The Role of Lan Na Women in Historical Perspective

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Abstract—This article examines and interprets the social construction of women's roles within the historical context and background of the Lan Na Kingdom. The historical, political, economic, and socio-cultural characteristics of the region influenced the construction and refinement of male and female gender roles. These social processes created parallel and nuanced relationships between the roles of men and women, allowing Lan Na women to engage actively and harmoniously alongside men in several activities.

Keywords: Gender Roles; Historical Change; Lan Na; Matrilineal Society; Northern Thailand

Introduction

The term "Lan Na" (ล้านนา)—literally "land of a million rice fields"—refers to a historically rich kingdom in northern Thailand that thrived for centuries. Most studies on Lan Na have concentrated on political, economic, and socio-cultural developments, typically through a male-centered lens. In contrast, the roles and experiences of Lan Na women have been underexplored, partly due to limited historical records and the oral nature of women's social lives. As a result, historical narratives often obscure or stereotype their roles.

However, it is reductive to assume Lan Na women played only minor or oppressed roles. Creating academic space to examine their contributions is essential for a fuller understanding of gender dynamics, as such inquiry can uncover the complexity and significance of women's roles in society, culture, and the economy.

This article investigates gender roles in Lan Na from the 13th to the 19th centuries, spanning three key periods of what I term the traditional state era: (1) the independent Mangrai dynasty from the 13th to the mid-16th century; (2) Burmese rule from the mid-16th to the late 18th century; and (3) Siamese overlordship from the late 18th to the late 19th century (Sarassawadee 2566). Despite political changes, palm-leaf legal codes indicate that Lan Na's economy and social structures—based on subsistence agriculture and a man-power-based tribute system—remained relatively consistent (Aroonrut 2520). These conditions fostered kinship- and patronage-based community networks, reflected in the legal system, such as in the *Mangraisat* (มังรายศาสตร์) code (ed. Prasert 2521).

This legal code offers valuable insights into women's property rights and domestic roles. Lan Na's legal texts often show a more balanced view of gender than Indianized Mon law. For

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example, while the Mon code frames the husband as the wife's "master" and entitles him to compensation if she is harmed (Forchhammer 1892: 6, 10), such provisions seem to be absent in Lan Na law. In fact, even 19th-century Western observers noted the more equitable nature of Lan Na family laws, which governed divorce with "just and humane" principles (Perkins 1884: 444).

By examining social structures, beliefs, and economic relationships during the traditional state era, this article aims to reconstruct the gendered roles of Lan Na women. It argues that these roles were shaped not only by subsistence-based economies but also by kinship systems, religious ideology, and customary law—factors that sometimes enabled women's participation even in political life.

Lan Na Women in Governance

The *Yuan shi* (元史), the official history of the Chinese Yuan dynasty, compiled in the 14th century, refers to Lan Na as Babai xi fu (八百媳婦), the "country of the 800 concubines" (Liew-Herres et al. 2008: 53). Supakarn & Pipu (2561: 73) elaborate: "The leader of that land had 800 concubines, each governing a separate fortress, which is how the name originated". This description, while exoticized through a foreign gaze, reflects a worldview in which women in Lan Na could act as representatives of the ruler or as co-rulers in their own right.

Local chronicles corroborate this political agency. *The Nan Chronicle* (พื้นเมืองน่าน) records that the ruler's consort was entrusted with governing a provincial town while he resided elsewhere (ed. & trans. Wyatt & Prasoet 1966: 3–5). Later, a similar arrangement is noted, with another consort appointed to administer the same town while her husband resumed rule over the central domain. Similarly, King Saen Phu (r. 1325–1334) entrusted the governance of Chiang Mai to his mother and son while he remained in Chiang Saen (Saeng 2501: 96).

Lan Na's political history also acknowledges the authority of two female monarchs of the Mangrai dynasty: (1) Queen Chiraprapha Thewi (จิระประภาเทวี; r. 1545–1546) and (2) Queen Wisutthi Thewi (วิสุทธิเทวี; r. 1564–1578). The political ideology of the Mangrai dynasty upheld a system of bilateral succession, in which royal inheritance could be traced through either the paternal or maternal line. While noblemen without royal lineage were excluded from kingship, this structure allowed royal women to ascend the throne. Their legitimacy was affirmed through honorific titles such as *phra nang* (พระนาง), "Her Majesty", and *thewi* (เทวี), "Queen", which emphasized both their femininity and sovereign authority. An inscription at the base of a buddha image from Chiang Mai refers to Queen Wisutthi Thewi as "Her Majesty the Queen, the greatest of Nopburi" (ed. Penth 2519: 101). Her reign is further documented in the 1597 royal silver plaque, which issued a protective decree for commoners assigned to Wat Rat Wisutharam (วัดราชวิสุทธาราม) during the 1632 Burmese round-up (Kraisri 2533: 52–54).

