

Women Enter The ‘Public Sphere’: Thailand’s Post-Revolutionary Period 1932-1956¹

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Abstract

By the revolutionary year of 1932, elite Siamese women were represented in the political domain of the post-absolutist regime. They became more involved in the public sphere, participated in politics, and eventually served as agents of nationalism in the continuous era of state-building. In order to understand the pivotal role of elite women in the politics of the post-absolutist regime, this study uses the voices of the wives of politicians – La-iad Phibunsonkhram and Phunsuk Banomyong – to analyse the enhanced state’s recognition of women in the nation-building process and the promotion of greater political participation of women beyond the aristocratic class barrier.

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Introduction

Although women had been granted a space in the national discourse by the post-revolutionary year of 1932, they were still serving as objects of the state's manipulation. The organisation of the first female beauty pageant and the cultural mandates regarding representations of women are major examples of the increased female significance in the national scheme. Women became promoting agents of the constitution from 1934 through the beauty pageant *Nangsao Siam* (Miss Siam). Following the success of the revolution, the government had decided to organise an annual celebration of the constitution in December, which comprised of different performances, including the beauty pageant.³ However, this beauty pageant differed from the modern *Nangsao Thai* (Miss Thailand) that commodifies women as globalised subjects the most important objective of the Miss Siam contest was to promote the constitution and send official messages to the masses.⁴ Middle-class women who were contestants were serving as agents of the state. These annual events attracted people from middle to lower classes of the population; hence, the message from the government could easily reach the masses. Nevertheless, women were not only passive objects that were manipulated by the government; they were rather active in another national scheme – the Cultural Mandates.

Victorian Era versus *Ratthaniyom* (Cultural Mandates)

The two significant eras in Thai history, namely the absolute monarchy and the early revolutionary period, underline remarkable changes that have shaped Thai society and especially the role of women. Both periods demonstrate the state's attempts to refashion the society according to their perceptions of 'civilisation'. Although the target group of women in the civilising mission of the two periods were two distinct groups, the causes and approaches were similar. The

³ The pageant took place annually from 1934 to 1940 but due to the crisis of the Second World War, the pageant stopped and only resumed in 1948 under Phibun regime. However, the objective of the pageant shifted from the constitution promotion to the promotion of nationalism.

⁴ Sujira, "The Political Economy of the Beauty Contest" (in Thai).

Victorian era influence that was adopted by King Chulalongkorn resulted in new representations of elite women of the inner court rather than women from lower ranks. In other words, the refashioning of women's role in the late nineteenth century was confined within the Siamese court only, unlike the period of hyper-nationalism under the control of the Cultural Mandates when the state's civilising mission was subjected to all women beyond class barriers. In order to prove that the state's Cultural Mandates contributed to an increase in female participation in the public sphere, two terminologies '*siwilai*' and '*arayatham*', which offer the same meaning as the English term 'civilised', need to be examined.

'*Siwilai*' and '*Arayatham*'

A number of researchers and scholars have focused their study on Siam's survival in the colonial era. One of the major themes of this literature is the Siamese road to *siwilai*, the term that was introduced to the Siamese court from the direct English borrowing of the word 'civilise' in the second half of the nineteenth century. Both scholars Thongchai Winichakul and Maurizio Peleggi have described the civilising process of Siam as a 'conceptualised scheme'.⁵ Thongchai classifies varying degrees of *siwilai* from forest, village, city, and Europe. In the nineteenth century, the quest for being civilised was considered most important for the survival of Siam's sovereignty as carried out by Thai elites. The process of *siwilai* demonstrated the anxiety of Siamese elites to adoption of Western lifestyles. Instead of focusing on the mission of being civilised on a larger scale with varying degrees, as did Thongchai, Peleggi confined his work to the court of Siam. He illustrated the transnational cultural flows represented in the court of Siam, which can be seen in the refashioning of self-images, Westernised modes of consumption, residential and representational architectures, and public spectacles. These are all part of the new image of a *siwilai* Siam. Hence, to consume the Western sense of self was to bring the nation to being civilised.

⁵ Thongchai, "The Quest for "Siwilai", 528-549; Peleggi, *Lords of Things*.

On a similar notion, *arayatham* was a more common term for 'civilisation' in the post-revolutionary period. *Arayatham* or "peace and happiness that lie on the basis of good morals and law which includes the prosperity of custom and tradition," as defined by the Thai Royal Institute, was a preferred term that Phibun chose to use in the Cultural Mandates (*ratthaniyom*) of 1939, rather than *siwilai* that had been used earlier.⁶ The choice of terminologies reflects the political tensions of Phibun's era, in which foreigners were considered as the most dangerous enemies of state. As *siwilai* served as a safeguard to colonialism in the nineteenth century, Phibun's government employed *arayatham* to defend Thailand from foreign enemies in the pre-Second World War period. Phibun expressed his concerns on the resistance people had to the Cultural Mandates that could have been caused by "foreigners who aimed to break up" the population.⁷ Colonialism, as claimed by Phibun, was a threat to non-civilised nations. Hence, in order to escape colonialism, the Thai government sought to bring up the nation to *arayatham* or to being civilised through the promotion of the Cultural Mandates. Foreigners were seen as enemies of the state who preferred other nations to remain 'barbaric' in order to claim possessions of those territories.⁸ This message encouraged the people, of now 'Thailand', to adhere to the principles of the Cultural Mandates. While *siwilai* might have been seen as a mission led by men, *arayatham* required the participation of all people of the state, including males and females, as *rath* means 'state' and *niyom* means 'popular'. Within the political context of Phibun's era, women were once again subjects of modern representations and this time they were more active than before.

