

Urban Respectability and the Maleness of (Southeast) Asian Modernity

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Abstract

The urban modernity that became an irresistible model for elites in Asia in the decades before and after 1900 was far from being gender-neutral. It represented an exceptional peak of patriarchy in its exclusion of respectable middle class women from the work force, from ownership and control of property and from politics. Marriage was indissoluble and the wife's role in the male-headed nuclear family was to care for and educate the abundant children she produced. Puritan religious values underlined the perils for women of falling outside this pattern of dependence on the male. Though upheld as modern and civilized, this ideal was in particularly striking contrast with the pre-colonial Southeast Asian pattern of economic autonomy and balance between women and men, and the relative ease of female-initiated divorce. Although attractive to many western-educated Southeast Asian men, including religious reformers determined to 'save' and domesticate women, urban respectability of this type was a poor fit for women accustomed to dominant roles in commerce and marketing, and at least equal ones in production. Southeast Asian relative failure in the high colonial era to adapt to the modern market economy may also have a gendered explanation. We should not be surprised that patriarchy and puritanism became more important in Southeast Asia as it urbanized in the late 20th Century, since this was echoing the European experience a century earlier. The question remains how far Southeast Asia could retain its relatively balanced

gender pattern in face of its eventual rapid urbanization and commercial development.

Key words

gender, female autonomy, modernity, middle-class values, Southeast Asia, neo-traditionalism

URBAN RESPECTABILITY AND THE MALENESS OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN MODERNITY

In the 1980s I drew attention to the relatively balanced gender pattern of pre-colonial Southeast Asia as one of the most distinctive social characteristics of the region, involving female economic autonomy, dominance of marketing, and ease of escaping unsatisfactory marriages through divorce.¹ Though initially controversial, particularly in relation to Viet Nam, I believe that this distinctiveness is now broadly accepted.² The expanding anthropology of gender, drawing on ethnographies of the least urban and industrialized sectors, still salutes Southeast Asia as “the only region of the world as we know it which features such androgynous or at least sex-similar systems.”³ Yet the reformist literature of the 20th Century overwhelmingly portrayed Asian women in general, including Southeast Asians, as victims needing to be rescued by the more enlightened example of Europe.

The two most popular images of Southeast Asian women in the 20th Century Europe and America were emblematic of this profound misunderstanding. The teenage Javanese aristocrat Kartini yearned for the freedom and education of her Dutch cor-

¹ Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450-1680*, vol. 1, *The Lands below the Winds* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 146-72; Reid, “Female Roles in Pre-Colonial Southeast Asia,” *Modern Asian Studies* 22, no. 3 (1988): 629-65; Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450-1680*, vol. 2, *Expansion and Crisis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 91-93, 161-64.

² See notably Barbara Andaya, *The Flaming Womb: Repositioning Women in Early Modern Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2006), 226-32.

³ Victor King and William Wilder, *The Modern Anthropology of South-East Asia: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2003), 265.

respondent Stella Zeehandelaar, in eloquent Dutch letters published by a Dutch reformer after her death as 'From darkness to light.'⁴ Dutch reformist celebration of Kartini was continued by independent Indonesia, which declared 'Kartini Day' a national holiday in 1964. The remarkable, arguably early feminist, educator Anna Leonowens found a niche for herself in North America by romanticizing her experience teaching English to King Mongkut's children in 1862-7 as a story of combating the slavery of the palace women. Her *The English Governess at the Siamese Court* (1870) was already a popular success, but the further fictionalized account by Margaret Landon (1944), and its dramatization as a Rogers & Hammerstein musical (1951) and film (1956), *The King and I*, cemented the idea of Southeast Asian female oppression needing liberation from the West.⁵ Because the European model of bourgeois respectability had the prestige of being on top around 1900, a discourse of 'female liberation' as a western import seemed plausible in relation to the royal courts with their particular needs to control female sexuality. They were indeed the polygamous and controlled exception to the general Southeast Asian norm of monogamy moderated by relatively easy divorce. High colonial modernity in reality sought to curb the economic autonomy of the great majority of Southeast Asian women in a manner quite opposed to liberation.

Up until the late nineteenth century most Southeast Asian women had more freedom and economic agency than their European (or Chinese or Indian) counterparts, and played economic roles equivalent to (though different from) those of men. Free of the status preoccupations of men, women in Southeast Asia generally managed the money of the household, and engaged in business such as marketing, buying and selling. In Java, for example, Raffles noted: "The women alone attend the markets, and conduct all the business of buying and selling. It is proverbial to say the Javanese men are fools in money concerns."⁶ In southern

⁴ Raden Adj Kartini, *Letters of a Javanese Princess*, trans. Agnes Louise Symmers (New York: Knopf, 1920) and frequently republished.