Visual and oral traditions also preserve the memory of women's leadership. A mural from Wat Nong Bua

Figure 1: Queen Phromchari confronts King Kawintharat with a female parade opposing male forces, Wat Nong Bua, Nan, 19th c. © Francesco Germi

(วัดหนองบัว) in Nan depicting the *Candagāthajātaka* (จันทคาธชาดก), the 11th story in the latter section of the *Paññāsajātaka* collection (ed. 2478), reveals the story of Queen Phromchari (พรหมจารี) assembling a parade of women to confront male forces led by King Kawintharat (กาวินทราช) suggesting symbolic resistance and female martial agency **[Figure 1]**.

In the 19th century, Western missionary accounts further attest to women's political influence. Presbyterian missionary Miss Emelie McGilvary noted the authority of Queen Thep Krisorn (เจ้าเทพไกรสร), consort of King Inthawichayanon (พระเจ้าอินทวิชยานนท์) (r. 1870–1897), observing that "the current queen effectively holds the reins of government, despite her husband being the nominal head" (E. McGilvary 1884: 484). She is also mentioned in other missionary diaries, where she is portrayed as a key figure in governance and a patron of missionary activity (Cheek 1884; D. McGilvary 2002).

Buddhism, the Monarchy, and Lan Na Women

The governance of the Lan Na kingdom was deeply intertwined between the monarchy and the Buddhist sangha. Kings and queens alike actively supported and promoted Buddhism, as reflected in various legal texts. For example, *The Law of King Nan* (กฎหมายพระเจ้าน่าน), a section of the Lan Na law enacted in 1853 in Nan under the reign of King Anantaworaritdet (เจ้าอนันตวรฤทธิเดช; r. 1852–1891), required officials, nobles, and the general populace to work collectively to sustain the Buddhist religion (ed. Singkha et al. 2523: 8), while the *Mangraisat* prescribed harsh punishments—including the death penalty—for those who destroyed monasteries or Buddhist images (ed. Prasert 2521: 10). Judicial procedures in Lan Na often involved not only male and female nobles but also Buddhist monks, highlighting the integration of civil and monastic authority.

Monastic codes were often regarded as equivalent to civil laws (Aroonrut 1996: 34–37). Buddhist texts and chronicles in Southeast Asia, including in the Lan Na tradition, emphasized the ten royal virtues (*thosaphit ratchatham*; ทศพิธราชธรรม), as the ideal qualities of a righteous ruler. These virtues ensured peace and prosperity, while their neglect brought about disorder and misfortune. One of the six royal traditions specifically addressed the moral obligations of rulers, affirming that ethical governance was central to the legitimacy of sovereign power. Accordingly, women who held political authority in Lan Na were expected to embody these same principles.

According to Lan Na custom and political tradition, queens who assumed sovereign authority were regarded no differently from male rulers. Both were considered *khun tham* (ขุนธรรม)—masters of dharma—entrusted with upholding righteousness and moral order (ed. Prasert 2521: 9). The *Mangraisat* stresses that rulers must be guided by virtue and compassion, treating commoners (*phrai*; ไพร่) with care and refraining from exploitation. Tyrannical rulers are labeled *khun man* (ขุนมาร)—masters of demons—who bring ruin to the polity. Whether male or female, rulers who governed according to dharma were believed to accumulate spiritual merit and power. Ultimately, the ideal ruler was envisioned as progressing toward buddhahood (Amara 2555: 40).

This conception of virtuous kingship rests on the broader Buddhist cosmology of *saṁsāra*—the cycle of rebirth—and the accumulation of *puñña*, or merit, over multiple lifetimes. Royal authority was thus interpreted as the karmic result of merit amassed in previous existences. Significantly, this merit-based cosmology carried gendered implications: to be reborn as a male was seen as a necessary condition for kingship. For a woman to be born female and yet become a sovereign indicated not only an exceptional store of merit but also a transcendence of her gender in karmic terms (Andaya 2006: 15). Her status as ruler was therefore interpreted as a sign of extraordinary spiritual advancement.