Clothing-the-Nation

Attempts to modernise the society according to the Cultural Mandates resembled the hybrid culture or the 'localised practice' adopted by the Siamese elites during the fifth reign, which was reflected in the process of clothing the nation.⁹ Jackson has pointed out that

⁶ The Royal Institute, *The Royal Institute Dictionary*, 1367 (in Thai).

⁷ Ministry of Education, *Cultural Mandates*, 15.2.1/20, 3 (in Thai).

⁸ Ministry of Education, *Cultural Mandates*, 15.2.1/20: 4 (in Thai).

⁹ Thongchai, "The Quest for "Siwilai".

Chulalongkorn's attempts to: (i) represent heterosexual relations as civilised; (ii) fully 'clothe' the population; and (iii) visually differentiate the genders, were key elements to the refashioning of the nation as one of the aspects of the *siwilai* mission.¹⁰ This highlights the high imperialist culture of the Victorian era, which had a direct influence on representations of Siamese women. As seen in official historiography, elite women of the Rama V period are represented in official texts with a great sense of modernity; for example, *Somdet phrachaolukter chaofa Walai-Alongkon* (Princess), a daughter of King Rama V, is praised highly as *satri-thansamai thisut* or the most modern woman in a country for wearing long hair and a fitted skirt.¹¹ The princess had abandoned the short man-like hairstyle and *chongkraben*, which made the women to be seen as men. The hyper-nationalist regime employed a similar approach in the practice of the Cultural Mandates. The new decree was addressed to both Thai males and females to adjust and adopt the new public dress codes as according to the nation's measurement of *arayatham*. Nonetheless, concerns went to the clothing of females more than males. Prime Minister Phibun stated in a letter to the minister of Education that the appearance of women resembles the appearance of the nation. "Seeing beautiful things such as flowers or women who are well-clothed brings happiness to the eyes and soul...if everybody dresses accordingly to the Cultural Mandates, our sovereignty will be kept in a safe place."¹² The words of Phibun demonstrate the government encouragement in the refashioning of all Thais, especially women, as part of the nation-building process.

The announcement of the Department of Propaganda of 1938 (*Krom Khotsana*) requested participations from all Thai women to adjust their dressing style in according to the following principles:

I) All Thai women are kindly requested to wear long hair as according to the popular custom of the present day.

II) All Thai women are kindly requested to stop wearing *chongkraben* and adopt fitted-skirts as according to the popular custom of the present day.

¹⁰ Jackson, "Performative Genders, Perverse Desires".

¹¹ Fine Arts Department, *Notable Ladies in Thai History* (in Thai).

¹² Ministry of Education: 15.2.1/20: 3 (in Thai).

III) All Thai women are kindly requested to wear a blouse instead of a shawl to cover the upper part of the body.¹³

From this announcement, the Western influence once again played a significant role in reshaping the images of women. In fact, all three principles that are listed in this announcement repeat the Victorian styles that had been directed by King Chulalongkorn to be adopted within the inner court in the late nineteenth century. Therefore, 'clothing the nation' between the two eras offers a similarity in relations to the concept of localised civilisation, which the ruling class of each era had interpreted and defined. The quest for *siwilai* and *arayatham* was central to state's interest and clothing the population was one significant step to achieve the goal of being called civilised. However, in the period of hyper-nationalism, the Cultural Mandates made this refashioning process a political one that went beyond class borders between elites and commoners. This is not to make the assumption that the change of the images of the women of the inner court was not a political one, but rather to underline the scale of popularity of the Cultural Mandates. The Cultural Mandates targeted the masses and women's participation was as essential as men's. Even though this attempt by the government tended to turn women into passive objects of nationalism, the state's female agents of the Cultural Mandates provide apparent evidence that the statement was rather inaccurate. The roles of wives of politicians in Thailand's early post-revolutionary government as new agents of modernity in the age of nationalism and the quest for democracy will be studied in the next part.

An Agent of Nationalism: La-Iad Phibunsongkhram

Apart from Victorian modernity, nationalism also played an influential part in representations of elite women by themselves. The use of terms such as *botbat* (role) and *phara-nathi* (responsibility) emphasised social expectations of women in the public sphere in the era of growing nationalism, which led to the emergence of a new elite group of women – the wives of politicians. *Than-phuying* La-iad Phibunsongkhram was one of the most active female state agents, who

¹³ Ministry of Education: 15.2.1/13: 4 (in Thai).

became involved in a number of social propaganda-making activities during Phibun's nationalist regime. The story of *Than-phuying* La-iad emphasises both the role and responsibility of women. She took on the dual role of a faithful wife in her household and an inspiring, enthusiastic, nation-devoted woman in her public scene as the wife of the Prime Minister and a female politician.¹⁴

Personal Life

'*Than-phuying*' is a title equal to 'lady', which La-iad was granted when her husband became the Prime Minister.¹⁵ La-iad Phankrawi was born on the 25 October 1903 in Nakhonpathom Province during the reign of King Chulalongkorn. At the age of only fourteen, she married Phibun, who was then an army cadet with a promising future. As Phibun's career was rising, La-iad's role became more influential in Thai society. Being the wife of a leader who was extra-ordinary as Phibun, La-iad's life deserves further study. The biography of La-iad underlines a significant change in the role of modern women who had to play roles in both the domestic and the public spheres. As emphasised by Prince Damrong, La-iad had successfully played both roles of a 'good wife' in domestic sphere and as 'good citizen' in the public sphere.