⁵ Susan Morgan, *Bombay Anna: The Real Story and Remarkable Adventures of the King and I Governess* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008).

⁶ Thomas Stamford Raffles, *The History of Java*, 2 vols. (London 1817; repr., Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1965 and 1978), 1:353.

Viet Nam Crawford found women performing many of the tasks reserved for men in Europe or India. “They plough, harrow, reap, carry heavy burdens, are shopkeepers, brokers, and money-changers. In most of these cases they are considered not only more expert and intelligent than the men, but what is more extraordinary . . . their labour is generally of equal value” in terms of pay.⁷ When slavery was being abolished in northern Siam in the 1880s, female slaves were found to be worth more than men because “the woman is decidedly as a worker worth more than the man.”⁸ The relative harmony and absence of violence within marriage was one of the most positive things noted by Europeans, largely because of the ease with which women could obtain divorce.

URBAN RESPECTABILITY IN 19TH CENTURY EUROPE

The European peace between 1815 and 1914 was a remarkable period of technical and industrial progress, urbanization and democratization (for men). The urban population of England and Wales increased from 2.3 million to 20 million between 1801 and 1891, by which date England was 72% urban. This was the preeminent age of the upwardly mobile urban male. German historians rightly define it as that of the *bürgertum*, essentially tied to the city, and more sharply defined in German in opposition to the aristocracy than is the case with French or English *bourgeoisie*.⁹ Its mindset incorporated a belief in progress, science, technology and rationality, and the individual’s moral responsibility before both God and the state. We might call it Europe’s confi-

⁷ John Crawford, *Journal of an Embassy from the Governor-General of India to the Courts of Siam and Cochin-China*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (London: Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley, 1830), 522-23.

⁸ Hallet 1890, cited in *A History of Thailand*, Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 86.

⁹ Jürgen Kocka, ed., *Bürgertum im 19. Jahrhundert*, 3 vols. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995); Jürgen Kocka and Allan Mitchell, eds., *Bourgeois Society in Nineteenth Century Europe* (Oxford: Berg, 1993).

dent high modernity, before the great disillusion of the First World War and its revolutions shattered the confidence even if it began more active roles for women. The influx of rural poor to the slums of these industrial cities made them appear dangerous places for 'respectable' women (to use the language of that day rather than a class analysis that arose subsequently), whose spheres of action were markedly restricted by 19th century industrialization. Its emphasis on education in all-male universities and colleges, rather than descent, created an aggressively male public sphere and urban work-places defined as exclusively for the male bread-winners of the family.¹⁰ Poor women had to work to survive, either respectably controlled as domestic servants or dangerously engaged at the margins of society. Either way they seemed invisible or at best subversive to the idealized model of the dominant urban class. Respectable women were excluded from paid employment, and in any case would have lost legal control of any income they obtained to their husbands.¹¹

Religious revivalism was a marked feature of this period, as evangelical movements such as Methodism in England, Pietism in Germany, and Vincent de Paul and the Little Sisters of the Poor in France sought to redeem the desperate slum-dwellers, especially their women, from the gin-palaces, gambling-dens and homeless degradation that always threatened. The religious face of the period was a quest for personal, individual salvation through a direct relation with God that showed itself in personal piety, hard work, and ascetic puritanism that deplored alcohol, gambling and any display of female sexuality. This was the only path to upward mobility out of the slums. In the public sphere the moralistic puritanism of much religious discourse was suggestively similar to that found in urbanizing Southeast Asia a century later.

¹⁰ Marion Gray, *Productive Men, Reproductive Women: The Agrarian Household and the Emergence of Separate Spheres during the German Enlightenment* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2000), 16-17.

¹¹ Joan Perkin, *Victorian Women* (London: John Murray, 1993); Susan Kent, *Sex and Suffrage in Britain 1860-1914* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

In world-historical terms, this moment in European history was at one extreme of patriarchy in terms of its exclusion of women from paid employment, property ownership, or power. When translated to the colonial sphere around the end of the 19th century this model of modern urban life was still more exclusively male. All its agents were alien males, western European or southern Chinese, who no longer found Southeast Asian female partners to bridge the gap with local realities. This model had in theory no place for the economically active woman so dominant in Southeast Asian experience. The realities of the European poor, with their necessarily pragmatic sexual and working arrangements, were excluded from the colonial abstraction of respectable bourgeois European society with total male dominance in the workplace. The European women who began to come to Southeast Asia from the 1880s represented a totally unfamiliar domestic dimension of this modernity. They “confronted profoundly rigid restrictions on their domestic, economic and political options, more limiting than those of metropolitan Europe at the time.”¹²

It was in this ‘high modern’ period that Southeast Asia’s absolutist states and corporate life were first constructed by largely foreign and exclusively male hands. Where royal courts were partners in this enterprise—notably in Siam/Thailand but to some extent also Cambodia and Malay states such as Johor—their desperation to be accepted as “civilized” ensured that they copied the European exclusively male pattern. Since entrepreneurship, saving and budgeting had never been among the skills developed by such men, they left modern business to the Chinese and only an increasingly circumscribed arena of domestic business to their wives.