Lan Na Women as Queen Mothers

The cases of female monarchs in Lan Na illustrate the significant political and religious roles played by high-born

women, particularly in the position of Queen Mother (*mahathewi*; มหาเทวี). These women not only supported their sons' ascensions to the throne but often acted as regents and wielded real political power. In Chiang Mai, Queen Mother Tilok Chutha Thewi (ติโลกจุฑาเทวี) backed her son King Sam Fang Kaen (พระญาสามฝั่งแกน; r. 1402–1441), and Queen Mother Siriyosawadi Thewi (สิริยศวดีเทวี) supported King Mueang Kaeo (พระเมืองแก้ว; r. 1495–1525).

The Chiang Mai Chronicle (ตำนานพื้นเมืองเชียงใหม่) records that the mother of King Tilokarat (พระเจ้าติโลกราช; r. 1442–1487) led troops in battle against Mueang Phrae and played a decisive role in securing her son's succession (ed. & trans. Wyatt & Aroonrut 1998). Along with the nobles of Lampang, she overthrew King Sam Fang Kaen in 1442 and installed her own son, demonstrating the strength of maternal kinship during the Mangrai dynasty. According to the *Jinakālamālīpakaraṇaṁ* (ed. Saeng 2501: 112), when King Tilokarat temporarily ordained as a monk, he appointed his mother regent. Together, they expanded Lan Na's territory eastward during the 1440s (Wyatt & Aroonrut 1998: 128–129).

Queen mothers also acted as major patrons of Buddhism. Inscriptions record their donations of labor, land, and resources to temples. For example, an inscription from Wat San Makha (วัดสันมะค่า) in Lamphun, dated 1488, states that the Queen Mother commissioned Wat Weluwan (วัดเวฬุวัน) and dedicated the merit to protect both herself and the king, while assigning four households to serve the monastery (*Collected Inscriptions*, ed. 2508: 160–161). Another inscription from Wat Chang Kham (วัดช้างค้ำ) in Nan, dated 1500, records her offering of land, rice, and 29 households to the temple (Ibid.: 195–196). Such acts reflected both religious devotion and political authority.

Though some high-born women commanded armies or ruled as regents, because of their gender they could not ascend the throne. The Queen Mother of King Tilokarat, despite leading military campaigns, never ruled outright. Religious patronage may also have served as a means of accumulating merit toward rebirth as a male and eventual kingship. An inscription on the base of a buddha image attributed to Phra Mae Sri Mata (พระแม่ศรีมาตา)—likely the Queen Mother herself—expresses the wish to be reborn as a man and to become a disciple of Metteyya, the future Buddha (*Inscriptions of Sukhothai*, ed. 2527: 197–198). Similarly, Queen Mother Siriyosawadi Thewi's patronage of Wat Tapotaram (วัดตโปทาราม) may reflect the same aspiration (*Lan Na Inscriptions*, ed. 2551: 40–44).

Marriage Alliances of Lan Na Royal Women

Marriage alliances were a significant diplomatic tool in Lan Na, used to forge and maintain relationships across royal courts. These kinship-based arrangements involved the exchange of princesses and noblewomen to foster peace, facilitate trade, support cultural and socio-economic ties, and strengthen political bonds between ruling families, including external kingdoms (Singha 2016: 875).

Royal women played an active role in shaping such alliances. The Queen Mother in Lan Na often influenced the marital decisions of rulers to consolidate

dynastic ties and affirm political legitimacy. For instance, Chitra Maha Thewi (จิตรามหาเทวี) arranged for her son, King Kue Na (พระญากือนา; r. 1355–1385), to marry her relative, Princess Yasunthara (ยสุนทรา) of Mueang Chiang Khong. Later, Yasunthara Thewi facilitated the marriage of her son, King Saen Mueang Ma (พระญาแสนเมืองมา; r. 1385–1401), to her lady-in-waiting Tilok Chutha Thewi, who became Queen Mother and supported her son's accession to the throne as King Sam Fang Kaen (Wyatt & Aroonrut 1998: 66, 69–71; Sarassawadee 2562: 17–18).

From the Mangrai dynasty through the Siamese tributary era, diplomatic marriages continued to serve as mechanisms of alliance-building. Royal daughters were married into other dynasties to secure strategic relationships (Grabowsky 2008: 14). As discussed earlier, Yuan dynasty sources refer to Babai xi fu, the "country of the 800 concubines", a perhaps hyperbolic phrase that nonetheless reflected the extensive network of marriage alliances in the region. According to *The Mulasasana Chronicle* (ed. Sommai 2519: 7), Chiang Mai princesses married rulers of neighboring polities: Nang Kaeo Phota (นางแก้วพอตา), daughter of King Chai Songkhram (พระญาไชยสงคราม) (r. 1311–1325), wed King Thao Kham Daeng (ท้าวคำแดง) of Mueang Phayao, while a daughter of King Kue Na was married to Chao Ai On (เจ้าอ้ายอ่อน) of Chiang Tung.

