The late nineteenth century in Siam (now Thailand) witnessed an unprecedented level of cultural influence from the West. Siam’s King Chulalongkorn was at the forefront of this process of enculturation, not only taking in European influences as they flowed through Bangkok, but also traveling to various European colonial states in South and Southeast Asia (India, Java, and Singapore), and making two extended visits to Europe himself in 1897 and 1906. In addition to incorporating Western-style organization to Siam’s governmental structures, Chulalongkorn and his fellow elites were also active in “modernizing” Siamese culture by Westernizing elements of existing Siamese aesthetics and arts, such as dress, dance-drama, and architecture. The Siamese nobility saw itself as part of a transcultural elite who shared an identification with certain Westernized notions of civilization, which the Siamese called “siwilai.” In this construction, Thai elites looked to the Victorian ecumène as a blueprint for Siamese elite culture and society, emulating its practices of luxury consumption, patronage of the arts, and racial hierarchy to reinforce the existing social stratum.

In writing the history of this important era of political and cultural transition in Siam, most scholars have focused on the activities of elite males, who were considered to be the main architects of change in Siam’s political and cultural spheres. Indeed, elite Siamese men were oft-noted patrons of architecture, music, dance-drama, photography, and other arts during this era. The roles of elite women – particularly those of royal consorts – in the arts during the same period have been largely overlooked. Yet as I have argued elsewhere, royal women played an essential role in both reproducing elite Siamese culture, and in negotiating the influx of Western influence during this era. But what of elite Siamese women as “matrons,” financial supporters of artistic endeavors rather than artisans or performers? The notion of “matronage” provides a new framework for examining the activities and impacts of Siamese royal consorts and palace women. Although I utilize the term “matronage” in a similar manner to Belli Bose in this volume, I broaden my application of the term to include support of a range of performing and visual arts – such as dance-drama, music, and weaving – as well as intellectual and scientific endeavors, such as education, medicine, agriculture, and historical research.

In this chapter, I begin with a discussion of Siam’s palace women as producers of high culture in the royal palace, and their role in disseminating it to Siamese culture
at large. This is the background against which I examine Dara Rasami’s role as a representative of a distinct ethnic group within the Siamese palace – the Tai Yuan of the Lan Na region – during her career as a royal consort in the Siamese court from 1886 to 1914. During this time, Dara Rasami played a unique role in the palace: in addition to performing Tai Yuan cultural difference, she also acted as a true “matron” of its arts, actively supporting Lan Na artisans and performers – most of whom were female – and ultimately the region’s traditions. I argue that as a de facto member of the Siamese nobility, Dara Rasami’s matronage stemmed from her enculturation to siwilai values, which shaped her activities both during her tenure as a consort in the royal palace in Bangkok, and from her retirement to Chiang Mai in 1914 until her death in 1933. However, I also argue that as a representative of a non-Siamese cultural group within the palace, Dara Rasami’s transcultural adoption of siwilai also resulted in a heightened awareness of her ethnic distinction that resulted in her support of local culture, arts, and history in her homeland in ways that reflect a very “modern” self-awareness.

In addition, Dara Rasami’s “matronages” also reflect the differences in acceptable women’s roles between Lan Na and Siam. While some of the activities “matron-ized” by Dara exceeded the boundaries of cultural participation acceptable for elite Siamese women at that historical moment, they demonstrate consistency with the activities of Lan Na’s prior generation of female elites: embracing Western influence, while promoting cultural and economic adaptation to contemporary circumstances. Dara Rasami was an uncommon matron of Lan Na culture: simultaneously an insider and outsider to the elite cultures of both Siamese and Lan Na, whose worldview was further elaborated by her internalization of Siamese siwilai. This elaboration made Dara Rasami uniquely “modern,” as her interest lay not in merely preserving the artistic forms of the past, but rather adapting them to a contemporary context in such a way as to ensure their survival in the longer term.

**Siamese Palace Women as Performers and Producers of Elite Culture**

Over the course of the late nineteenth- to early twentieth-century period known as the Fifth Reign, Siam (Thailand today) struggled to retain its hold on its tributary domains as European nations raced to stake territorial claims in mainland Southeast Asia, which they saw as their principal gateway to trade with China. Up to that time, royal polygyny in Siam had functioned as an important means of forging alliances with its regional vassal domains in mainland Southeast Asia, bringing women of various ethnicities into the royal Siamese palace as consorts to the king. The last consort to enter the Siamese palace in such an exchange was Dara Rasami, whose union with King Chulalongkorn in 1886 was intended to cement the loyalties of her home kingdom, Lan Na (today part of northern Thailand), against possible British annexation.