¹² Ann Stoler, “Making Empire Respectable: The Politics of Race and Sexual Morality in Twentieth-Century Colonial Cultures,” in *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives*, ed. Anne MacClintock, Aamir R. Mufti, and Ella Shohat (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 344.

SOUTHEAST ASIAN WOMEN RETREAT FROM THE WORKFORCE

Around 1900 the dramatic achievements of electricity, railways, steamships, the telegraph and printed newspapers, coupled with the beginnings of western-style education, were of great importance in convincing elite youths that a new age of technology and progress had indeed dawned. I therefore distinguish the 20th Century as Southeast Asia's century of full modernity, distinct from the early modernity that had been in place since the long 16th century.¹³ Of course this embrace of modernity came rather earlier for the Filipino *ilustrados*, and later for most of the rural mass, but something did change relatively quickly around 1900, roughly in step with China but significantly later than in Europe itself, the New World, India and Japan. Western patterns of behaviour, which had been resisted and resented as alien by many, became the style of the desired modernity. There was little contestation of the fact that it was a masculine style, or that its offices and work-places were exclusively male.

The earliest large-scale manufactures in Southeast Asia, like the most recent ones, had relied on the productive tradition of its women. The Manila cigar industry, and the tobacco and *batik* factories of nineteenth century Java, had almost exclusively used female labour. The textile industry of Ilo-ilo (Panay) was an astonishing success in the century before 1860, organised by a few Chinese-*mestizo* males and about 60,000 Filipina women around the city—virtually all the available female labour of the province. They wove local cotton and pineapple fibre, as well as abaca thread from Bikul and silk from China, on rudimentary bamboo looms. The industry supplied much of the population of the Philippines with its cloth, but also contributed a large share of Philippines export income up to the early 1860s.¹⁴ By 1870, however, this thriving industry was virtually wiped out by cheaper British machine-made cloth replicating the popular Filipino patterns. A male-run 'modern' sugar industry took over the

¹³ Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia: Late States, Diverse Cultures* (Oxford: Wiley/Blackwell, forthcoming).

¹⁴ Alfred McCoy, "A Queen Dies Slowly: The Rise and Decline of Iloilo City," in *Philippine Social History: Global Trade and Local Transformations*, ed. Alfred McCoy and Ed. de Jesus (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1982), 301-6.

export economy of Panay, and women had to work in domestic situations if at all. Women ceased to be independent producers; their “economic position declined absolutely and in relation to men.”¹⁵

Although female labour was in retreat for the remainder of the colonial period, it was dynamic enough in 1922 to spark a debate in the all-male Indies assembly (*Volksraad*). The Netherlands had signed one of the first attempts to regulate labour globally in the image of patriarchal Europe, an ILO convention which banned ‘the weaker sex’ from paid work at night. Employers in the Indies objected that this would cripple them, and the enquiry that was commissioned as a result showed that the majority of the labour input in agriculture on Java was still by women. Although the western-run sugar and other plantations routinely sought male labourers, even there around a third of the labour was done by women. The more thorough 1930 census ignored ‘unpaid’ labour in agriculture, but still found that women formed 43.5% of the formal-sector paid work force in Java, as against 22.5% in the Netherlands.¹⁶

Everywhere the modern economy of mass production sought male employees on the model of Europe. The specifically female commercialized productions for the market—cloth, ceramics, basketwork and medicinal herbs—were replaced by imported manufactures. Many male reformers sought the kind of urban respectability that would ‘protect’ married women in the home, as in pre-1914 Europe, and to some extent they succeeded. Between the 1930 and 1961 censuses the proportion of adult women in Java listed as employed dropped from 36.6% to 30.7%, and the proportion of those employed who were in manufacturing collapsed, from 27.7 to 8.7%.¹⁷ Ann Booth attributed this remarkable decline of women in manufacturing to the retreat of

¹⁵ Elizabeth Uy Eviota, *The Political Economy of Gender: Women and the Sexual Division of Labour in the Philippines* (London: Zed Books, 1992), 59.