During Siamese suzerainty, these alliances remained crucial. Chao Sri Anocha (เจ้าศรีอโนชา), sister of King Kawila (พระเจ้ากาวิละ; r. 1775–1816) of Chiang Mai, married Chao Phraya Surasi (เจ้าพระยาสุรสีห์), who later became Somdet Phra Boworatchao Maha Surasinghanat (สมเด็จพระบวรราชเจ้ามหาสุรสิงหนาท), viceroy to King Rama I (r. 1782–1809). This union reinforced the tributary bond with Siam. After her marriage, Chao Sri Anocha played a critical political and military role during the 1781 rebellion of Phraya San (พระยาสรรค์) against Thonburi. While Chao Phraya Chakri (เจ้าพระยาจักรี) and Chao Phraya Surasi led the counter-offensive against Khmer forces, Chao Sri Anocha mobilized the displaced Lan Na residents of Ban Pak Phriao (บ้านปากเพรียว) in Saraburi, to free Thonburi. According to *The Chiang Mai Chronicle*, "Chao Khrok Sri Anocha upheld the city and respectfully invited Chao Phaya Chakri and Chao Phaya Surasi into power" (ed. & trans. Wyatt & Aroonrut 1998: 220).

Such dynastic alliances were further instrumental during the late 19th century, amidst colonial pressures and commercial disputes, especially over teak concessions. The Chiang Mai treaties in 1873 and 1883 likely coincided with the formal reception of Lan Na princesses into the Bangkok court: Royal High Consort Thipkesorn (เจ้าจอมมารดาทิพเกสร) in 1876 and Her Highness Princess Dara Rasmi (พระราชชายา เจ้าดารารัศมี; 1873–1933) in 1886, during the reign of King Chulalongkorn (Sarassawadee 2562: 23) **[Figure 2]**.

The Economic Role of Lan Na Women

The history of the Lan Na Kingdom reflected a subsistence economy that fostered strong family and community ties. Agricultural activities, the backbone of this economy, relied heavily on human labor and required mutual support

Figure 2: HH Princess Dara Rasmi, princess consort of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V). Public Domain

among kin and neighbors. The tradition of "exchange of labor" (*ao mue ao wan*; เอามื้อเอาวัน)—where labor was reciprocated without monetary compensation—underscores the collaborative nature of production within local communities. This system was embedded in a social structure shaped by kinship networks, where economic activity and gender roles were necessarily intertwined. Under this mode of subsistence production, both women and men worked in a mutually dependent manner to sustain household and community life.

The state's labor conscription system required men to serve for designated periods, during which women assumed responsibility for all domestic and agricultural tasks. The *Mangraisat* notes, for example, that when a husband was conscripted, his wife was tasked with providing food for him (ed. Prasert 2521: 7). In addition to conscripted labor, men often engaged in long-distance trade, which necessitated extended absences from the household.

As a result, men and women operated in distinct but complementary

economic spheres like almost anywhere else.[2] Men were associated with activities outside the home in public or external spaces, while women—due to their roles in childbirth and caregiving—were more closely tied to the home and family (Van Esterik 1995: 253). The social structure of Lan Na, in which women typically remained on the land and within their natal communities, positioned them as key proprietors and facilitators of local economic life (Chiralak 2539). Women played central roles in managing household finances, producing goods, and participating in local markets.

These roles were further integrated with the spiritual and kinship systems of Lan Na, particularly the veneration of ancestor spirits. Gender roles were embedded in lineages traced through both paternal and maternal lines (Yos 2536: 25). The interplay of kinship, belief, and labor created a system of reciprocal support between men and women. As such, the division of labor did not give rise to the structural oppression or control of women. On the contrary, contemporary observers such as female missionaries in Chiang Mai noted that women in Lan Na were not subjugated; rather, they held considerable influence and authority within their communities (E. McGilvary 1884: 484).

Academic presentations regarding women in pre-modern Southeast Asia, such as those by Reid (1988a) and Booth (2016), suggest that women in Southeast Asia played significant economic roles. Reid (1988b: 629) noted that the influences of Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, and Confucianism, which have intensified in Southeast Asia for over 400 years, have not diminished the economic importance of women. In the subsistence economy of Lan Na, women continued to enjoy economic autonomy and played vital roles as producers across all social classes. High-status women, such as Princess Ubonwanna (เจ้าอุบลวรรณา; 1842–1886), could hold significant economic and social roles in Chiang Mai. Village women participated in trade at the community level, contributing to their family's economic well-being. Market traders were predominantly women and the goods they sold were often essential consumer products. These activities were observed and noted by Westerners in Lan Na during the 19th century (e.g., Perkins 1884: 451–452; Wilson 1884: 493).