Upon arriving in Bangkok in 1889 to become a concubine of the Siamese king, Dara Rasami became a resident of the Inner Palace, the women-only domain within the royal palace occupied by the king’s 153 wives and concubines, their children, ladies-in-waiting, and the servants of their households. In addition to high-status
wives and consorts like Dara Rasami, the Inner Palace included women of all social strata and classes, ranging from the daughters of nobles and wealthy merchants who worked as ladies-in-waiting, to women of lower or common birth who served as maids, cooks, and other domestic workers, both free and indentured. When a royal consort gave birth to a child of the king, she was awarded space for her own separate residence in the Inner Palace. There the consort gathered her own entourage of ladies-in-waiting, usually young female relatives, who typically entered palace service in early adolescence. By apprenticing their daughters to the households of royal consorts, families both noble and common enhanced their status by their linkage to the palace. There, young women were provided training in the etiquette, customs, and crafts of the royal elite. Consorts who demonstrated particular talents were provided with advanced training, which included poetry, music, and dance. Dance-drama in particular was considered demanding enough that there were separate quarters within the Inner Palace for the lakhon (dance-drama) troupe, where women could spend more time rehearsing. Historically, lakhon dancers were also more likely to catch the eye of the Siamese king, and several noted consorts of Chakri dynasty kings had been skilled lakhon dancers.

Although women played prominent roles in the performance and dissemination of Siamese high culture, they looked largely to elite males for support. Outside the palace, the patron’s role was typically played by the husbands and fathers of elite Siamese women; within the palace, royal consorts’ primary patron was the king himself. Although royal daughters remained inside the palace into their adulthood, royal sons born in the palace were forced to move out upon reaching adolescence, at which point they set up households with wives and consorts of their own. Men from the growing ranks of royal bureaucrats and officials often sought wives among the women who served palace consorts, who could bring the elite manners and crafts they had learned in the Royal Palace to their new households. Thus, Siam’s royal palace functioned as a crucible of high culture: its consorts acted as matrices of cultural production, their personal households actively replicating and disseminating Siamese high culture. Nonetheless, Siamese consorts were typically the recipients – rather than the providers – of financial support for cultural and artistic activities, rather than “matrons” providing support themselves. Within the royal palace, the king himself functioned as the consorts’ ultimate patron. Besides him, very few high-ranking royal women had financial resources sufficient to sponsor such activities – rendering “matrons” of Siamese elite culture a rare occurrence within palace culture. Nonetheless, the Fifth Reign (1868–1910) saw a few instances of matronage among royal consorts, and Dara Rasami was among them.

Dara Rasami as a “Matron” of Northern Culture within the Palace

Among the 153 royal consorts who populated the Inner Palace, Dara Rasami was unique in several important ways. While the majority of the consorts there shared Siamese ethnicity, language, and culture, Dara Rasami was ethnically Tai Yuan, speaking a distinct dialect and practicing different conventions of diet, dress, and comportment than the Siamese. After Dara Rasami gave birth to the king’s daughter,
and she was given her own palace household,9 she brought several of her kinswomen down from Chiang Mai to attend her and her infant daughter. Rather than adapting to Bangkok style, her ladies were required to maintain a Lan Na lifestyle, which made the residence distinctive among the Siamese consorts’ households. There, Dara Rasami’s ladies-in-waiting wore Chiang Mai-style dress, cooked northern-style dishes, and spoke “kham muang” language (the Tai Yuan dialect). Dara Rasami’s ethnic difference stood out within an otherwise ethnically homogenous environment, rendering Yuan identity visible amongst a veritable sea of Siamese ethnic homogeneity.

