

## METHODS

# The causes and consequences of hegemonic masculinity and dominance in Thailand

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Women across the globe make up at least half of all populations or 2.5 to 3 billion persons yet they own less than 10% of all wealth. This is also the case for Thailand. The arguments in the post-feminist movement raised by Giffort, Hawkesworth, Tomalin, Chatterjee, McClintock and others clearly show that many communities of women especially in the Third World such as Thailand continue to depend on hegemonic masculine strategies either directly or indirectly.

**Keywords:** hegemonic theory, Thailand, gender rights, Buddhism, political science

## 1. Introduction

Hegemonic masculinity refers to the seemingly monolithic way in which Thai masculinity dominates Thai culture. This paper focuses on how Thai women have helped advance Thai hegemonic masculinity in late modernity.

Feminist theory dates back to the time of universal suffrage and women's movements in New Zealand, Great Britain, the United States, Europe and Canada. These movements were the natural out-growth of a need for women to enter the workforce to replace men who were away fighting wars or who never returned from them. These movements not merely asserted the rights of women (and children) in the West but also served as a critical model for overcoming the pressures of life and work in a paternalistic White-Western world as well as for Southeast Asia and Thailand. Women's suffrage and International Women's Day is celebrated world-wide on March 8th annually. This is because universal women's rights are not accepted universally even in the Kingdom of Thailand. As a result, the feminist movement and its bra-burning years are now far from over and we women now live in a post-feminist world. This serves as the background to hegemonic masculine control of women and minorities in Thailand.

## 2. Research elaboration

One key weakness is woman's unwillingness to break from tradition and to give up the past, as found along the Gabon Coast and Nigeria in West Africa. *Igbo* men from the *Igbo* tribes in Africa would laze under the sun every day, while their wives and single women ported water for miles to the village, milked the domestic animals, fed the cattle, pounded millet and cooked the evening meal. *Igbo* men are raised by their mothers to perceive of themselves as naturally superior to all women of all ages. Therefore mothers and sisters as well as aunts in *Igbo* culture play a significant role in reinforcing the apex position of men in Nigerian tribal society. For some, such situations are related to colonialism and the loss of "political institutions" scholars (1) but today's reality as it was in the early 1970s is a far cry from such claims. The gender-situation today is perhaps better understood via alternative approaches (Morell, 1999, Narayanan, 1999) and others.

Like many women the world over, Thai women are often left at home to be care-givers and home-makers; or in the fields to do field chores while the men sit under trees and wait to hunt. In Thai society, women who are at the top tier of the wealthiest (mainly Teochiu) business families (the top 0.01%) often become CEOs, COOs, and other top-level executives in banking and finance, manufacturing, retail,

wholesale and accountancy (for example). The next 4% of wealthy Thai women along with the apex women control billions of baht worth of then Kingdom's wealth. These cherished apex positions are, however, severely restricted to these Thai women of means. The vast majority of Thai, Lao, Isan, and other minorities living in Thailand (94.9%) remain fairly impoverished.

Siamese-Thai gender has sometimes been neglected by mainstream Feminist scholarship despite insouciant issues that emerged in ancient Lanna-Tai (Chiangmai), Sukhothai, and Ayutthaya. These three large territories cover more area than modern Thailand after 1946 (when the name was changed from Siam) Siamese masculine control and the modern Thai monarchy. In 2006, for example, Tomalin analyzed the link between the "low status of women in Buddhism" and the "inferior status of women in Thai society". The simplistic Hegelian dichotomies used by world development economists and the IMF to forecast Thai economic performance today [after (2)], fail to explain the logic of how Thai men constitute a significant component of the equation that causes women to sell their bodies within the Thai system itself.<sup>1</sup>

There is a clear separation of labor in the private sphere for male and female workers. Women workers in modern Thai firms are prevented from strategizing about their careers and are expected to maintain their traditional family-functions at home (care-giving, nursing, cooking, cleaning, washing for example). There is also a clear separation of function and productivity in the public sphere among Thai bureaucrats as noted in the Southern Thailand [after (3)] as well as among queer spaces [after (4)]; or by scholars like Arya W. Kittipichai measure the Quality of Life (QoL) among Thai workers in certain factories. The results are varied. Some scholars say the results indicate relative pleasure and acceptance of QoL in Thailand (5); and the level of satisfaction of QoL in Thailand (6).

