in Siam. Akat has portrayed Thai men who are free to mix with white European women, work with them, fall in love with them, even to live with them in intimate, domestic arrangements while they are overseas. But he also tells his story in such a way as to suggest that they should return home to find a good Thai woman to marry and bear their children, as we can assume Wisut has done.

CONCLUSION

Histories of white European women in the context of nineteenth century imperialism have been appearing for the past decade. They have not just been recuperative projects, but have suggested the complex intersections of race, gender and class in colonial hierarchies. I have attempted to begin such a history in Thailand, never a colony, but nevertheless a site of colonial influence in the cultural sense. I centred on the lives of three white, European women, not just recovering their histories, but also revealing through the contested narratives of their lives, their relationship to Thai society, and the ways they have been represented as 'others' by Thais.

As a tiny minority in Thailand, it is perhaps not surprising that no study has yet been attempted of white European women in Thailand. Like minority groups elsewhere, they have often been treated as a normalised absence or a pathologised presence.

White European women have made fleeting forays into Thai historiography, for the most part as stereotyped *memsahibs* - racist characters lying, culturally misbehaving, or marrying the wrong kind of men.

However, an examination of white European women in the history of Thailand and the narratives of race, gender and class that surround their presence sheds light far beyond our understanding of white European women and actually makes for a better understanding of what it is to be Thai and not Thai. It does this by helping to define Thainess by examining 'others' or 'outsiders' to this category. I argue that white European women are not irrelevant to the course of Thai history, and that although a tiny minority, their experiences in Thailand and the discourse surrounding them offer a more nuanced understanding of Thai identity.

The notable trend in Thai history to shy away from the category of gender has meant, until recently, both a lack of studies concerning local women, and foreign women. Weaknesses in the development of labour history and social history in Thailand further conspired to keep gender in the margins. However, from the mid-1980s onwards, gender has been an increasingly salient category to help understand the power dynamics in Thai society, amongst the Thai majority of the population resident in the Chao Phraya basin, but also amongst smaller ethnic minority groups within Thailand.

My analysis of white European women in nineteenth and early twentieth century Thailand not only considers such recent trends in Thai scholarship but also the comparative literature concerning white European women and their contested relationship to imperialism. Although this literature has at times been criticised for being Eurocentric, and for gendering Europeans but not locals, I focused on three white European women as exemplary case studies in such debates, and as affording a basis for reflection on my own experience.

I analysed the writings of Anna Leonowens, Mary Cort and Katherine Desnitsky, and the existing commentary in English and Thai about these women, to illustrate the complexities involved in being a white European woman in late nineteenth or early twentieth century Thailand. The scarcity of Thai language sources on their lives has led to a situation where I have relied on their testimony more than I would have liked. To provide a Thai language context for the writings of these women I turned away from historical writing to Thai fiction of the early twentieth century. There, in the novels of Akat Damkoeng Raphiphat in particular, were displayed a host of ambiguous feelings about white European women. They were tempting, they were desirable, and yet the Thai desire for a European wife appeared tempered by a belief that marriage with such a woman could not work in the cultural context of Thailand.

The contested stories of the lives of Anna Leonowens, Mary Cort and Katherine Desnitsky give a clear insight into the problem white European women posed in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Thailand. Of the three women I examined, Anna Leonowens and Katherine Desnitsky posed more of a challenge to Thai identity than did Presbyterian missionary Mary Cort.

Many historians, both Thai and Western have attempted to discredit the personal life of Anna Leonowens, the independent, determined, enterprising, and at times exasperating teacher, to invalidate the contribution to Thai history of her two books. She has been unfairly blamed for the way Broadway and Hollywood portrayed her in their productions of the *King And I*, as a civilising force from the West who swirls into the palace to domesticate the King and his court, readying them for Western colonisation.

Anna Leonowens has been scape-goated as denigrating the image of Thailand abroad, and of falsely representing Thailand. Part of the problem was that few English language histories of Thailand existed at the time Leonowens' work became well-known by way of the Broadway play and the Hollywood films, and so there were few more factual histories to inform those with an interest in Thailand. Leonowens' writings have been criticised as untruthful, although more sympathetic critics have argued that she wrote her books as 'romances' rather than as factual historical narratives. Moreover, Leonowens herself has been exposed as not the woman she claimed to be. She had claimed to be from the genteel middle-class of early nineteenth century Wales, but it has since come to light that she was born into a British working-class army family in India, and that she may have been of mixed race. Such information has been presented by her detractors to further dismiss any authority her books may have gained by her five years of employment within the Thai royal palace. It is clear from these texts that Anna Leonowens felt and wrote passionately about the rights and freedoms of women, regardless of their race or social class.

Anna Leonowens' commitment to women's rights was shared, equally passionately, by Mary Cort, the American Presbyterian missionary instrumental in the establishment of education for girls in Thailand. Mary Cort believed, as did many 'maternalists' of the late nineteenth century, that women's rights were dependent on access to education. She also believed, as did many other Protestant missionaries of her time, that Christianity was a potent force for women's rights. As such, she delivered and supervised the delivery of Christian education to girls in Phetburi province for seventeen years of her life. While not ostracised like Anna Leonowens for her views or her single, independent status (for in fact, she had the protection of her church and a supportive community), Thai historians have quietly tolerated the presence and opinions of Christian missionaries like Mary Cort, while not wavering from their steadfast adherence to Buddhism, as a distinguishing feature of Thainess enduring in the face of Christian proselytisation.