More importantly for our purposes, however, Dara Rasami actively supported a range of performing and visual arts within her palace household. She and her ladies-in-waiting were well known in palace culture as skilled practitioners of Lan Na dance and music, which they practiced regularly:

There was a stringed band and a mixed combo; the lady and her family practiced energetically. The [Princess] . . . was not shy in her merriment while singing. They said that those who came to stay at her residence, besides being beautiful and sweet-voiced already, looked like they had nearly equal talents in singing, dancing, and music. . . .10

Playing some kind of musical instrument “at least a little” was apparently a requirement for kinswomen who wanted to become part of Dara’s entourage.11 In contrast to the lakhon troupe and orchestra made up of the Inner Palace’s Siamese consorts, whom the king supported, here we find Dara Rasami supporting the music and dance activities of her household as their “matron.” This was a unique situation within the Inner Palace: only one other royal consort ever supported her own musical or dance performers during the Fifth Reign – and it was the highest-ranking queen, Saowapha Phongsri, and only briefly, in 1906.12 As I will discuss later in this chapter, Dara Rasami continued to act as a “matron” of the musical and performing arts even after the end of her palace career.

By requiring her ladies-in-waiting to continue dressing in the style of her homeland, Dara Rasami also acted as a “matron” of northern textiles and dress. Traditionally, Lan Na women wore a lower garment called the phasin, a tube skirt wrapped around the abdomen and legs, usually gathered into pleats to fit the wearer and clasped at the waist with a belt (Figure 30). In addition to its distinctive difference from the Siamese lower garment, called the chongkrabaen, which was worn by Siamese males and females alike, the phasin typically utilized textiles distinctive to the north, as well. For example, in Figure 31, Dara Rasami and her entourage are pictured wearing phasin woven in the Burmese-influenced luntaya style, which features a wave-like horizontal pattern throughout the “body” of the skirt. In Figure 32, Dara Rasami poses for an informal portrait wearing a phasin with a simpler striped pattern above, and a fancier border piece sewn to the bottom edge called teen-jok. While each distinctive teen-jok pattern was identified with a particular village in Lan Na, Dara Rasami’s use of various teen-jok patterns in her dress signified her continued identification with Lan Na culture – one that she maintained throughout her twenty-eight-year career in Bangkok. During that time, Dara Rasami acted as a “matron” of
Lan Na textile arts, supporting the weavers connected to her family’s household in Chiang Mai for the supply of phasin textiles worn by her and the ladies of her entourage while they lived in Bangkok. Her matronage of Lan Na weaving and textiles would continue even after she left Bangkok in 1914 to retire in Chiang Mai, as I will discuss later in this chapter.

Dara Rasami’s “copresence” within the palace created a zone within which she simultaneously performed her own cultural difference for the elite Siamese, and assimilated elements of the Siamese worldview. As she adopted elements of the siwilai worldview, Dara Rasami also gained a different appreciation of her ethnic difference and its value in Siam’s “modern” era. As Dara Rasami and her household were to have a disproportionate historical impact on the dissemination and/or preservation of Lan Na’s elite culture, I will now turn to the ways in which siwilai shaped Siam’s elite worldview during this era.

**Adaptation and Assimilation: Siam’s Elite Moderns and Siwilai**

In cultural terms, the 1880s and 1890s were a heady time for Siam’s royal elites. Their exposure to European ideas, objects, and consumer culture prompted a period of intense Siamese acculturation and response. As Maurizio Peleggi explains, by
the 1870s the “Victorian ecuméne” had emerged as the dominant worldview of the Siamese, displacing the China-centric paradigm of the prior generation. The Siamese version of this new worldview, which has been well documented by Thongchai and Peleggi, was called “siwilai,” derived from the English word “civilization.” The frequent contrast of siwilai with “savage” as an antonym indicates siwilai’s implications for ethnic discrimination and racial hierarchy. As Thongchai explains, the Siamese elite’s desire to demonstrate siwilai was “. . . not simply a reaction to the colonial threat. Rather, it was an attempt originated by various groups among the elite . . . to attain and confirm the relative superiority of Siam.” During this era, Siamese identification and ranking of their subject peoples’ ethnic differences played an increasing role in “attaining and confirming” Siamese superiority, as Dara’s example demonstrates.

Although many Europeans were employed by the Siamese to implement “modern” practices within governmental institutions, many Siamese elites pursued siwilai interests of their own as well. Perhaps the individuals most emblematic of the embrace of siwilai within the royal court were princes Narathip Prapunphong and Damrong Rajanubhab, two of King Chulalongkorn’s closest half-brothers who also
played important roles in the palace. Prince Narathip’s interests lay in dance and theatre, and the theatrical works he wrote and produced during this era reflect the application of Western aesthetics and dramaturgy to Siamese siwilai style. While accompanying King Chulalongkorn on his travels to the Malay peninsula and Singapore in 1891, Narathip saw dramatic productions that he later cited as his inspiration for the “lakhon rong,” or “sung lakhon” type of drama. In contrast to the traditional dance-drama form, where a narrator speaks while dancers act out the drama’s events, in lakhon rong “. . . there’s a minimum of dancing . . . and female performers only sway their bodies to the music and gesture with their hands” in a manner much more consistent with Western operas. In 1908, Narathip founded his own venue in Bangkok, the Pridalai Theatre, where his performance troupe produced many dance-dramas utilizing both traditional Siamese stories, and adaptations of Western stories such as Cinderella, The Arabian Nights, and Madame Butterfly (which will become significant to our story later on). Dara Rasami was said to be “one of his most ardent patrons.”