Their participation in family economic activities is also reflected in various Lan Na literary works that depict women as merchants. For example, the poem *Kam Ka Dam* (กำกาดำ; "Black Crow") describes a market woman as follows: "[T]he woman merchant sells various goods, including sweet desserts, mangoes, longans, beans, fresh ripe fruits, watermelon, cucumber, and jackfruit" (ed. 2511: 73; my translation). These vignettes illustrate the integral role of women in community economic activities, highlighting their contributions to local markets and the family economy. Lan Na women established economic roles by controlling the local

[2] The concept of public and private spheres has been the subject of various academic discourses since the publication of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* by Jürgen Habermas (1962). The concept of gender role divisions employed in this article has been extensively discussed, especially within feminist theory.

Figure 3: Female vendors at the Kat Luang market in Chiang Mai, late 19th c. © Chiang Mai City Heritage Center

economy as traders. Even lullabies often mention women's economic activities alongside those of men, such as agricultural work and trading activities in the market. For instance, one Lan Na lullaby describes groups of female traders sitting in rows in a market, selling items like pork, vegetables, catfish, corn, sweets, and textiles (Phanphen 2552: 41–63); these products corresponded with those documented by American missionaries who observed the market in Chiang Mai during the 19th century (Perkins 1884: 438).

A photograph of the primary market (*kat luang*; กาดหลวง), established in 1889 on the left bank of the Ping River in central Chiang Mai, highlights the prominent role of women in the local economy. Here we see Lan Na women actively engaged in commercial activities **[Figure 3]**.

Furthermore, Lan Na's laws reflected a system of market exchange at the community level, where buyers and sellers were primarily local residents or individuals from nearby areas. This type of trade occurred in village markets, where villagers exchanged goods with one another. The Law of *Khlong Phitcharana Taeng Thoi Chon Kham* (คลองพิจารณาแต่งถ้อยชนคำ)[3] noted that people from other towns came to purchase rice at the Chiang Mai market (ed. Manee 2518: 26).

[3] This refers to judgment practices in the Lan Na Mangrai dynasty, dating back to the reigns of King Kue Na (r. 1355–1385), King Tilokarat (r. 1441–1487), and King Yot Chiang Rai (r. 1487–1495).

The role of women in these markets is also evident in Lan Na's legal corpus. For instance, in the *Judgment of Phra Phutthakhosachan* (คลองตัดคำพระพุทธโฆษาจารย์), case no. 1—concerning a theft—reveals that the stolen goods were sold to several female merchants at the market; the case was resolved through investigations involving these women (Winai 2549: 58–59). Case no. 9 describes a dispute between two female merchants selling woven goods at the Chiang Rueak market (Ibid.: 99).

In addition to their roles as traders, Lan Na women contributed significantly to the economic well-being of their households. William Clifton Dodd (1857–1919), a Western missionary in Lan Na, observed that mothers wielded greater decision-making power in domestic and financial matters than fathers and held considerable economic influence within the household (Dodd 1996: 307). Women were responsible for managing household finances: they not only earned income but also oversaw household expenditures (Davis 1984: 68). Lan Na poetic teachings portray women, particularly as wives, as industrious figures engaged in agriculture to ensure abundant harvests, build financial reserves, and support their families. A woman's determination, these texts such as *Withun Teaches the World* (โคลงวิธูรสอนโลก; ed. Sommai & Puangkham 2518: 27) suggest, would lead to positive outcomes.

The economic roles of Lan Na women reflected broader societal norms—both accepted and expected. This is illustrated in teachings that emphasize a wife's duty to manage and safeguard household assets. If a woman failed in this responsibility, leading to a loss of property, she could be compared to a thief who steals from the household (Prakhong 2551: 21). A Lan Na proverb—ผัวบ่นับถือเมีย เงินคำเต็มเยียก่เสี้ยง เมียบ่นับถือผัว เงินคำกองเท่าหัวก่เสี้ยง ("If the husband does not respect his wife, even a barn full of riches will be wasted. If the wife does not respect her husband, even a mound of gold as tall as her head will be exhausted")—underscores the importance of mutual respect between husband and wife to ensure the prosperity of the household (Samorn 2558: 118–119).