La-iad lived for eighty years to witness a number of changes in Thai history and even created part of history as an agent of nationalist modernity. She entered the inner court to learn the good manners of a lady, lived through the Revolution of 1932, and became the number one lady in 1938 when she was actively involved in the drafting of *ratthaniyom* with regard to women. La-iad played her role as a devoted wife and as a good role model for modern women of the nationalist regime. Her appearances in public challenged the traditional representations of the earlier high-class women. She often appeared in public scenes standing shoulder-to-shoulder with Phibun, which opposes the traditional idea that dictated that a wife always serve as the

¹⁴ Fine Arts Department, *Notable Ladies in Thai History* (in Thai).

¹⁵ *Than-phuying* is a title for wives of *chao phraya* or married women who are rewarded by the highest insignia given by the king (The Royal Institute, *The Royal Institute Dictionary*, 524).

chang thao-lang (the hind-legs of the elephant). The mentioned manners revolutionized representations of modern women in the nationalist era. Even Phibun called her *pheuan ruam chiwit* or a life-companion, which demonstrates the equal status he gave to his wife.¹⁶ As a life-companion of an influential politician in a crucial period of Thai history, La-iad proved that she was a devoted wife to her husband through all the assassination attempts and political exiles.

The biography of La-iad Phibunsongkhram describes how her husband survived three assassinations, in February 1934, November and December 1938.¹⁷ This was the reason why La-iad had to be always by his side and pay attention to every detail of her husband's routine. Food, in particular, was La-iad's major concern. In December 1938, Phibun almost died from food poisoning at his mansion within the military controlled zone. After that, La-iad took full charge of all daily meals with only a little help from trusted wives of other high-ranking military officers. Moreover, when Phibun was accused of being a war criminal after the Second World War ended, La-iad never left his side. For the five months that Phibun was jailed, La-iad visited him every day to deliver his meals. Even during Phibun's political exile, she rushed back from her overseas trip and took part in the decision-making to migrate to Japan and remained there until 1964 when Phibun passed away from heart failure.¹⁸ From this evidence, La-iad was represented as a true modern woman and wife. She demonstrates the new active role of wives. Unlike the previous era when *chaochoms* were kept only within the inner court, La-iad made her appearance always by her husband's side. Even Queen Saowapha, who acted as regent during Chulalongkorn's visit to Europe, did not portray herself as equal to the king, as La-iad did with Phibun. The queen would never have stood side by side with the king. As La-iad successfully played the role of a devoted wife in the domestic sphere, her responsibilities in the public sphere increasingly highlighted her popularity, especially in politics.

¹⁶ Jirawat, *Biography and Works of La-iad Phibunsongkhram*, 20 (in Thai).

¹⁷ Jirawat, *Biography and Works of La-iad Phibunsongkhram*, 20 (in Thai).

¹⁸ Jirawat, *Biography and Works of La-iad Phibunsongkhram*, 105 (in Thai).

Political Role

Thanphuying La-iad Phibunsongkhram fully entered the public sphere by taking significant roles in both the military and politics. Even prior to the Second World War, she was one of the prominent figures who helped draft the Cultural Mandates. However, this part of the chapter will concentrate on accomplishments that La-iad achieved in politics and the military as careers in the government. In 1942, La-iad was appointed a lieutenant colonel of the army. With the government's recruitment scheme for female cadets, Supreme Commander Phibun stated that "the most vital force in guarding the nation is the military without any gender barrier between males and females...the wise way that our ancestors had chosen. Therefore, our nation is in need of building the female military force. As a result, we must first have female officers who can train these new recruited female cadets to achieve their goal."¹⁹ La-iad then received the rank of Lieutenant Colonel in the army and was highly involved in the recruitment and training of the first generation of female cadets. In her speech upon the completion of the training of the first female cadet class in 1943, La-iad stated, "Now that you, my daughters, have completed the army training, I believe that you could handle heavy tasks as well as any man can. You can carry guns; shoot those enemies who do harm to our nation..."²⁰ From this statement, Lieutenant Colonel La-iad had given a message in the same manner as a mother would to her children, which demonstrates her influential status in the female cadet academy at the time.

Apart from her military career, La-iad was also highly involved in politics. She was twice elected as a senator, in 1949 and 1950. In the crucial year of 1957, she won a seat as a member of parliament from Nakhonnayok Province, but the coup on 16 September 1957 drove Prime Minister Phibun to exile for six months after the election. During the years when La-iad occupied a major seat as a senator in the house of parliament and the number one lady, she was actively involved in movements for political rights of women. Three major changes were demanded by La-iad: (i) women's right to vote; (ii) women's right to

¹⁹ Jirawat, *Biography and Works of La-iad Phibunsongkhram*, 252 (in Thai).