Prince Damrong, in addition to his administrative talents, had a scholarly bent, with interests that included linguistics, history and archaeology. He, like his
half-brother King Chulalongkorn, had been instructed in the English language and several Western subjects at the palace school during his youth, under the tutelage of Anna Leonowens and a succession of British schoolmasters. Damrong’s education had also produced in him a thirst for knowledge, a fact reflected in the hundreds of English-language books and journals still extant in his personal library in Bangkok.\(^{19}\) He traveled widely within Siam and Southeast Asia in pursuit of his interests in archaeology and history, and wrote voluminously on Siamese culture and ancient history. He also founded Siam’s National Museum and Library (later the National Archive and National Library of Thailand, respectively), which contributed to his reputation as “the father of modern Thai history.”

Dara Rasami had personal ties to both these princes, though she and Damrong in particular had had a close association in Bangkok from very early in Dara’s career. Prince Damrong’s official role as head of the Mahat Thai (Department of the Interior) meant that he managed the income from Dara Rasami’s family’s teak forest holdings, personally dispersing funds to her for use in her palace household. Through this regular contact, Dara had earned Damrong’s respect and friendship, and had close contact with the rest of his family as well. The prince’s daughter, Phunphitsamai Diskul, remarks upon Dara Rasami in her memoirs:

I knew Jao Ba [Auntie] (Phra Rajajaya Jao Dara Rasami) ever since I was a child in the palace, because she was a Chao Chom Manda [consort-mother] of the same generation as my Grandma Sae during the Fifth Reign. She was younger than my Grandma, but I knew her by the name of Jao Noi [Little Noble], which was how palace people called her, and they ignored her. Also, one could see she dressed in the beautiful northern style. Later on I saw an older woman who often came to see my father. She dressed in northern style with her hair in a small bun on the back of her head. . . . Later on, I learned that Father was in charge of the “stump money” of Phra Rajajaya Jao Dara Rasami, who, when he sent for her, was called Jao Ba [Auntie]. . . .\(^{20}\)

Even after Dara Rasami left Bangkok to return to her hometown of Chiang Mai in 1914, she maintained regular correspondence with Damrong. He visited Dara in Chiang Mai several times during her retirement, bringing several of his daughters with him.\(^{21}\)

Siamese elite males weren’t the only ones interested in siwilai, however. Even within the Inner Palace, royal consorts were also working to incorporate Western esthetics into a siwilai mode of Siamese dress. The visible expression of acculturation to siwilai was adopting particular elements of Western dress, a practice reflected in photographs of the highest-status royal consorts. For example, in Figure 33 Queen Saowapha Phongsri is shown wearing an ensemble paradigmatic of the time: a Victorian-style lace blouse, complete with leg-of-mutton sleeves, draped liberally with strings of pearls and jeweled brooches, worn atop a silk Siamese chongkrabaen (lower garment), the outfit completed with stockings and shoes.

Like Saowapha and other Siamese consorts, Dara Rasami also adapted her mode of dress to these new conventions – but only to a similar degree as her Siamese
counterparts. Like Queen Saowapha and other high-status consorts, Dara Rasami incorporated the lacy Victorian blouse – preferably bedecked by a plethora of gems – into the overall template of her dress (particularly before the camera’s eye). But Western-influenced dress stopped at the waist, as Dara and her ladies combined the lace blouse with the traditional phasin on the bottom. Interestingly, Dara Rasami’s muay hairstyle – heretofore a marker of ethnic difference from the Siamese – also became considered siwilai due to its similarity to both Japanese and European feminine hairstyles of the time (Figure 34).22