¹⁶ Elsbeth Locher-Scholten, *Women and the Colonial State: Essays on Gender and Modernity in the Netherlands Indies, 1900-1942* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2000), 52-60.

¹⁷ Anne Booth, *The Indonesian Economy in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: A History of Missed Opportunities* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), 68.

domestic modes of production in face of imports, but changing attitudes also had something to do with it.

More recent data for Thailand, Laos and Viet Nam show that their high female participation rates in the workforce appear to have dropped as these grew more urban and prosperous. Between 1990, when data is first available, and 2010, the female participation rate in Thailand dropped from 80.0% to 70.5%, in Laos from 84.7 to 80.1, and in Vietnam from 81.1% to 78.1%. Other countries show stability or slight rises in participation in this period, because the more affluent and urbanized countries had already shifted to lower participation rates: in 1990 Malaysia 45.3%, Philippines 49.2%, Indonesia 51.9%, as against 'backward' Burma 85% and Laos 84.7%.¹⁸

When women did join the European-managed modern economy they were invariably paid less than men, as was the universal pattern in Europe—on average only 60% of men in agriculture and 40% or less in factories and offices.

The exclusively male character of the model of the modern economy on offer in colonial Southeast Asia appears in this light to be the unobserved elephant in the room of the widely observed absence of an entrepreneurial middle class among indigenous Southeast Asians at the end of the high colonial era. During the period from the 1930s to the 1950s much debate on the region focussed on what J. H. Boeke had labelled a 'dual economy,' whereby a huge socio-cultural gap divided the rational modern economy operated by Europeans and Chinese from the traditional rural one.¹⁹ Indigenous societies, it was claimed, simply failed to respond to the profit motive of liberal economic theory, either by producing the entrepreneurial movers and shakers or the capital accumulators who would move the economy forward. With the work of Clifford Geertz on the absent indigenous middle class in Indonesia,²⁰ the debate shifted to how

¹⁸ World Bank data bank at <http://data.worldbank.org>, accessed March 2014.

¹⁹ J. H. Boeke, *The Interests of the Voiceless Far East: Introduction to Oriental Economics* (Leiden: Universitaire Pers, 1948); Boeke, *Economics and Economic Policy of Dual Societies* (New York: Institute of Pacific Relations, 1953).

²⁰ Clifford Geertz, *Agricultural Involution: The Process of Ecological Change in Indonesia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963); Geertz, *Peddlers and Princes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963).

specific colonial policies favouring population growth within static and hierarchic social structures may have created this pattern. I believe the gender factor never entered this debate, so natural did male modernity seem to its principals. From a social-historical perspective, however, it becomes clear that Southeast Asian males were poorly prepared to adopt roles which had long been dominated by women, and that there was a grave economic cost to women's exclusion from the modern economy as defined in the high colonial period.

SOCIAL IDEALS AND DOMESTICITY

Urban middle-class fashions were set by Europeans in this phase of high colonial modernity, and above all by Europeans fresh from Europe. Their women were far from the office or factory, but played decorous roles as upholders of an imagined pure 'national' essence of impractical modest dress, large hierarchic families, good taste and domesticity. Upwardly mobile Asian modernisers absorbed the model. The more the Filipino *ilustrados* (enlightened ones) of the 1880s, pioneers of Southeast Asian male modernity, enjoyed the demi-monde of the ladies of Paris and Madrid, the more they adopted a *haut bourgeois* ideal for their sisters in the Philippines. In editing Morga's description of the sexually assertive women of the pre-Spanish Philippines, nationalist hero José Rizal glossed over all the evidence of female desire and freedom and instead defended the subordination and virtue of Filipina womanhood. He wrote home to tell his sisters to emulate German women (not French), who, he said, "are home-loving, and they study cooking with as much diligence as they do music and drawing."²¹

The vernacular model of the upwardly-mobile family being presented in the 1920s and thirties was one in which the wife and mother was not in the workforce at all. Male-written manuals for

²¹ Rizal 1886, cited in Raquel Reyes, *Love, Passion and Patriotism: Sexuality and the Philippine Propaganda Movement, 1882-1892* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2008).

domestic behaviour, such as 'Husband and Wife' (*Soemi-Isteri*), eight times reprinted by the Indies government publishing office in 1921-41, emphasized that girls should be educated, as the European model decreed, but only in an elementary school close to home so that they could be prepared for a domestic life of keeping a clean and regulated household.²² David Marr (1981: 206-14) describes twenty-five such books written in *quoc-ngu* in the 1920s, almost all seeking to transfer to a 'modern' nuclear household the Confucian ideal of 'three submissions' of women to father, husband and eldest son in succession.²³ As the first generation of western educated women aged and married, a nationalist weekly in Burma changed its 'young ladies mirror' column to 'for the housewife.'²⁴ As national-language periodicals blossomed, their advertising heavily promoted the ideal of the domesticated modern housewife as consumer, urged to buy soaps, bottle-feeding formula and medicines to ensure a healthy and content household.