Women were expected not only to nurture family members but also to contribute economically by producing household goods such as woven textiles and handicrafts. A "good" woman was characterized as diligent and frugal—qualities reflected in Pakdeekul 2565. For instance, case no. 10 in the *Judgment of Phra Phutthakhosachan*, involves a lawsuit between a husband, Ma Rongsin (ม้าโรงสิน), and his wife, Sri Sopha (ศรีโสภา). Known for her playfulness and laziness, Sri Sopha neglected household duties such as spinning and weaving for domestic use or trade. More critically, she repeatedly borrowed money for personal use without repayment, insisting her husband repay the debts, which eventually accumulated and harmed the family. She also deceived her noble uncle, who filed a legal complaint—illegally—against her husband, violating ancient law prohibiting wives from suing their spouses.[4] After

[4] The *Judgment of Phra Phutthakhosachan* delineated three categories of lawsuits that violated ancient customs: (1) a wife initiating legal action against her husband; (2) a servant pursuing claims against his master; and (3) a child filing suit against his parents. The filing of these cases was prohibited (Winai 2549: 104).

investigation, Sri Sopha was convicted of causing discord in the family and community. King Kue Na ruled that her behavior matched that of a "wife as robber" (*chori phariya*; โจรีภริยา) and permitted Ma Rongsin to sell her without legal repercussions (Winai 2549: 100–104).

This ruling reflects principles found in the *Mangraisat*, which warns that personal borrowing and lending can lead to conflict and disrupt social harmony. Such offenses could incur severe penalties, including being sold to another city or exiled (ed. Prasert 2521: 10, 12). These legal sanctions aimed to deter socially disruptive behavior and reinforce communal order.

Lan Na culture thus sought to shape and instill virtuous traits in women: diligence, industriousness, and thrift—qualities aligned with a subsistence-based lifestyle. Women's labor was essential to both household and community economies, particularly in households where men were conscripted for state labor. The traditional system of state production relied heavily on mutual cooperation within the family. If women refused these roles, it threatened not only familial stability but also the functioning of the state.

Matrilineal Elements in Lan Na Society

A matrilineal society, while debated in anthropology (Sanday 2008), is often characterized by three key norms: (1) descent through the mother; (2) a matrilocal residential system; and (3) inheritance of property by females (Das 2018: 410). The Lan Na matrilineal society was shaped by a matrilineal descent group based on descent traced through women and whose primary function is the worship of ancestral familiar spirits (Turton 1972: 217). Generally, when a man married, he became a member of his wife's matrilineage (Potter 1976: 120) by "buying entry" (*sue khao*; ซื้อเข้า), which resulted in the loss of his connection to his mother's group (Turton 1984: 273). The Reverend Daniel McGilvary (1828–1911) noted, "After marriage, the almost universal custom of the country has been that the husband lives with the wife's family. He becomes identified with it, and for the time, a subordinate member of it, almost to the extent of becoming weaned from his own family" (2002: 178).

Male children become affiliated with their maternal group by filiation and may retain this affiliation throughout their lives; however, children typically do not possess membership rights in their father's mother's group (Turton 1984: 273). Thus, the maternal brother, who typically becomes a member of the wife's family after marriage and thereby loses his mother's group, finds it difficult to manage his sister's inheritance as a close maternal relative.[5]

However, both sons and daughters shared in the division of inheritance and property in Lan Na society. There was, however, a notable pattern of inheritance whereby parents often bequeathed houses and land to their daughters, who tended to live nearby or cohabitate with

[5] Cohen (1984) notes that, in theory, although an affinal male integrates into his mother's group, in practice, he is allowed to belong to either his wife's or mother's descent group; multiple memberships are rare.

them. Sons typically inherited movable assets, such as monetary resources and livestock, while female siblings inherited land. The youngest daughter, who frequently cared for the parents, often received a larger share of the inheritance compared to her siblings (Anan 2560; Aroonrut 2554: 12), including the ancestral house. The *Thammasat Pakorana* (ธรรมศาสตรปกรณ) stated that, according to the traditional legal code, the distribution of family inheritance to women was divided into multiple portions, as women served as custodians of the property (ed. 2551: 135). The *Mangraisat* indicated that most property was allocated to the daughter who remained at home to care for the parents (ed. & trans. Aroonrut & Wijeyewardene 1986: 43–44). Additionally, in case no. 6 of the *Judgment of Phra Phutthakhosachan*, the mother bequeathed the inheritance to her married youngest daughter who continued to reside at home to care for the parents, rather than to her son, who had relocated to his wife's residence (Winai 2549: 89). This practice effectively consolidates land control within the family through the daughter (Mougne 1981).