²⁰ Jirawat, *Biography and Works of La-iad Phibunsongkhram*, 262 (in Thai).

run for elections and all other public campaigns; and (iii) women's right to political positions and to perform public tasks. In her speech of February 28, 1955, La-iad mentioned that this calling for reform would enhance the status of Thai women in the eyes of foreigners. She referred to the human rights resolution of the United Nations that "the members of the United Nations agree to uphold the human rights, individual values, and equality between men and women."²¹ So in La-iad's view, *arayatham* modern civilisation could only be achieved once all women gained the ability to enjoy their deserved rights. La-iad's role in the early movement for female rights earned her an international reputation. She was elected President of the World Federation of United Nations Associations in 1956, which brought Thailand closer to the Western camp of the Cold War after SEATO (Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation) was formed in Bangkok one year earlier. From the mentioned evidence, La-iad was more than the first lady of the progressive Thai nation; she also served as an influential military and political figure. These roles clearly sharpen the image of modern Thai woman so that there were no longer excluded from the public sphere.

Cultural Role

The true legacy of *Thanphuying* La-iad Phibunsongkhram was her role in the cultural realm. As the country was moving toward the era of hyper-nationalism, the government saw the need to include women in the new development scheme. As a result, *sapha watthanatham haeng-chat*, or the National Council of Culture, was founded in 1942 with La-iad as the head of the women's committee.²² This foundation then led to the emergence of the Women Cultural Society at the provincial level all over the country. This was when La-iad had set herself as a role model for the new elite group of women. Wives of mayors and high-ranking government officers were encouraged to join this society. La-iad also often made appearances in public. Hence, this gave her the opportunity to promote the popular woman's fashion as according to *ratthaniyom*. Nevertheless, she was more than a fashion model of the modern elite

²¹ Jirawat, *Biography and Works of La-iad Phibunsongkhram*, 479 (in Thai).

²² Fine Arts Department, *Notable Ladies in Thai History* (in Thai).

women; La-iad had become an influential figure in the promotion of nationalist culture which included literature and famous recreational activities, such as the *ram-wong* dance – the folk group dance that had been standardised by the Phibun regime.

La-iad mastered in literature. She was appointed as one of the members of language reform committee founded during the Second World War. Moreover, she often wrote poems to broadcast on the national radio accompanying the Prime Minister's nationalistic stories and New Year's speeches. As nationalism played a major theme in the political atmosphere, La-iad's works in literature served to further promote this popular sentiment. Her poems were often about women and their duties to families and the nation. Flowers were employed as symbols for women. In one of her famous poems, *klon wan mae* (Mother's day poem), she compares mothers to jasmine in the way that they are beautiful flowers of great use. "While they are young, we can turn them into beautiful white garlands. When they withered, we can turn them into herbal medicine."²³ Therefore, there seemed to be no other types of flowers that can resemble mothers as well as jasmine, which has been used as a symbol for mothers since the day the poem was written on 15 April 1948. Another flower that the author used to represent women was the lotus. Thai women had, according to La-iad, great value as did lotuses that people offered to the Lord Buddha. Women belong in the higher place in the society as lotuses belong on the high shelves where people make offerings to the Lord Buddha.²⁴ These poems demonstrate the author's will to enhance the status of women in the society, which corresponded to state's policy in the hyper-nationalist period.

La-iad's poems were well known throughout the literate class of the population; yet her contribution to the new state's recreational activity proved to be more widely popular. *Ram-wong* was a recreational dance that developed from *ram-thon*, a traditional group dance that originated in the Central region of Thailand.²⁵ The songs that are used in this performance have simple, but playful lyrics. Hence,

²³ Fine Arts Department, *Notable Ladies in Thai History*, 271 (in Thai).

²⁴ Jirawat, *Biography and Works of La-iad Phibunsongkhram*, 336 (in Thai).

²⁵ *Thon* was a core percussion instrument of *ram-thon*.

ram-ton served as an effective way to promote government campaigns to villagers and the less literate population. As a consequence, the government under Phibun transformed *ram-ton* into *ram-wong* in 1944.²⁶ *Krom Sinlapakon* (The Department of Fine Arts) standardised the dance movements for ten newly composed *ram-wong* songs, six of which were written by La-iad. The lyrics of *ram-wong* songs that La-iad wrote were built around the same nationalist theme, similar to her other literary works. One example of a song that she composed was *Ying Thai Tchai Ngarm* (Thai Women of Kind Hearts), which contains a convincing message that women are an important force to the success of the nation. "Beloved Thai women support the nation with their exquisite beauty and bravery."²⁷ This part of the lyrics directly aims to promote nationalism amongst the female audience. A similar message can be seen in *Dok Mai Khong Chart* (Flowers of the Nation). The lyrics of this song praise the beauty of women who uphold the government's policies and support the nation-building process.²⁸ This dedication to the nation, hence, is the true beauty and women are regarded as flowers of the nation. *Ying Thai Tchai Ngarm* and *Dok Mai Khong Chart* are two out of six songs that La-iad wrote for the Public Relations Department prior to the Second World War. Two interesting innovative ideas sprang from these works. First, the intended audience of these songs were females. In other words, *ram-wong* clearly was gendered in its lyrics, although the performance includes both males and females to dance in pair. The songs encourage women to think of themselves as equal subjects to men who could support the nation as well as men. Second, class barrier does not play any role here as all women are considered *flowers of the nation*. La-iad had successfully implanted nationalist sentiments into popular audiences regardless of their literacy limitations. These *ram-wong* songs became a popular recreation at the village level up to the national level. During the Second World War, government officials were encouraged to perform *ram-wong* in official parties, which harmoniously supported the nationalistic policy of the government in the early 1940s. The ten *ram-wong* songs are still

²⁶ Ammara, *Songs and Folk Performances*, 176.