The radical transformation of the family required by urban modernity proved a great opportunity for puritanical religious reformers to emphasize female pre-marital virginity, submissiveness and domesticity as if they had been normative. In Europe too, nineteenth century industrialization and urbanization had called forth revivalist religion in a puritan and patriarchal form. The real and imagined dangers of urban anonymity and industrial mixing required strict new codes for separating upwardly-mobile respectability from the urban flotsam. Salvation depended now on individual morality which showed itself in frugal habits, hard work, and the exaltation of the nuclear family over which a breadwinner father presided. 'Respectable' women were unprecedentedly constrained in dress, deportment and domesticity.

It is possible, though needing much greater research, that urban modernity's emphasis on the stable nuclear family with a

²² Jeffrey Hadler, *Muslims and Matriarchs: Cultural Resilience in Minangkabau through Jihad and Colonialism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 79-81.

²³ David Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 206-14.

²⁴ Chie Ikeya, *Refiguring Women, Colonialism, and Modernity in Burma* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011), 75.

sole male breadwinner may have increased the entrapment of women in violent situations. Europeans, we noted, while scathing about many Southeast Asian habits in the nineteenth century, conceded the laudable gentleness and affection shown within the family unit, often attributed to the ease of either party escaping from unsatisfactory unions.²⁵ Scott noted in Banten in 1604 that “it was an ordinary thing for the Chinese to beat their wives,” but “the Javans will hardly suffer them to beat their women.”²⁶ The Burmese were also thought to be less inclined to domestic violence than others, but a court in 1938 upset some Burmese women by its judgement condemning one man to fifteen days’ imprisonment for wounding his wife with an ironbark rod. The (European?) judge had declared that “the chastisement of wives should [only] be effected by means of a small cane or bamboo,” prompting an irate female correspondent to declare that Burmese families never tolerated violence, and the judge must be careful to rid his mind of that error.²⁷

Some of the modernizing legislation on names, marriage and inheritance explicitly required a shift to patriarchy, notably where Asian men themselves were in a position to impose it—in Japan and Siam. In 1875 all Japanese males were required to select surnames which their wives and children were obliged to adopt. Meiji Japan appears to have perceived male control of property as intrinsic to the European model of modernity, and so narrowed inheritance to this same male surname line. In 1913 King Vajiravudh also imposed surnames in Siam, claiming that this would make Thais ‘civilized,’ and promote “the maintenance of family tradition . . . as an incentive to everyone to uphold not only personal honour but the honour of the family as well.”²⁸ In a hitherto surname-free region (except for Vietnamese on the

²⁵ John Crawford, *History of the Indian Archipelago*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: John Constable, 1820), 1:73-84; Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce*, 1:151-54.

²⁶ William Foster, ed., *The Voyage of Sir Henry Middleton to the Moluccas 1604-1606* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1943), 127.

²⁷ Ikeya, *Refiguring Women*, 117.

²⁸ King Vajiravudh 1914, cited in Anthony Reid, “Family Names in Southeast Asian History,” in *Personal Names in Asia: History, Culture and Identity*, ed. Zheng Yangwen and Charles Macdonald (Singapore: NUS Press, 2009). 31.

Chinese model), the only colonial government to require a shift to male-inherited surnames was the Philippines, in 1849, in an explicit attempt to strengthen family control over its members across time. Both Siamese and Philippine changes succeeded in creating powerful patriarchal families across the generations, largely because the introduction of surnames coincided with the merging of wealthy Chinese-mestizo families into the local elite, adopting local names to become the Thai and Filipino corporate 'big families,' where there had been none before.²⁹

The nineteenth century European ideal of permanent monogamy altered the general pattern of Southeast Asian marriage chiefly in its disapproval of divorce, especially female-initiated, and its domesticizing of a subordinate wife. Polygamy was one of the pretexts Europeans used for not granting 'civilized' status to Asian societies and for demanding extraterritoriality in them, but in reality it was restricted to a tiny minority of royals and rich Chinese and Arabs. For the Chakri kings of Siam an abundance of wives and children became an obsession, both signifying royal potency and facilitating royal monopoly of high offices in partnership with the Europeans and Chinese. The first five Chakri monarchs sired a total of 324 children through 176 mothers, but the two reformers, Mongkut and Chulalongkorn, were the champions with 60 plus and 153 wives respectively. Each designated a clear heir along the lines of European kings (avoiding the fratricide of the past) but used their brothers and children to staff crucial positions in the cabinet, diplomacy and the army. Siam was unable to legislate against polygamy until 1935, after the absolute monarchy was abolished, despite the huge and acknowledged cost to its 'civilized' status.³⁰