Therefore, women Thai workers in both the public and private spheres of life are expected to maintain traditional roles while executing modern work functions in support of paternalistic familial values and male-dominance in modern workplace (7–10). These social encumbrances lead to the construction of "multiple feminist identities" (Roger, 2002) presumptively to combat the masculine control over organizations while maintaining a harmonious domestic environment. Hawkesworth (11) and others have noted these organizations of control throughout the world and including in Asia. Additionally, there appears to be a degree of denial of competency among Thai feminists within the Thai academy itself.<sup>2</sup> Rajaretnam (1975) illustrates the tragic position of the Rector of Thammasat University and the death of the

student protestors and the weaknesses of its local scholars in the ensuing political violence of Black October of 1973.<sup>3</sup>

No wonder the feminist movement and feminist theories have failed in Thailand. This is because ordinary Thai women workers are denied access and opportunities for access to feminist knowledge. The matrices of denial exist in terms of three major Thai institutions that date back at least to the 3rd century during the Sukhothai era (citation). These three institutions organize the polity into discrete digits that are dependent on the overarching control of the Thai hegemony. The first is the dominant religious institution of Buddhism and the Buddhist Sangha (the order of monks); secondly, the absolute monarchy (1300 AD to 1932 AD); and thirdly, the Asian male patriarchal "modern" Thai state. All three institutions possess independent agents and agencies that ensure their existence. It should be noted here that these institutions, both ancient and modern, were not designed or did not evolve to control Siamese and Thai women *per se*. Rather, women were considered a mere appendage to the larger Siamese and Thai universe in which they played submissive roles with the primary function of reproducing the next generation of male heirs.

### 3. Results: The hegemonic state, Buddhism and the Buddhist Sangha

The results from this original work clearly demonstrate that there are three major institutions that dominate Thailand today. These three institutions make up the Hegemonic State in Thailand, viz., (1) the Palace and Monarchy; (2) the Royal Thai Army and other coercive elements; and, (3) the Buddhist Sangha.

The dominant religious institution of Buddhism and the Buddhist Sangha (the order of monks). Women are not allowed to be monks. They are expected to become nuns. Nuns have less spiritual and public power than male monks. There are no male nuns so far. Access to financial and national resources are denied to religious women especially those who desire to become monks. Religion is the agency of control and conservation of sacred values. The Sangha is common in countries that embrace Theravada Buddhism rather than the later Mahayana one. Theravada is believed to be closer to the original form of Buddhism according to the Buddha's teachings and is generally found in Southeast Asia; while the Mahayana version influenced succeeded the versions that followed the decline of the Asoka Empire. Mahayana Buddhism is common to East Asia. Keyes (Keyes, 1971) was among the first anthropologists to reveal how the central government in Bangkok attempted to strengthen the meaning of Buddhism in the Northeastern parts of tribal

<sup>1</sup> We are particularly suspicious of scholars (located thousands of kilometers away) who claim to speak for Thai culture, gender and religion but have never lived in Thailand for more than a few weeks.

<sup>2</sup> See for example, (26).

<sup>3</sup> This is not to be confused with the Black October of 2016 when King Bhumiphon Adulyadej died.

Thailand through religious conversion. Keyes had shown that there were adverse consequences to use Thai Buddhism as instrument of national policy. The government's Buddhist program was a tool of national integration that was critical in fighting the growing power of the Communists in the 1960 and 1970s. This government program was also a continuation of the policy of nationalization that had begun in the reign of Rama V and continued with his son, Rama VI. However, Rama VI was unsuccessful in converting the Muslim dominant south to Buddhism at the *fin-de-siècle*.