²⁷ Jirawat, *Biography and Works of La-iad Phibunsongkhram*, 389 (in Thai).

²⁸ Jirawat, *Biography and Works of La-iad Phibunsongkhram*, 393 (in Thai).

included in the national school curriculum where nationalism is being successfully implanted in the minds of both male and female students.²⁹

A Role-Model of Modern Woman in the Democratic Era: Phunsuk Phanomyong

Phunsuk Banomyong or Phunsuk Na Pomberjra (her maiden name) was not an ordinary woman. She demonstrated her unique strengths and idealistic way of life in her written works of which none of the women in her generation shared the same character. She was born in an elite family in 1912 and was given the name 'Phunsuk' by King Rama VI. Her father *Luang* Wichitsorakrai was a governor of Samutprakan City when his wife, *Khunying* Pheng, gave birth to the third daughter of the Na Pomberjra family.³⁰ The given name from King Vajiravidh, 'Phunsuk', means full of happiness. Besides its good meaning, the fact that the king named her highlights that Phunsuk was from an elite origin. In fact, her husband's family, Banomyong is related to the Na Pomberjra family. While Phunsuk's close ancestors descended from the ruling class, Pridi Banomyong was born in a peasant family. Although she was not officially involved in politics as other politicians' wives, for example La-iad, Pridi's political ideology influenced her greatly. From her own voice, another active female figure in Thai history is being discovered.

Personal Life

Phunsuk's childhood followed the popular pattern of other elite women of the same era. Education was an important part of her life. She enrolled at Saint Joseph's Convent School at the age of six for the preparatory class. Phunsuk remembered her school years very well as she described: "Saint Joseph's Convent had around two hundred students when I first enrolled in 1918....I went to the same class as my second sister Sari... At that time the school offered two different language programs, English and French. I enrolled for the English

²⁹ Ammara, *Songs and Folk Performances*, 176 (in Thai).

³⁰ *Pridi's 101st - Phunsuk's 90th Anniversaries* (in Thai).

program.”³¹ Phunsuk attended Saint Joseph’s Convent School until she completed level seven, where she earned English, French, and piano skills from *mae-dam*.³² Phunsuk had established a strong bond with Saint Joseph’s Convent and the Alliance Francaise, where she continued her French classes after she quit Saint Joseph’s Convent in order to get married. At the Alliance Francaise, Phunsuk made acquaintance with Chamgat Phalangkul and Puay Eungphakon, both of whom served as leading members of Seri Thai movements for liberation from Japan during the Second World War. From this point, Phunsuk’s educational background demonstrates that she was a woman of Victorian era skills. She went through Western style training at Saint Joseph’s Convent and Alliance Francaise and earned European language skills, Western manners, and arts, which were all central to the ideal of women of the Victorian age. Even when she had to quit school, she expressed her regrets for not being able to complete her study or to continue to university.³³ Getting married at the age of seventeen was a suitable age for women of that era. However, Phunsuk’s regret for her loss of education demonstrated that she was putting herself outside the constructed frame of traditional Siamese women. Phunsuk remembered all of her teachers. In her memoir, she listed all the teachers who taught her at Saint Joseph’s Convent and at the Alliance Francaise. Moreover, she kept a strong bond between her and *mae-dam* at the convent such that she even trusted to leave her two daughters with the sisters while she had to flee abroad with Pridi in political exile. Phunsuk mentioned, “*mae-dam* of Saint Joseph’s Convent School had a great understanding of my family. During the difficult time when my family was threatened by politics, *mae-dam*, teachers at Saint Joseph’s Convent took great care of my children....and I will always feel grateful for what they have done for us.”³⁴ Nevertheless, of all teachers, Pridi gave her the most valuable lessons in their eventful married life, which Phunsuk called the University of Life or *Mahawitthayalai chiwit*.

³¹ Pridi’s 101st- Phunsuk’s 90th Anniversaries, 14 (in Thai).

³² Thai adopted French word, *madame*, for Catholic nuns.

³³ Narut, *Phunsuk Banomyong and Her Multiple Roles in Life* (in Thai).

³⁴ Pridi’s 101st- Phunsuk’s 90th Anniversaries, 17 (in Thai).

