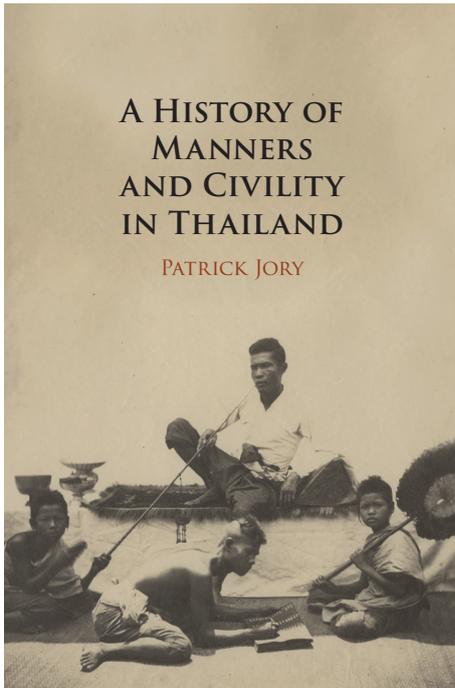


Reviews

A History of Manners and Civility in Thailand by Patrick Jory (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021). ISBN: 9781108491242 (hardcover) £75; ISBN: 9781108868006 (Kindle) \$60.49.



When I was at school in Bangkok, some friends and I represented our school in a ‘Manners Competition’. We learned and rehearsed forms of deportment: curtsying, prostrating, crawling, presenting gifts to a royal person, and many types of *wai* greetings. Little did we know that such activities, which we thought refined and graceful, and a lot of fun, would be interpreted half a century later by a historian of culture, with a different perspective, and with a few unexpected twists. This is what *A History of Manners and Civility in Thailand*, by Patrick Jory of the Southeast Asian History Department, University of Queensland, is all about.

The Siamese notion of civilization, the book argues, has so far been explained by historians as either something conceived and developed as a response to threats from colonial powers, or something inherent in Thai culture from time immemorial.

Following closely the theoretical framework of Norbert Elias, the author proposes an alternative view, namely that civilization, in the form of manners, should be understood as an adoption by individuals of higher standards of self-restraint in the midst of changes in the socio-economic and political structures at particular times in history. So, it is neither force-fed from external power, nor ingrained in the genetics of the Tai/Thai, but borne out of the interdependence of social groups who are the main actors of each period.

There are three major turning points in the history of Siamese manners. The first one took place from the late 19th century to the mid-20th century. Prior to this period, Jory argues, the Buddhist model for the conduct of monks, which equates

deportment with morality, was the ideal model of conduct. This premodern ideal was supplanted by the transformations of court society, which led to the establishment of the modern bureaucracy and the decline of the aristocratic lineages, and culminated in the introduction of new models of conduct. Chapter 3, entitled the *Making of the Gentleperson*, presents a rich description of manuals of manners. These were written primarily for the new recruits to the bureaucracy, many of whom came from a commoner background, and lacked training in the manners desirable for modern court officials. One particular book, *Sombat Phudi*, or *Qualities of a Gentleperson*, has had long-lasting influence up to the present time. Yet it should be noted that a *phudi* is not defined by birth, but by conduct, which should be cultivated and expressed bodily, verbally and mentally. It is a fusion of a secularized version of the traditional Buddhist model, and the style of a British gentleman.

The second period began with the revolution of 1932. During this time, the wealth and privileges of the aristocracy further dwindled due to the reduced size of court society, and the increasing influence of the new bureaucrats, who were educated in Europe, as well as the growth of the urban middle class. Among these new players, manners became a battleground between the aristocracy and rising commoners. This period saw a spectrum of manners literature, ranging from the courtier-oriented versions to more progressive tomes that valued social equality, individualism and self-improvement. The form and content of the literature on manners became more varied too. There were manuals for professional army personnel, magazines for women, books on dress and bodily appearance, manner of speaking, table manners, and so on. One chapter is devoted to ladies, particularly those from a court background who had a new role as the wife of a bureaucrat, and a new focus in life on the management of the household. Magazines and books on household management, socialization, and cookery abounded. Aristocratic and educated middle-class ladies began to write. Jory is especially impressed by the novel, *Ban Sai Thong*, or *Golden Sand Mansion*, in which a feisty country girl confronts her opulent aristocratic relations, and eventually gains ownership of the eponymous sumptuous mansion. This novel is seen as an analogy of the theme of the 1932 revolution when educated commoners seized power from an arrogant aristocracy.

The third turning point arrived in 1957 when the military took control in a coup, eliminated all the anti-royalist, socialist, left-wing elements, and reinstated the monarchy as the unifying symbol of the nation.