Two decades later the government's program showed significant success in the northeastern tribal program. There were increasing numbers of Thai people from different walks of life who participated either actively or passively in the maintenance of the national Buddhist culture. Four decades later, by the end of the life of Rama IX, the total number of Buddhists had increased to 95% of the population, up from about 93% in the 1970s. A total of 300,000 Buddhist monks were recorded to have been present with about 150–200 Bhikkhuni or female Buddhist monks. Therefore there is a clear politics that has emerged between the Bhikkhu and Bhikkhunis. For example, the Thai scholar Suksamran argued in 1981 that there is politics when religion in Thailand interacts with the democratic state. He postulates that religion may be used as an instrument of modernization. We also need to consider the fact and the farce of the Absolutist State and now the Constitutional Monarchy where men remain in charge and women are expected to support them or are marginalized, tortured, or killed. Women who do not play by the masculinist hegemonic rules in Thailand have no chance at any form of mobility (be it occupational or social). In fact the past three wives of the current king, Rama X, had their families implicated in high levels of corruption. And hence that led to the Rama X divorcing them. For any one of those wives to have questioned his decision would result in them and their families being charged under the draconian *lese majeste* laws. Only a man can become a king and only a king can be the head of state. Women cannot become a head of state or a monarch. Women may be appointed as queens or concubines and consorts but not as a monarch. The Absolute Monarchy (1300 AD to 1932 AD) and Constitutional Monarchy (1946-present). Women are denied. The monarchy becomes at once an agency that channels devotees toward that sacred vestibule of Buddhism, the doorway into an infinite mysterious Buddhist spirituality. The patriarchal Thai state is designed around a military driven, benign bureaucratic authoritarian model. The authoritarian state develops and maintains a range of diverse agencies and agents to maintain law and order. Civil rights and freedoms do not exist in Thailand as they exist elsewhere. Life for the average sex worker in Thailand is messy, complicated and superficially demeaning. It is superficial because women sex workers control the climaxes of at least 37,000 white Australian men every year in various entertainment outlets in Bangkok, Chiang

mai, Pattaya, Phuket, Hat Yai, and other major cities in Thailand. In spite of most Thai women directly or indirectly supporting the hegemonic state of men, there are pockets of political resistance to the hegemonic state power. Hollander and Einwohner (12) on the other hand perceive resistance as action and opposition while Foucault and others have preferred to juxtapose the problem of resistance where subjugation and power form a nexus. But none of these focused on Thai women's bodies. Political resistance has maintained a constant appearance in the political and social science literature stemming from the importance of the articulation of disaffection with structures of power and the widening poverty gap in Southeast Asia. A wide variety of definitions of resistance but most eventually refer to other concepts such as agency, force, action, inaction, and power for explanation. Some scholars like Sharlin (1977) and Allen (2004) prefer the historically-determined approaches which tend to limit thought to modern capitalist enterprises trapped within masculine domains of political discourse such as but no limited to Constitutional and legal theory. Thai law, for example, tends to take the side of local Thai citizens over *farang* defendants in family court suits; and Thai men over Thai women in marital writs, divorce and the division of marital property. It is too bad that writers like Bao (13) have failed to discuss polygyny as well as multiple, long-term socio-sexual relationships between women and men. Bao fails to discuss this as form of political resistance; indeed, a strategy for women avoiding being foisted onto men's bodies for cash and kind. James C. Scott's weapons of the weak discussed everyday forms of resistance in Malaysia similarly apply to its northern neighbor Thailand. What kinds of quotidian resistance are available to Thai women in combatting the three national institutions of masculine control?

## 4. Conclusion

Women's bodies are used as a site of violence. Women's traditional control over the domestic sphere in which male dominance is suddenly abated upon entry into the familial sanctum. The body of the woman is again used as a marker of modernity depicting the advances and retreats of masculine historicity.<sup>4</sup> Women in Thailand are postponing marriage and often as a result postponing having children perhaps as another form of social resistance against the State. Women are more willing to give up their children to their husbands or the fathers of these children to move overseas to the UK, Canada and the USA in order to seek their own fortunes. Women are part of that invisible public, seen only in terms

<sup>4</sup> See for example, (27). Lan's work while focused specifically on Taiwanese geographical and women's bodies as boundary markers display very similar conditions and consequences when applied to the Thai case in late modernity. See also (28).

of their gender. All legitimate political action begins with non-legitimate strategies. A legitimate strategy is one that is officially sanctioned within a genuine democracy while an illegitimate one is neither official nor permitted or sanctioned by the state. One strategy employs the life chances within the system to articulate political interests from within the public domain (14–Narayanan, 1999).