Although Phunsuk's background is of the elite class, she believed in a simple living style. Her husband had significantly influenced the belief in her chosen way of life. When Phunsuk and Pridi Phanomyong got married on November 16, 1928, the life of a seventeen year-old young elite lady was about to change. Pridi or *Laung* Praditmanutham was a young educated lawyer who had completed a law degree from France. He was one of the most controversial politicians in Thai history, especially during the crucial transitional period between 1932 and 1947. With his democratic ideas, he was one of the major leaders of the revolution in 1932, occupied the seat of Prime Minister, served as the king's regent, and also became a political dissident and a state criminal convict.³⁵ Pridi's political ideologies had a great influence on Phunsuk. An apparent example is the way she addressed her husband with the title '*nai*' (a title comparable to a male commoner). It is unlikely that an elite woman in a Thai society would call her husband with this title. As in traditional society, following the creation of woman's identity by Prince Damrong, women had been subordinated to men. Lekha, wife of former Prime Minister Khuang Aphaiwong used '*khun*' (a polite and formal title for males and females) every time she mentioned her husband. However, Phunsuk chose to employ the simplest way to address her husband in her written works by using the commoner's title. Another example of Phunsuk's egalitarian principles appeared in her letter of 1 October 1998. She refused to keep any ranks or titles that she had obtained during her lifetime.³⁶ In fact, Phunsuk was given an insignia from King Ananda and the title of '*Than-phunying*' in 1939.³⁷ Nevertheless, she refused to keep any of them and instructed her children that she wanted to be known as another commoner woman after she passed away. Her last words to her children also gave the exact instruction for her funeral plan. This letter reflects her unique attitude of a strong and confident woman who had been through a series of political success and struggles throughout her life. In Phunsuk's letter of 1 October 1998, Phunsuk instructed her children that she wanted her funeral to be as simple as possible and she did not want to receive any

³⁵ *Pridi's 101st - Phunsuk's 90th Anniversaries* (in Thai).

³⁶ Lalita, *In Memorial for Phunsuk Banomyong* (in Thai).

³⁷ *Pridi's 101st - Phunsuk's 90th Anniversaries* (in Thai).

titles after her death. "There won't be any religious ceremony and do not bother any relatives to attend my funeral," wrote Phunsuk.³⁸ From her own words, Phunsuk demonstrated the dignity of a modern woman with strong democratic principles, which replaced her elite representation of her original background.

From *Than-Phuying*, To Rebel, To Expatriate

Thai women must enhance their abilities in all aspects in order to be able to take responsible positions at a national level. Although women are often viewed as sensitive, we can be strong if we assemble our forces together. We can check and balance the management of the government, block corruption or fraud that could harm our husbands' reputation. I think this is a very important element to the development of our nation toward the era where virtue of meritocracy governs.³⁹

This statement by Phunsuk was recorded in her cremation volume edited by her children, and explains Phunsuk's vision on politics of Siam in a crucial period. The role as the wife of Pridi was a challenging one. After the revolution of 1932, Pridi was charged with being a communist, hence, a threat to the government. As a result, the couple decided to flee to France where Pridi had earlier spent a number of years as a law student in the pre-revolutionary years. In 1934, the couple returned to Thailand after *Phraya* Phahon Phonphayuhasena seized power from the government of *Phraya* Manopakon Nithithada who had opposed Pridi's economic plan that caused his first exile in 1933. From then on, Pridi's career rose quickly. He occupied a number of important seats in the government, including Minister of Foreign Affairs, Minister of Finance, and Prime Minister. As Pridi's power in the government increased, Phunsuk's role as a wife of a statesman was also significantly affected. In the statement above, Phunsuk stressed the potentiality of women to prevent 'corruption' and 'fraud'. This directly

³⁸ Lalita, *In Memorial for Phunsuk Banomyong*, 8 (in Thai).

³⁹ Lalita, *In Memorial for Phunsuk Banomyong*, 10 (in Thai).

reflects her real experience with Pridi in politics that caused them to leave Thailand twice on political exile. Moreover, Phunsuk also saw the importance of ‘meritocracy’, a word that was unexpectedly used by a woman of her era. All of these key words are central to Phunsuk’s role as the wife of a politician and a public figure, which will be explored in the following part.

Although Phunsuk was never a Member of Parliament or an official politician, her public role is worth studying as she served as a model for a democratic woman of the modern era. Phunsuk participated in the *Seri Thai* movement during the Second World War and travelled overseas with Pridi after the war ended. She described in her article *Chiwit khong khapphachao nai yam songkhram lae santiphab* (My Life during War and Peace) that the Council of Ministers had split opinions about Thailand entering the Second World War. One party wanted to compromise with Japan by entering the war on the side of the Axis and the other wanted to defend Thai sovereignty by declaring war on Japan.⁴⁰ Pridi was a leading supporter of the second opinion to resist the Japanese occupation in Thailand. Nevertheless, then Prime Minister Phibun made the decision to announce a cease-fire and allowed Japanese troops into Thai territory. Finally, Thailand declared war on the Allies on 25 January 1942. Pridi left his seat of Minister of Finance and took the position of the King Ananda’s regent the same year. While Japan was enjoying the satisfaction that Pridi was no longer in the Council of Ministers, Pridi took this moment to initiate the *Seri Thai* or Free Thai movement to liberate the country by allying with the United States and Great Britain. At this point, Phunsuk became one of the members of the Free Thai Movement. “My major task was to help *nai* Pridi follow the news on foreign radio in order to keep up with the Allies’ movements...as well as to accommodate members of *Seri Thai* at our Tha-chang mansion that was then serving as an office of *Seri Thai*.”⁴¹ The war finally ended with the victory of the Allies. As a result, Pridi became immensely popular. Phunsuk, as a wife of a war hero, had the chance to travel overseas with her husband as honourable

⁴⁰ *Pridi’s 101st - Phunsuk’s 90th Anniversaries* (in Thai).