NEGOTIATING MALE COLONIAL MODERNITY

Given their past roles, it is disappointing to find so little explicit female contestation of the maleness of modernity. Men readily

²⁹ Reid, "Family Names," 21-36.

³⁰ Tamara Loos, *Subject Siam: Family, Law, and Colonial Modernity in Thailand* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 100-20.

embraced not only the government positions made available only to them, but also the modern spheres of journalism and political association. Women appear to have conceded these to have been part of a male sphere of public discourse, status and hierarchy. Formal ideology, especially as associated with the male-centric scriptural religions, was itself in the male domain, so that women tended to evade ideology rather than contest it. It was not so much that modernity usurped their roles in the economy (though this happened too as production was mechanised in textiles and agriculture), as that industrialization, bureaucratization and the spread of foreign ideologies expanded the 'male' spheres of life in unprecedented ways. Foreign models of religion (first and foremost), healing and medicine, production, the organization of knowledge and even business were conceded to men because they resembled the hierarchic and status-filled world of male politics.

The few young Southeast Asian women who did persevere to western-style education beyond puberty would often find themselves living away from home and in male-majority schools, mixed in both gender and race. This kind of adolescent mixing was indeed different, though in reality more controlled, than that which occurred in every rural market or festival. The novel image of 'modern' youth free to mix, much stimulated by Hollywood films, did indeed create a false dichotomy in the minds of both progressives and conservatives between modern freedom and traditional constraint. When articulate elites took up the 'women's question,' therefore, it was on westernized assumptions about the 'emancipated woman' of the 1920s and '30s, with indigenous male literature eroticizing the tempting European or Chinese female other much as European literature fantasised the oriental feminine. The imagined harmonious village became the symbol of virtue as against the temptations of the city, reversing the 'exemplary centre' pattern of older Southeast Asia.³¹ The debates were between two types of male modernity—the invented

³¹ Scot Barmé, *Woman, Man, Bangkok: Love, Sex, and Popular Culture in Thailand* (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 213-14.

tradition of male supremacy and female domesticity, dependence and subservience as championed by neo-traditional Buddhists, Muslims, Confucians and Christians, against westernizers who saw female emancipation in largely western terms.

The women's movements of the colonial era, particularly as reconstructed in the subsequent official-nationalist narrative, appear a disappointing handmaid of male initiatives. The realm of modern political associations had already been conceded to men, as an extension of their traditional preoccupations with status and public talking. The biggest organisations were women's wings of originally religious organisations like Muhammadiyah, Sarekat Islam and the YMBA. Their pronouncements represented "quite strongly entrenched western bourgeois notions of femininity . . . that had little basis in the lives of most Indonesian women."³² In the 1920s such movements aligned themselves generally with the nationalist trend, to the point of muting their pursuit of specific advances for women. The banning of polygamy was an issue on which European reformers and women's organizations could agree, and the revolutionaries finally achieved it in Siam/Thailand as part of their anti-monarchy agenda. But even though it was only a tiny Muslim elite that indulged the practice in Indonesia, the women's movements ducked the opportunity to support such a law in 1937 on the grounds that a Dutch-dominated government should not meddle with Indonesian marriage customs. Semi-legendary warrior women from the less patriarchal remote past, like the Trung sisters of Viet memory, sexually-ambiguous Srikandi of the Javanese *wayang* tradition, and the romantic heroines of Luang Wichitwathakan's plays, were recycled only to show that women too could sacrifice for the nation.

The progress that did occur in bringing greater equality for women within this political realm appeared to be more the work of male liberals, European or Asian, than of the indigenous women's movement. The dyarchy reforms of India were extended to Burma in 1923, with the addition of equal female suffrage, in deference to the more balanced traditions of Burma than of

³² Susan Blackburn, *Women and the State in Modern Indonesia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 19.