Thus, family structure in Lan Na resulted in a pronounced tendency for households to be organized around women, since daughters—especially the youngest daughters who married last—generally inherited the family home. Men typically married into their wives' families and initially resided in their wives' parents' homes. Consequently, it was customary to construct the newly married couple's dwelling near the bride's parents' residence. This arrangement was noted in a foreign document by Carl Bock (1849–1932), who remarked that "a newly married young man is scarcely ever to be found living with his father, but with his father-in-law" (1884: 183). Furthermore, the principle of preferential matrilocal residence served as the foundation for lineage residence. Over successive generations, a core group of matrilineally related women might establish a cluster of households near one another. These households engaged in the worship of familial spirits (Potter 1976: 141).

Kinship Ties through Female Ancestral Spirits

In Lan Na society, beliefs in ancestral spirits help shape kinship norms and women's status. Kin ties are traced through the female line—from mother to daughter—and because men marry into women's households, women are seen as receiving protection from their natal kin. They also retain the ability to negotiate and form alliances within marriage, while men, as outsiders, are slow to gain authority (Yos 2536: 25).

According to Marion Alonzo Cheek, a 19th-century missionary, nearly all social and domestic interactions in Lan Na were guided by spiritual considerations (Cheek 1884: 505). The kinship system, known as *sai phi* (สายผี), reflected this worldview. Membership in a *sai phi* was determined by descent and individuals within the same line venerated shared ancestral spirits (*phi diao kan*; ผีเดียวกัน). Crucially, this lineage was strictly matrilineal; spirits are transmitted through women (Potter 1976; Cohen 1984; Turton 1984), and marriage is prohibited between those sharing the same spirit line (Mougne 1981).

The ancestral spirits, known as *phi pu ya* (ผีปู่ย่า), are believed to originate from founding ancestors and are passed through the maternal line. While *pu* and *ya* in central Thai refer to paternal grandparents, in Lan Na they may include both patrilateral and matrilateral kin. Nonetheless, in Lan Na the cult of *phi pu ya* follows matrilineal succession: spiritual membership is inherited from mother to child (Davis 1984; Turton 1984; Rhum 1994).

Phi pu ya serve as protectors of family members, guarding against illness, death, malevolent spirits, and harm from others (Aroonrut 2554: 115). They also function as instruments of social control. Within the village, they are seen as enforcing proper conduct and punishing transgressions, especially in relation to women. Spirit violation (*phit phi*; ผิดผี) discourages men from violating women's autonomy: any unwanted physical contact with a woman, regardless of her consent, is seen as an offense against her ancestral spirits (Turton 1972; Aroonrut 2554: 116–118).

Beliefs surrounding ancestral spirits are transmitted through the senior woman of a matrilineage, known as the *kao phi* (เก๊าผี)—literally "origin of the spirit". The *kao phi* functions as the spiritual and familial leader, a role typically passed from mother to eldest daughter (Tanabe 1991). As custodian of the lineage's rituals, she mediates between the family and ancestral spirits, upholds ritual practices, and conveys the faith embedded in the *phi pu ya*. The ancestral shrine is regarded as *sing saksit* (สิ่งศักดิ์สิทธิ์), "holy thing", through which the family seeks merit **[Figure 4]**.[6]

Matrilineal inheritance in Lan Na is closely tied to these beliefs. The term *mae huan* (แม่เฮือน) signifies the female head of household. A related term, *mae chao huan* (แม่เจ้าเฮือน), "mistress of the house", appears frequently in legal contexts concerning marriage and divorce. According to the *Mangraisat* legal code, property acquired before marriage was considered part of the woman's estate. Upon divorce, two-thirds of marital property went to the wife and their custody was granted to her (ed. Prasert 2521: 15). If the husband abused his wife, he forfeited all shared assets "because during his residence, he mistreated the owner of the house" (ed. & trans. Aroonrut & Wijeyewardene 1986: 40).

The Socio-Cultural Roles of Lan Na Women

The integration of Buddhism and animism profoundly shaped the worldview of the Lan Na people and their socio-cultural system (Muecke 1992). Gender roles reflect this synthesis, especially in religious activities that illustrate the complementary, mutually reinforcing responsibilities of men and women.

Barbara Watson Andaya (2007: 18) argues that Theravada Buddhist principles position women—especially mothers—as patrons of the religion. In addition to nurturing children, women promote Buddhism by encouraging their sons to enter the monkhood. While men

[6] The concept of the "holy thing" in Thailand, as demonstrated by McGovern (2024), does not simply represent a mixture of different religious elements, but rather reflects a convergence of multiple discourses on religion, whereby the same object may be interpreted through diverse religious frameworks.