It was the official tolerance of Christian missionaries within Thailand by the Thai kings that has helped to minimise their influence and stifle any outcry arising from their presence. The Thai kings and nobility were pleased to receive Western knowledge and technology from the missionaries, but they selected what they wanted from the missionaries and refused the rest. They did not need or want Christianity, as did few other Thai people with whom the missionaries came in contact. In all, the missionaries planted the seeds for a Western-style education system for boys and girls of all social classes, introduced the printing press and Western medicine and surgery, but made no lasting influence in the field of religion. As such, Mary Cort and many of her colleagues have remained nameless because their missions were officially tolerated, but irrelevant both culturally and religiously.

Katherine Desnitsky, because of her proximity to the upper echelons of the Thai court, was perceived as a much more significant challenge to the passage of Thai history than was Mary Cort. And despite the fact that Katherine had married into the royal family,

she actually had less access to the inner sanctum of the palace and the royal circle than did Anna Leonowens. Desnitsky's lack of access to the court was quite possibly because the threat embodied by her mere presence was felt so keenly by her husband's father, King Chulalongkorn. Never before had a Thai prince married a white European woman (although they had often married foreign women from neighbouring Asian kingdoms), and this mixed race marriage threatened to disrupt not only the Thai racial hierarchy discussed by Streckfuss¹, but also the Thai dynastic hierarchy, as well as being seen to lead to racial degeneration. The challenge to the Thai royal line posed by Desnitsky's marriage was so great that she was ignored, lest her acknowledged presence cause more disruption than simply ignoring her.

Anna Leonowens was discredited because she dared to behave in front of the king and to refer to him as if he were an ordinary human being and therefore her equal, and Katherine Desnitsky was ignored because her marriage to Prince Chakrabongse was perceived to put the Thai dynastic line in jeopardy. They both spent very lonely times in Siam, under close public and private scrutiny. The treatment of Mary Cort was less severe. Rather, she was politely tolerated as yet another Christian missionary dedicating her life's work to social causes in Thailand, in her case, education for girls. She had the camaraderie of the mission station to buoy her spirits in stressful times, and also, because her life was not at all related to the royal family, she did not have to live her life in the glare of the harsh spotlight placed upon white women in the royal circle.

The attitudes encountered by Anna Leonowens, Mary Cort and Katherine Desnitsky due to their gender, race and social class, and to their presence in Thailand, are amplified in fictional sources in Thai language novels of the era, notably those of M.C. Akat Damkoeng Raphiphat and M.L. Kukrit Pramoj, all of which featured principal white female characters. The novels were personal stories designed to illustrate the

¹Streckfuss, 'The Mixed Colonial Legacy in Siam'.

many issues raised by increased Thai/Western relations. They featured both Thai and white European characters, and broached the then controversial topic of mixed race marriages. The novels suggest that while the physical appearance, independence and perceived 'modernity' of white European women are admired by Thai men who have been educated in Europe and North America, there is little hope in Thai men and white women forming successful, happy marriages, especially if they settle in Thailand.

Akat's novels warn readers away from mixed race marriages of this sort. The novels took a firm stand in the debate about Thai/Western relations, declaring that the characteristics of Thai men and white European women are incompatible, and that to avoid personal unhappiness it is best to avoid potential partners of another race.

The novels perhaps in part explain the reception received by Katherine Desnitsky when she arrived in Thailand. Perhaps they also help to explain attitudes to Anna Leonowens and Mary Cort, who although they were widowed and single respectively, may have been perceived as searching for husbands and therefore posing the same threat as Katherine Desnitsky. Had they been married to white men, their treatment in Thailand may have been subtly different.

The opinions Akat expressed in his novels constitute one variant of the sexual politics of imperialism. Elsewhere during the same period, in Africa and Papua New Guinea, sexual liaisons between indigenous men and European women were so unimaginable by Europeans as to constitute a sexual panic in images of black rapists. In the Thai instance both the upper class and the Thai origins of the men were not such a threat to Europeans, but rather to Thais.

The unequal power relations brought about by the imposition of colonial rule or the exertion of colonial influence, as in the case of Thailand, was at times based on a sexual fear of other races. In the European colonial societies of the nineteenth century, white sexuality was regarded as the norm, and the practices of other races were

labelled 'sexually deviant'. As white European men tended to precede European women in settling in nineteenth century colonial societies and earlier, they often formed sexual relationships with local women before the arrival of European women, except for those worried about miscegenation, and the possibility of racial degeneracy. Racial purity was highly valued in nineteenth century Europe, and in Thailand, and contemporary debates about racial classification were thrown into confusion by mixed race marriages and their resultant offspring which managed to highlight the fluidity of race and challenge concepts such as racial purity.

Miscegenation and the subsequent threat of racial degeneracy was treated more seriously after the arrival of white European women in the colonies. Their sexuality was closely guarded by the white male population, as it came to symbolise the power of the ruling group. The seduction of a white European woman was akin to an attack on the legitimacy of white colonial rule, and so in a way, European women's sexuality became a symbol of European imperialism.

My aim in this thesis has been to begin to document some of the rich history of white European women's experiences in Thailand, experiences which up until now have been rarely documented in an academic manner. My primary task has been to make white European women visible within Thai history, and to go some way towards normalising their occasional presence within the pages of Thai history. I have examined the lives of three white European women in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Thailand, to discern the similarities in their experience, and to ascertain whether conditions of life and attitudes towards white European women had changed significantly during that sixty year period, and countered their views with those of influential Thai novelist, Akat Damkoeng Raphiphat who provided a range of white, European female characters in his novels of the late 1920s and early 1930s.

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Ironically, a topic that at first appeared very removed from the mainstream of Thai history, with its emphasis on the epic narrative and the fostering of national identity, has the potential to provide Thai studies with new directions. I hope my approach will serve to interest others in the complex, interactive nature of race, gender and class operating within Thai history, and to expand the scope of gender studies in Thailand.

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