India. They could vote, on a restricted property qualification, but not stand for election. That further step was strongly debated by the men elected to the Legislative Council, with neo-traditionalists claiming that Buddhism insisted on female inferiority, and that equality was a western idea. Elected Filipino male politicians also devoted much heat to debating this issue. Quezon eventually insisted that the women themselves should decide the vote in a plebiscite. Half a million women took part in 1937, opting ten to one in favour of having the vote. In Indonesia the men of the *Volksraad* narrowly defeated the government's proposal for equal female suffrage in 1925, ethnic Indonesians voting 9-8 against, but passed the measure in 1937. The various transitions to nation-statehood in the 1940s and fifties gave power temporarily to radical modernizers, and there was little further controversy about women getting the same political rights as men.

IS THERE A LESS PATRIARCHAL MODERNITY?

This record could be read to mean that Southeast Asia's historic gender balance was forgotten in the rush to embrace a pre-1914 western image of modernity with all its profound patriarchy, so that a return to greater balance in a modern urban context had to play catch-up with post-modern progress in the West. Neo-traditional religious reformers, and at times even authoritarian post-war governments, were ready enough to condemn sexual liberation as an unwanted western import. Does the region's remarkable heritage of relative gender balance and flexibility suggest anything by way of a less patriarchal model of modernity? If so, neither well-meaning reformers nor the ever more influential religious neo-traditionalists seem inclined to celebrate it. Japan's experience is not encouraging, as well as Southeast Asia's last chance for an autonomous modernity in Siam/Thailand, Burma, Vietnam and Aceh. Even here the European model of modernity

was too strong, too attractive to Asian males, and too alien, for different experiments with the gendering of it to succeed.

Nevertheless an overview of the Southeast Asian pattern of adjustment to urban, industrial modernity does reveal some positive advantages over the same process (differently dated) in Europe and East Asia.

Firstly, despite a century of tutelage in modern western ideas of fixed and binary sexuality, the new anthropology of gender recognises the widespread survival in Southeast Asia of flexible and heterogeneous gender and sexual identities strikingly at odds with western norms. Colonial regimes criminalized homosexuality, but could never enforce this in indigenous societies which continued to accommodate European and Chinese refugees from sterner systems. Wazir Jahan Karim is one of those insisting that Southeast Asian bilaterality still means, as it always has, a preference for kinship terminology based on age rather than gender in everyday social relations.³³ Male and female are free to explore and exploit their complementary sexuality, but also to transgress these through "the fluidity of sexual boundaries" and the acceptance of an "intersexual third dimension of behaviour." While gender theorists describe the readiness of Southeast Asian women to concede status superiority to men, especially in the realms of formal religion and politics, this relative freedom from status concerns still allows women more latitude in everyday business matters. Moreover the resilience of custom (Malay *adat*) and folk animism in everyday life renders it "the constant 'equaliser' or 'moderator' for women" against neo-traditional religion and normative ideology.³⁴

Secondly, Southeast Asian women did make the transition to industrial wage labour more willingly and successfully than European women, or Southeast Asian men, even if colonial capitalism insisted on paying them much less than men. The most 'indigenous' manufactures of the colonial era, in cigarettes and textiles, overwhelmingly employed women, and even European-run enterprises did so on a much larger scale than in Europe.

³³ Wazir Jahan Karim, "Bilateralism and Gender in Southeast Asia," in *'Male' and 'Female' in Developing Southeast Asia*, ed. Wazir Jahan Karim (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1995), 35-37.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 44.

The older male labour system of the region had been based on vertical ties of patronage and bondage. Free male wage labour was slow to emerge except among Chinese and Indian migrants, so that employers even into the 1920s complained of the stereotyped ‘lazy native,’ and the need to create bonds of indebtedness as an incentive to work. ‘Eating wages’ (*makan gaji*, in Malay) for an impersonal or foreign boss was still seen as an indignity for many Southeast Asian men as late as the 1970s. Women had always been freer of these status inhibitions, and readier to do what was necessary to feed the family. When large-scale manufacture for the world market did become a major feature of Southeast Asian economies, in the 1970s, it was a largely female work force that made this possible in electronics, textiles and food processing.

Thirdly, the gender pattern also permitted women more labour mobility than was the case in other industrializing situations, even if this was concentrated in the informal sector and initially invisible to governments. Doeppers has shown that the contemporary female majority in Filipino migration to Manila was already pronounced in the mid-nineteenth century, when employment in the women-dominant cigar factories was a major draw.³⁵ Male migration prevailed during the revolutionary period of the 1890s and early 1900s, but a balanced pattern re-established itself in the 1920s and 30s, to be again replaced by the female-dominant post-war pattern. The Ilocos coast, to the north of Manila, was already notable a stand-out in the nineteenth century for the readiness of its women to postpone or forego marriage in order to seek economic autonomy and support for their families in the city. During the 1920s Rangoon’s dominant immigrant population was 88% male, whereas the outnumbered Burmese in the city were majority female, 80% of them being under forty.³⁶ The abolition of slavery in Siam in

³⁵ Daniel Doeppers, “Migration to Manila: Changing Gender Representation, Migration Field, and Urban Structure,” in *Population and History: The Demographic Origins of the Modern Philippines*, ed. Daniel F. Doeppers and Peter Xenos (Madison: Center for Southeast Asian Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1998), 150-53, 171-72.