Figure 4: Annual ancestral ritual at the *kao phi* residence, April–June © Puvamin Indee

perpetuate Buddhism through ordination (*buat*; บวช), women express their devotion through motherhood and merit-making (*tham bun*; ทำบุญ). Giving birth and supporting a son's novice ordination accrue significant merit, improving a woman's prospects in both this life and the next (Lefferts 1999: 218). In Lan Na, the tradition of early ordination reflects the belief that the sangha should be entered before boys become entangled in worldly experiences. As a result, novice ordination was often considered more spiritually potent than ordination as a monk (Srilao 2538: 33).

The *phithi tham khwan nak* (พิธีทำขวัญนาค), a ritual preceding the monk ordination ceremony, provides an example of the syncretism between Buddhism and spirit worship. Though not found in the Tipiṭaka (พระไตรปิฎก), the ritual often includes offerings and symbols that evoke spirit beliefs. In particular, before ordination, the man embodies the *nak* (นาค), or serpent—a symbol of indigenous animist traditions—thus reconciling spirit worship with Buddhist ideals under the same ritual umbrella (Sujit 2559). These interwoven systems of belief assign distinct yet complementary responsibilities to men and women, serving as powerful agents in the gender socialization process.

Notably, in Lan Na Buddhism, women—not men—play a crucial role in connecting the community through traditional animist beliefs. One striking example is the role of the female spirit medium (*ma khi*; ม้าขี่, lit. "ridden horse"). The term refers to women whose bodies are believed to have been chosen by

spirits as their human vessels. Historically, women have overwhelmingly occupied this role, which typically lasts a lifetime (Thidawan 2006: 30). These *ma khi* act as intermediaries for ancestral spirits or guardian spirits, offering assistance in matters of health, property, and familial distress.

Historical records suggest that Princess Ubonwanna, daughter of King Kawilorot (r. 1856–1870), employed a *ma khi luang* (ม้าขี่หลวง)—a royal medium—for political ends. Through this channel, she transmitted warnings from the royal ancestral spirits regarding the harmful impact of the Chinese-controlled whisky monopoly in 19th-century Lan Na, as documented by both Western visitors and missionary accounts (Grabowsky 2016: 218).

Women who serve as spirit mediums gain religious authority outside of the Buddhist framework. These roles provide them with autonomy and control through non-Buddhist rituals. While ancestral spirit worship—often transmitted through the maternal line—can reinforce gender roles, it also opens space for gender negotiation. Men tend to dominate public religious and political authority, whereas women exercise agency in domestic and economic spheres, as well as in spiritual practices outside the sangha. This dual system reflects both a symbolic gender hierarchy and the coexistence of Buddhist values with indigenous beliefs (Rhum 1994).

Ultimately, Lan Na women derive social power from matrilineal structures, where men often move into the wife's household after marriage. As central figures in the household and ritual life, women maintain independence through roles as spirit mediums, healers, and fortune tellers—positions that reaffirm their social status and religious legitimacy beyond the bounds of institutional Buddhism.

This division of roles is also visually represented in the murals at Wat Buak Krok Luang (วัดบวกครกหลวง), in Chiang Mai, where Lan Na women are engaged in domestic activities, while men fulfill obligations related to corvée labor, underscoring the complementary yet hierarchical gender roles in Lan Na society **[Figure 5]**.

Conclusion

In the traditional era of Lan Na society—prior to its full incorporation into the Siamese state—women played vital roles in spiritual and domestic spheres. However, political, economic, and ideological transformations during the tributary and post-tributary periods profoundly altered these dynamics. The completion of the northern railway to Chiang Mai in 1921 and the administrative reforms of 1933 marked the region's integration into a centralized Siamese state. The Sangha Administration Act of 1902 restructured Buddhism, weakening the autonomy of the Lan Na Sangha and marginalizing influential local monks such as Kruba Srivichai (ครูบาศรีวิชัย; 1878–1939; see Bowie 2023).

These changes coincide with economic shifts from subsistence farming to commercial and industrial production. Women increasingly leave their communities for urban wage labor, altering household dynamics and weakening matrilineal structures. The decline of

Figure 5: Mural showing Lan Na women in household tasks and men in labor conscription, Wat Buak Krok Luang, Chiang Mai © Pakdeekul Ratana

spirit worship and mediumship, once central to women's religious authority, further erode their traditional roles. Together, these developments reshape gender relations in northern Thailand, subtly but steadily transforming patterns of kinship, authority, and socialization from the traditional era to the present.

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