In addition to dress, there are a number of other signs of Dara Rasami’s embrace of siwilai. Some of the younger royal consorts became interested in the new technologies siwilai had to offer, particularly cameras and photography. Although photography became popular as a hobby among many of the royal sons and daughters (as well with King Chulalongkorn himself), the consort most closely identified with palace photography was Chao Chom (royal consort) Erb Bunnag (about whom I have written more extensively elsewhere23). Dara Rasami shared Erb’s interest in photography, albeit to a lesser extent, though Dara Rasami appears in a number of Erb’s

*Figure 33* Queen Saowapha Phongsri’s style of dress: note the combination of European-style lace blouse, stockings and shoes worn with short, Siamese “flank” hairstyle and chongkrabaen (lower garment). National Archives of Thailand.
photographs of life in the Inner Palace of the early twentieth century (Figure 35). Dara’s *siwilai* orientation towards the technology represented by photography, however, is amply demonstrated by her personal participation in the 1905 photography competition held at the king’s annual temple fair at Wat Benchamabophit. Although there is no evidence that Dara Rasami ever shot any photographs of her own, she nonetheless participated in supporting the contest as a member of the “wash and print” team, which processed several hundred contest entries for public display at the public fair. 24 Thus Dara Rasami’s enculturation to *siwilai* Siamese modernity can be seen as consistent with the views and practices of the Siamese elites of her era – but also by virtue of her close relationships with prominent Siamese elites who were active proponents of *siwilai* like Chao Chom Erb Bunnag and Prince Damrong Rajanubhab.

The impact of Siamese *siwilai* enculturation upon Dara Rasami may be most clearly seen in the performing arts practiced by Dara’s palace ladies. While Dara’s musical interests encompassed the musical traditions of Lan Na and Siam, they embraced Western music as well. In addition to training her all-female ensemble

*Figure 34* Dara Rasami’s dress (including *phasin* skirt with *luntaya* pattern) and *muay* hairstyle. National Archives of Thailand.
in Siamese music, Dara also incorporated Western instruments into their repertoire, including the violin, mandolin, piano, and pedal organ. Records show that several of her ladies-in-waiting were even provided training by Western musicians outside the palace. Chao Ying Bua Choom, for example,

studied piano at the hotel of teacher ‘Ma’am’ Tao on Suriyawong Road . . . She also studied organ from . . . Phraya Prasaan Duriyasup . . . Bua Choom was able to give the knowledge she learned to teach music to the royal boys and girls of the lakhon troupe of the royal palace.

Thus Dara Rasami once again serves as a “matron” of music and dance, here “matron-izing” new, siwilai forms of these arts within the palace, as well.

**Dara Rasami and Exemplifying Exotic Ethnic Other-ness in Bangkok**

One might question the extent to which Dara Rasami’s presence in the Siamese palace affected local perceptions of her ethnic difference, given that during her
twenty-eight years of service as a royal consort to the king in Bangkok, her expressions of ethnic difference were limited to the confines of the palace, where she and the women of her household spent the majority of their time. There, her ethnic difference was less cause for acknowledgment or recognition than for teasing and taunting. In one account of palace life during that era, Dara Rasami is described as being reluctant to leave her house in the Inner Palace, as she was frequently humiliated by Siamese consorts and their ladies who called her “Ai” (an insulting, low-status form of address). Even – or perhaps especially – within Siam’s most elite circle, Dara’s ethnic difference was emphasized as inferior to Siameseness – a practice that was reinforced, rather than undermined, by *siwilai*.

Nonetheless, Dara Rasami’s ethnic distinction held an exotic appeal for some Siamese elites within the palace. Dara Rasami’s performing talents caught the attention of the aforementioned Prince Narathip, who was always on the lookout for new dance and musical talent within the palace. When the King asked Prince Narathip to adapt Puccini’s opera *Madame Butterfly* to the Siamese “*lakhon rong*” form, Narathip clearly had Dara Rasami in mind as he sought familiar categories into which the original story could be recast. In his adaptation, the American naval officer protagonist and tragic Japanese heroine became – tellingly – a Siamese soldier and Lan Na woman, giving the tragic heroine the same “exotic” cultural identity as Dara Rasami. Such a formulation provides an illuminating window into Siamese elites’ *siwilai* thinking about other ethnicities within Siam: here, the Lan Na woman is analogous to the Japanese Cio-Cio San, a beautiful, foreign siren who is helpless against the deceit of the Western male. In the Siamese version, the exotic appeal of the heroine’s Lan Na cultural difference is played against the domination of the Siamese male “norm,” in the person of the male officer in whom Bangkok audiences would recognize themselves.