³⁶ Ikeya, *Refiguring Women*, 22.

1905, later than elsewhere, ended one form of female urban migration but opened up a more free and commercial recruitment for the urban service sector.

The huge male domination among Chinese, Indian and European migrants to the cities created a demand for sexual and domestic services, covering the whole range from prostitution to stable marriage. Commercial prostitution flourished everywhere to serve this urban imbalance, but Bangkok and Rangoon were noted as especially freewheeling centres where poor rural women could hope to make some money when young without necessarily sacrificing the chance for a respectable family life back in the village. Bangkok was reported to have 20,000 prostitutes already in the 1920s, serving principally a resident clientele.³⁷ This was the high-risk edge of a much broader pattern of vigorous female participation in the commercial urban economy. From the 1970s, it had its extension in the massive international movement of female migrant workers out of the Philippines (the world leader), Thailand, Indonesia and Burma, serving Asia and the world in the domestic, health, tourist and entertainment sectors. It has been argued that Southeast Asian gender flexibility has made it easier for women to leave children in charge of stay-at-home males, who could assume female roles with less stigma than elsewhere.³⁸

Politically, the revolutions of the 1940s offered unprecedented opportunities for change, though in a context of the unprecedented maleness of 'high modern' rational reordering of society. Vietnamese communists, like their Chinese counterparts, demonstrated their total rejection of Confucianism by recruiting women into revolutionary violence, warfare and leadership. One veteran remembered it as a time "when even the gentlest Vietnamese woman could be inspired to enter the male world of violence for her country."³⁹ Women were most likely to be included in the heroic struggle stage, like Maria Ulfah Santo-

³⁷ Barmé, *Women, Man, Bangkok*, 82.

³⁸ Bernadette Resurreccion and Ha Thi Van Khanh, "Able to Come and Go: Reproducing Gender in Female Rural-Urban Migration in the Red River Delta," *Population, Space and Place* 13, no. 3 (May/June 2007): 211-24.

³⁹ Karen G. Turner and Thanh Hao Phan, *Even the Women Must Fight: Memories of War from North Vietnam* (New York: Wiley & Sons, 1998), 47.

so and S.K. Trimurti in the second and third Indonesian revolutionary cabinets, or Nguyễn Thi Bìn (b.1927), foreign minister of the provisional communist South Vietnamese government from 1969 and a prominent figure at the Paris peace accords of 1973. The authoritarian phase that followed tended to retreat to tokenism, but there could be no going back on the principle of equality in law and politics. The election of Philippines Presidents Cory Aquino (1986) and Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo (2004) and Indonesian Megawati Sukarnoputri (2001), and the anti-establishment election victories of Aung San Syu Kyi in Burma (1990) and Yingluck Shinawatra in Thailand (2011) all owed something to a more aggressive male relative being *hors de combat*, but undoubtedly something also to a particular style of female charisma attractive to the region's voters.

Taken overall, Southeast Asians have so far managed the transition from rural peasant poverty to urban modernity with many fewer constraints on female employment and economic autonomy than in nineteenth century Europe or other such transitions. In a 2013 ranking of gender equality in terms of economic, political, and educational access and health status, the Philippines was rated fourth out of 136 countries, behind only the Scandinavians, and in a class otherwise occupied only by very wealthy (or in the case of Cuba, very revolutionary) countries.⁴⁰ Nevertheless the confident male ideology of puritanical piety, rationality, and suspicion of women outside the home that accompanied the transition in England, France and Holland (but gradually died there after 1914) is still an aspect of modernity in rapidly urbanizing Southeast Asia. Neo-traditional Islam, in particular, imposes certain forms of puritan dress and behaviour on the model of respectability for upwardly mobile urban women. While in some respects this has echoes of Victorian England, Southeast Asia's contemporary women have long since arrived at a far more satisfactory place than that analogy would suggest,

⁴⁰ World Economic Forum 2013. *The Global Gender Gap Report 2013* (Geneva: World Economic Forum, 2013), http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GenderGap_Report_2013.pdf.

close to equality with men in education and the professions, and with crucial roles as breadwinners and heads of households.