Rather than waiting for the process or applying for permission, non-legitimate strategies involving self-authorization where the subject is decentered and decanted from public norms to private wants-where power shifts from the public structure to the private realm (15). Tomalin (16) comparison between the “low status of women in Buddhism” and the “inferior status of women in Thai society” and believes it possible for women to use “religious feminism” as “a guide to a politics of empowerment” ((16):385). This is what one might perceive as a means of exerting control over the pre-dominance of male patriarchy by making use of the cracks in so-called monolithic structures. However, her research contradicts my own fieldwork in Narathiwat, Pattani, Yala, Sakon Nakhorn, Bangkok, Kanchanaburi, Phuket, Pattaya, Chiang Mai, and Chiang Rai. My fieldwork surveys and focus groups taken from local and farang respondents, from all adult age groups, reveals several key findings. Thai women in Thailand are perceived positively with exception that women who work in entertainment and who are associated with sex work are considered to have lower status than women who work in an office or factory. Women who work in factories tend to have lower status than women who work in offices. While women who are part of the executive class, professionals such as nurses, police officers, and civil servants tend to have slightly higher or about the same status as those who work in offices. Women who have the same high-status jobs as men such as airline pilots, senior military officers, dentists, surgeons and professors tend to have slightly lower status than their male counterparts in the same vacation with the same number of years of occupational experience. While Tomalin’s work is outdated by at least a decade, it is clear that her findings of the “low status of Thai women” and the “inferiority of women in Thai society” no longer hold true. So either something must have happened to the status of women or her observations were neither generalizable nor representative. Perhaps it was not her intention to suggest such sweeping statements about women. The answer, or part thereof, arises out of the fact that Thai women in general have high status in Thai society when compared to India and Japan. Apart from Thai women who work in entertainment, the rest are perceived by locals and foreigners to have good and virtuous status as seen in my fieldwork notes that predate 2006 and began in 1987. My own findings after 2006 to 2016 clearly show no perceptible changes in the perception of the status of Thai women in Thailand’s pre-dominantly Buddhist society.

However, there is one exception. Thai women who attempt to move into the traditional spheres dominated by men

tend to experience a significant lowering of their status as women. For example, there are only about 150 *Bhikkhuni* Buddhist monks to over 300,000 male monks in Thailand today because of the obstacles created by Thailand’s National Association of the Buddhist Sangha. Their president believes that because the tradition of appointing ordained female monks died out a long time ago, perhaps 80 years ago, there were no lines of continuity. Tracing a continuous line of *Bhikkhuni* seems to be important for the Thai Buddhist Sangha. This is the only argument that they have against more women becoming Buddhist monks. The Thai Buddhist Sangha is against having any *Bhikkhuni* (an ordained Thai female Buddhist monk) in Thailand because of male chauvinism. There is nothing in the sacred Pali canon that prevents women from becoming a fully-ordained Buddhist monk. Even the Buddha himself was the first to ordain a woman to become a monk. Inasmuch as *Bhikkhu* (an ordained male Buddhist monk) cannot touch a woman or vice-versa, a *Bhikkhuni* also cannot touch a man or vice-versa. In fact, there are some social media reports of *Bhikkhuni* who are threatened with abuse or death and have had their temple burnt or their movements watched. This has led to a dilemma for the country’s National Buddhist Sangha Association since the principal precept in Buddhism is peace and non-violence. The dilemma of violence versus non-violence presents a dilemma for the Kingdom’s National Buddhist Sangha Association since a few of their members, perhaps with the nascent approval of their temple abbots, are alleged to have participated in violence against the *Bhikkhunis*. A *Bhikkhu* or ordained male Buddhist monk is an earthly being who has renounced everything except living with the bare minimum. This means that he has also renounced hatred or love or support or antagonism or any emotion toward women being ordained as Buddhist monks. This strong belief among *Bhikkhu* especially their temple and university abbots have made them particularly resilient against changing their chauvinistic attitudes and their refusal to do anything about the *status quo*. The concept of hegemonic masculinity has influenced gender studies across many academic fields but has also attracted serious criticism. The authors trace the origin of the concept in a convergence of ideas in the early 1980s and map the ways it was applied when research on men and masculinities expanded. Evaluating the principal criticisms, the authors defend the underlying concept of masculinity, which in most research use is neither reified nor essentialist. However, the criticism of trait models of gender and rigid typologies is sound. The treatment of the subject in research on hegemonic masculinity can be improved with the aid of recent psychological models, although limits to discursive flexibility must be recognized. The concept of hegemonic masculinity does not equate to a model of social reproduction; we need to recognize social struggles in which subordinated masculinities influence dominant forms.

Finally, from early formulations of women's bodies against men's dominance in Thailand (the idea of multiple masculinities, the concept of hegemony, and the emphasis on change) suggests what needs to be kept and what has to be discarded. A more complex model of gender hierarchy, emphasizing the agency of women; explicit recognition of the geography of masculinities, emphasizing the interplay among local, regional, and global levels; a more specific treatment of embodiment in contexts of privilege and power; and a stronger emphasis on the dynamics of hegemonic masculinity, recognizing internal contradictions and the possibilities of movement toward an equitable balance of power between Thai women and men.

## Author contributions

AR: principal investigator and only writer of this original manuscript.

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