⁴¹ *Pridi’s 101st - Phunsuk’s 90th Anniversaries*, 53 (in Thai).

guests in a number of Allied countries, such as Great Britain, China, the Philippines, and the United States. The photographs of the couple in formal receptions with world's politicians highlight the international reputation the couple had earned. Phunsuk appeared side by side with Pridi in modern Western outfits throughout their journey. Even the Thai queens in the past had never been seen the way Phunsuk was seen in the international public. The equal status that Pridi had given to his wife highlighted the new image for a democratic wife of a politician in the modern era.

Khun-ying Phunsuk and Prime Minister Pridi Phanomyong enjoyed their years of popularity and trust from the royal family until 1946 when the assassination of King Rama VIII on June 9 caused Pridi's good reputation to decline. Pridi became one of the prime suspects of the ambiguous murder. In 1950, just a few hours before the military took over the government, Pridi fled to China via Singapore. From the words of Phunsuk, Pridi left the house in the middle of the night of November 8 without a chance to say goodbye or tell her what was happening. Phunsuk was left alone with her children when the armed military intruded into the regent's mansion. The following part shows Phunsuk's description of the night of the coup:

As soon as I heard the sound of the machine gun shot into the mansion's building, I did not have time to ask anybody where Pridi had gone. I went straight to the children's bedroom to assemble them all in one room.... "Do not shoot, there are only women and children here", I shouted. After a while the sound of the machine gun had stopped and military men marched into the mansion. The lieutenant said to us that they were going to take over the government. "Take over the government. Why here? Why not at the parliament?", I responded.⁴²

Phunsuk demonstrated great strength in the tough time when her husband had to flee because of politics. She stood up against the military men who were intruding her house without fear, even though

⁴² *Pridi's 101st - Phunsuk's 90th Anniversaries*, 99 (in Thai).

she then had no idea where Pridi was. This time Pridi went to China. Phunsuk, on the other hand, was left in Thailand and was arrested for treason in 1952. The same accusation was charged against their twenty-one year old son, Pan, who was enrolled as a student at Thammasat University. While Pan was jailed for five years, Phunsuk was released after eighty-four days in prison. She then decided to leave her home country as she said, “For everything that had happened to *nai* Pridi, myself, and my children have been unbearable. I feel mentally and physically wounded. And this is why I have decided to leave for France in April 1956.”⁴³ From this statement, fraud and corruption of politics became the major factors that influenced Phunsuk to leave. She felt that the punishment she had was extremely unfair to her and her family as she claimed that she could not even get bail. Freedom for Phunsuk had become more and more limited as Pridi’s political enemies grew. The situation suggested that there was no place for justice for Phunsuk in both the public and private domains. From her writing, the political atmosphere of this period was full of fraud and corruption. As a consequence, she felt no longer the sense of belonging to the country.

Even when they were apart, Phunsuk had never given up her role as a faithful wife. Being left alone and charged as a rebel, she stood up and fought for the rights she deserved. She defended her husband in the accusation of the murder of King Ananda. With evidence of loyalty the Banomyong family had for the royal family, such as Pridi’s arrangement for the royal family’s to stay in Ayutthaya during the Second World War, a firm relationship with King Rama VII even after his abdication, a trusted role that he was given by the short-lived King Ananda and his brother Bhumibol,⁴⁴ Phunsuk was convinced that her husband was a royalist and would never attempt to assassinate the young king. She firmly declared in front of the court that her husband was an innocent subject with respect to the murder of King Ananda.⁴⁵ Once again, Phunsuk’s belief in meritocracy had been challenged by the state. By demonstrating that Pridi was a royalist and he had been doing

⁴³ *Pridi’s 101st - Phunsuk’s 90th Anniversaries*, 127 (in Thai).

⁴⁴ Pridi, *Some Stories about the Royal Family during the Second World War* (in Thai); *Pridi’s 101st - Phunsuk’s 90th Anniversaries* (in Thai).

⁴⁵ Satcha, *Phunsuk Banomyong’s Court’s Declaration for Pridi’s Innocence* (in Thai).

the best in the most difficult time, as he had done in the Second World War, Phunsuk had hoped that his merit could win over fraud. Nonetheless, the dark forces of Pridi's political opponents were stronger than Phunsuk's defence. It took over a decade to prove that Pridi was an innocent subject.

From the day Phunsuk got married to Pridi in 1928, until the day she decided to leave her homeland in 1956, this elite woman fought with a number of enemies and participated in politics far beyond other elite women of the same generation. Although her work is not as well known as other wives of politicians, such as La-iad Phibunsongkhram, she was a true role model for a modern woman in the democratic era who strongly believed in the virtue of meritocracy and justice.

The Changes in the Status of Elite Women in the Post-Absolutist Regime

Despite the change in the social concept of elite women that was no longer confined within a small circle of princesses, concubines, and daughters of high ranking aristocrats who were given the elite status by birth, the study of the wives of politicians La-iad Phibunsongkhram and Phunsuk Banomyong highlights an apparent increase in female roles in politics of the post-absolutist regime. Through the encouragement of their husbands, these two women gradually entered the public sphere in the early years of the constitutional monarchy. The following roles of the wives of politicians underlined the changes in the female status.