In order to get the production’s Lan Na elements right, Prince Narathip enlisted Dara Rasami’s help with music and dance. To do so, he sent his wife, *lakhon* dancer Mom Luang Tuan, to Dara Rasami’s household in the palace to familiarize herself with the “foreign” elements of Lan Na music, dance and dress that were to impart an authentically exotic Lan Na flavor to the production. Consistent with the new *lakhon rong* form, the actors were not costumed in the garb of classical Thai dancers, but in contemporary clothing appropriate to their characters: that is, a *phasisin* skirt and hairstyle for the Lan Na heroine, and an officer’s uniform for the Thai male – thus making their cultural difference even more visually recognizable to the audience. Mom Luang Tuan had already worked in the “northern” style for Prince Narathip’s earlier adaptation of *Phra Law*, a dance-drama of Lan Na origin. Tuan’s talent for composing stirring songs, “especially of love and sadness,” was well known – and advantageous in adapting the story of *Madame Butterfly* to a Siamese context.

After *Sao Khrua Fa* (Miss Butterfly) debuted in the palace in 1909, the production became wildly successful with Bangkok audiences, taking in around 2,400 baht per week at Prince Narathip’s Pridalai Theatre. Although Dara Rasami was visiting her
hometown of Chiang Mai at the time, King Chulalongkorn himself wrote to inform her of the play’s popularity with Bangkok audiences:

Talking about ‘madness,’ the courtiers are now ‘mad’ about [Prince Narathip’s opera], every person, every name, from the masters to the servants. Since you left [for Chiang Mai], . . . the men who did not see [Miss Butterfly] are very frustrated. It’s up to [Prince Narathip], whether he will perform the play again [at court] after having performed it at the Pridalai Theatre. If he does, the audience will be large. In the past, I went to [his] theatre, and there were not more than 500 present. But since he has performed in the Royal Palace, there are not enough seats . . . The money collected from outside performances is over 10,000 baht. Prince Nara exclaimed that it was due to ‘the glorious virtue of the king.’

Its success assured by its royal patronage, Sao Khrua Fa became Prince Narathip’s most successful production during the entire history of the Pridalai Theatre. In another letter to Dara Rasami, Chulalongkorn states “People seem to like Sao Khrua Fa more than any other [play] . . . to the point that there have been letters sent by mail asking for repeat performances. . . .” The play’s popularity broadcast notions of Lan Na cultural difference well beyond the palace walls via a siwilai form of cultural entertainment, gaining currency among a broad audience in Bangkok.

At the same time, the musical’s success also demonstrated to Dara Rasami a possible upside of siwilai’s racial hierarchy: the exotic appeal of Lan Na’s cultural difference to the Siamese. After decades of performing ethnic difference to the tight circle of Siamese royalty in order to maintain her natal family’s honor, the success of Sao Khrua Fa with Bangkok audiences clearly tapped into the heretofore unrealized appeal of Lan Na identity. Dara Rasami’s presence in the elite Bangkok “contact zone” may have fostered an exoticized view of Lan Na in the Siamized Madame Butterfly, but it also demonstrated to Dara Rasami the potential value of Lan Na cultural products and practices, particularly in resistance to Siamese cultural hegemony. Sao Khrua Fa’s smashing success in 1909 caused repercussions that flowed two ways: firstly, “knowledge” of a fantasized, exotic Lan Na / Chiang Mai “other” was popularized among a broad, central Thai audience in Bangkok. Secondly, Sao Khrua Fa’s popularity communicated an understanding of the potential value contained in that same “Other-ness” to Lan Na elites themselves, namely Dara Rasami. The emergence of a new, self-orientalizing awareness of Lan Na’s cultural appeal to Bangkok’s elites was a by-product of siwilai. It was this subtle, but pivotal shift that, I argue, prompted Dara’s promotion of local arts after her retirement to Chiang Mai from 1914 to 1933. Following her return to her hometown, Dara Rasami deployed her unique experience with both Lan Na tradition and Siamese siwilai to become a very “modern” matron. In this role, Dara Rasami undertook a process of constructing various elements of tradition in her native culture in order to maintain their appeal to the Siamese – which in turn had the effect of both ensuring their survival, and reinforcing local identity against Siamese cultural hegemony.
Problematic Patronages: Dara Rasami Returns to Chiang Mai