The last two chapters of the book deal with the complex series of events and societal transformations in recent history rather more cursorily than the preceding periods, and are less successful in capturing the whole picture clearly. The post 1957 era saw a number of trends, including the threat of communism, the rise of the new Chinese middle class, the revival of royal ceremonies, the growth of political parties and politicians, new relations between the business and bureaucratic sectors, and globalization.

Manners, too, were subject to a conservative turn. The book, *Qualities of a Gentleperson*, in its annotated version, became a national textbook at the time when national education policy was driven by security concerns. It was used to instill in

youth a Thai identity expressed in language, Buddhism, loyalty to the monarchy and norms of conduct. The body was turned into a space for visualizing social hierarchy via such activities as manners competitions, learning classical dance, and memorizing arcane words for addressing royal persons. It is not certain how the history of manners unfolds in the current political tension. On the one hand, the code of conduct originating in court society has lost its association with courtiers, but survived and flourished as a national identity through the national school curriculum. On the other hand, the author appears to have hope in the new generation, who are more open, globally connected and more democratic, to bring about a new code of conduct for a new society to come.

A History of Manners and Civility in Thailand is without doubt a thought-provoking and engaging book. It contains a wealth of information on the literature about manners—manuals, novels, cookery books and school textbooks—produced since the late 19th century. Translations from Thai are given with excellent command of the language. Many of these publications have become little known, and we have the author to thank for bringing them to scholarly attention. Included among them are intriguing titles. One example is *Chanya Khong Bao*, or *Conduct for Servants*, presumably written not to be read by servants, but by upstart masters who had no clue how well-mannered servants should behave. But more importantly, the life history of manners in Siam/Thailand is seen from a novel point of view as a response to internal changes within Thai society, which saw the formation of new institutions and new social groups at the dawn of modernity. This is certainly a fascinating book that should have an important place in the study of Thai cultural history.

Like all inspiring books, *A History of Manners and Civility in Thailand* provides fascinating answers and at the same time raises questions. Here are a few that may generate more dialogue and further research. The first thing that one can say about the scope of the book is that it is very much Bangkok-centred. The corpus of texts on manners was mainly produced, consumed, and adopted by the upper strata of the capital city—the aristocrats, bureaucrats and well-to-do families. To what extent they reached, and were received by the population in the provinces remains unknown. Even though the administrative reforms in the 19th century aimed to integrate regional polities into the centralized administration, local languages, customs, and manners, which are diverse and different from the manual books of the Bangkok elites, persisted for a long time. With the advent of globalization, mass tourism and cultural industry, these local and ethnic practices are repackaged as items of cultural heritage and serve as tourist attractions.

The second issue concerns the approach to the study of manners. Jory's approach is that of an intellectual historian, who addresses manners from written texts, and not what happens on the ground. It traces the intentions of those who produce such literature, and explains broad sociopolitical forces underlying such production. But it does not address how manners are practised in everyday life. The book begins with a lively incident of a fight at a railway station, started by a man lifting his luggage through a window, and over the head of an aristocrat, who claimed it was an act dishonouring the royal family. I would prefer to have more cases like this throughout

the book. Unfortunately, this is the only example given in detail. Seeing manners from the point of view of practice is crucial, as Jory refers to the concept of ‘habitus’, which means that the official code of conduct is internalized by individuals and acted out almost as a second nature. To assess the significance of manners in the course of history, we need more study on which parts of the code of conduct are practised by which groups, among whom, in public or in private. The question of practice is particularly important for the ‘bourgeoisie’, the ‘middle-class’ or the ‘Sino-Thai new middle-class’, all of whom were important social groups, but there is little discussion how they adopted, or negotiated, with the elitist manners while maintaining their own customs and manners in more domestic or commercial spheres.

The last thing one might ask is a more general question of what manners are, why human societies have manners, or what manners mean to people who practise them? This book seems to present a somewhat dark undertone of manners, seeing them as the product of relations among social classes, and a means for the more powerful to tame the body and mind of the less powerful. But manners are not only about the exercise of power and domination. Manners involve self-restraint in the presence of others, and in that respect we can think of them as concerns and care for others too. Manners evolve not only in European or Siamese court societies. Ethnographic accounts from small-scale societies across the world, once looked down upon as uncivilized, all have prescribed codes of conduct for members of their ethnic groups to enact in the presence of elders, chiefs, trading partners or spirits, in various social situations. I am not asking for one book to address everything. As the first full-length study of manners in Thailand, *A History of Manners* is groundbreaking, and has already made a major contribution. Considering that manners have a myriad of meanings and values, I just hope that Jory’s study will inspire more histories of manners in Thailand to be written.

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