First, wives of politicians took on major roles as the state's agents of nationalist modernity. The two parallel revolutions in representations of women in the late nineteenth century and in the late 1930s demonstrated that women were subjects of the state's modernity. As Victorian era influence played a significant role in the 'clothing-the-nation' process of Chulalongkorn's inner court, a similar modernising attempt also served as the core of the Cultural Mandates under the leadership of Phibun. The women of the inner court were encouraged by King Chulalongkorn to adopt the Victorian-era fashions along the same line that the male elites had been guided. The same approach was used in the promotion of the Cultural Mandates several decades later under the post-absolutist, fascist-inspired government of Phibun. Women were

also encouraged by the government to clothe themselves according to the new cultural norm. Nonetheless, the post-absolutist regime challenged the status of women to a greater extent than the absolutist regime. With the growing nationalist sentiments among the male politicians, women became agents of state nationalism. The role of dedicated woman of the nation was portrayed in the life of La-iad Phibunsongkhram who entered politics during the promotion of the Cultural Mandates (1939-1942) when she served as a major member of the committee to Establish Correct Names in 1939.⁴⁶ The involvement of La-iad in the committee highlights the increase female participation in the promotion of state policy. She was a highly influential figure. Apart from that, some of her works also promoted the Cultural Mandates, such as the lyric writings of *ram-wong*. By the mid twentieth century, La-iad had entered the Senate. As she became a full-time politician, the space for women in politics had also been expanded.

Second, an elite wife of a politician, such as Phunsuk Banomyong, had become an active political activist in the post-absolutist regime. While La-iad and Lekha had taken a major role in the nationalist promotion, Phunsuk Phanomyong adhered to her egalitarian principles. Pridi Phanomyong, Phunsuk's husband, was the most influential person in her life. As Pridi led the *Seri Thai*, Phunsuk played an important role as one of the members. Her contribution to the *Seri Thai* demonstrates the first woman's participation in the underground political movement. Although Phunsuk knew that she had put her family at risk by working closely with the Allies during the Japanese occupation in the Second World War, she did not fear. Instead, she worked side by side with Pridi until the war ended with the victory of the Allies. Moreover, Phunsuk's resistance to the military government in 1950s also highlights a new image of a wife of politician. While Pridi fled the country because of political tensions, Phunsuk was arrested with the accusation of treason. She believed in the virtue of her husband even when she was imprisoned for the charge that she did not deserve. As a result, her writings reflect her experience with the injustice of the military regime.

⁴⁶ Jirawat, *Biography and Works of La-iad Phibunsongkhram* (in Thai); Lekha, *Stories about Lek: in Lekha Aphaiwong's Biography* (in Thai).

She illustrated an apparent hatred for corruption and fraud which she believed to be the reason for her family's exile. Phunsuk's writing was unlike La-iad's. Her works questioned the reliability of the military government in the way that elite women had never expressed before. At this point, the status of elite woman had been enhanced with the growing intensity of politics. They made their public appearance as both the state's agents of nationalist modernity and political activist for democracy.

The Vital Political Roles of Women in the Public Sphere

The period after the revolution of 1932 highlights the transformation in the representations of women in a wider scale than in the absolutist regime. While the impact of elite women on the *siwilai* state affected primarily women of the inner court, the politics of the post-revolutionary period played a significant role in reshaping female representations. Hence, the result was the popularisation of the new framework of modern woman among the rising middle-class females and newly emerged class of elite women, which includes the educated females and wives of politicians. The male-dominated spaces, such as the parliament and the underground political groups became shared domains for both women and men. Both wives of politicians – La-iad Phibunsongkhram and Phunsuk Banomyong – demonstrated their active involvement in the mentioned public domains. In other words, although Thai history typically focuses on the role of men, women also had pivotal roles in politics of the post-absolutist regime. This point, therefore, reflects the enhanced state's recognition of women in the nation-building process.

Major changes in the roles of elite women occurred during the political transitional period between the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. First, there was an increase in the state's recognition of women. The domain for elite females was no longer confined within the inner court. As mentioned, elite women had entered into the public sphere by taking political roles as early as the 1930s. This aspect had completely transformed the former image of women in the absolutist regime. Although early female politicians did not enjoy the same popularity as male politicians, as a woman's newspaper, magazine, and

journal even criticised that females should not be represented in the parliament, this was a great improvement of state's recognition of women.⁴⁷ Second, a new class of elite women had emerged during the post-absolutist regime. In the pre-revolutionary period, the elite quality of a woman was identified by the surname (*sakun*). The Thai terminology *kunlasattri*, where the two words *sakun* (surname, clan) and *sattri* (women) are combined to form a term that refers to a woman from a noble family, is an apparent example of the traditional category of female elites who were determined only by birth. Nonetheless, this concept was challenged in the early years of the constitutional monarchy. Wives of politicians, who were not necessarily born in an elite clan, for example La-iad Phibunsongkhram who grew up in a middle-class family, became the new elite woman of the era. In addition, the post-absolutist regime also witnessed the rising voices of the middle-class women. In the election of 15 December 1957, forty per cent of all votes came from female voters.⁴⁸ This illustrates that these wives of politicians had successfully promoted a greater political participation of women without a class barrier.

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