After she entered the palace as a consort in 1886, at the age of thirteen, Dara Rasami was not allowed to return to her hometown (Chiang Mai) – even after her father’s death in 1894 – due to a series of rebellions and local unrest that rendered such a visit too risky. Her first opportunity to visit her hometown came twenty-three years after her arrival in Bangkok, in early 1909. At that time, the political fate of Dara’s home kingdom had finally been settled, the last rebellions quelled, and her half-brother Chao Inthawarorot installed as the region’s governor, sharing power with a Siamese commissioner. When Inthawarorot came down to Bangkok in January 1909 for one of his bi-annual official visits, she appealed to the Siamese king to allow her a visit home – a request that was granted. The planned visit was an extended one, as the journey was arduous: heading upstream to Chiang Mai during the dry season entailed overland travel in an era well before the advent of trunk roads in Siam, taking fifty-three days to reach Chiang Mai from Bangkok. Following her arrival in early April, Dara Rasami stayed in Chiang Mai for another seven months, returning to Bangkok in November 1909.

During her extended visit, Dara Rasami undertook a number of activities that promoted Buddhism, as well as cultural products and practices both high and low. Dara Rasami made visits and offerings to several important local wats (temples), including Wat Suthat (located on the top of nearby mountain Doi Suthep), Wat Phra Singh, and Wat Suan Dok. Although she was a staunch patron of local Buddhist temples and monks, she also supported the activities of local Protestant Christian missionaries – a group with whom her mother and aunt had been friendly in the past. During her 1909 visit, Dara Rasami was approached by these missionaries to lend her name to the all-girls’ school that they had set up as a counterpart to the all-boys’ school named for Siam’s crown prince. Following a brief exchange of telegrams with Chulalongkorn, she allowed the school to use her new, queenly title as part of the school’s name: Phra Raja Jaya Wittyalai. These activities are consistent with the pattern followed by both male and female Siamese elites in Bangkok, where setting up educational and medical institutions was seen as siwilai – that is, consistent with the new norms of the Victorian ecumène – even though such norms were as yet unknown to Lan Na culture. In Chiang Mai, the local Protestant missionaries served as an important source of and audience for such siwilai practices during her 1909 visit, and following Dara Rasami’s return home in 1914 as well.

Though Dara Rasami’s activities followed a pattern consistent with Siamese elites’ notions of siwilai, they did not necessarily resonate with the local Lan Na populace. In fact, some of her activities were quite controversial in view of local customs and traditions. The most problematic of Dara’s activities during her visit to Chiang Mai was undoubtedly her creation of a new royal cemetery at Wat Suan Dok (Rose Garden Temple). There, she collected the remains of her Lan Na ancestors from traditional resting places (most of which were adjacent to the Ping River, which itself had a particular local significance), and built new “ku” monuments (individual, freestanding crypts) in which to enshrine them (Figure 36).
Creating cemeteries was a relatively recent notion, even in Bangkok. King Chulalongkorn had built the first cemetery for the cremated remains of royal women and children adjacent to Wat Rachabophit in Bangkok in the 1870s following the death of his favorite consort (and half-sister), Princess Sunanta. Although this new funerary custom had since become an accepted modern practice for Siamese royal elites in Bangkok, it was viewed with great suspicion in Chiang Mai. Moving a person’s remains – particularly those of a royal person – was considered a spiritually risky enterprise to begin with. But moving them from the sacred bed of the River Ping, and then transporting them through the walled city to the new site at Wat Suan Dok, exposed the city and its residents to great spiritual risk. Though there were no newspapers to record local sentiment in Chiang Mai at the time, local reception of this event is captured in local apocryphal legend and (occasionally) in written records. In a note found in the marginia of an astrological temple manuscript, an anonymous monk recorded the dates on which “bones were moved” by Dara Rasami, along with his opinion that no good would come of it. Three months later, in January of the following year, the other shoe dropped: Dara Rasami’s half-brother Chao Inthawarorot,
then-governor of Chiang Mai, suddenly died. The anonymous monk attributed the Chao’s death to the inauspicious relocation of Dara Rasami’s ancestors’ remains, and her removal of an important Buddha image from Wat Chieng Mun, which she took back with her to Bangkok.38

Many of Dara’s other activities in Chiang Mai were far better received by locals, however. As her visit neared its end, Dara Rasami arranged for two weeks of celebrations before leaving Chiang Mai. The preparations for the celebrations included a flurry of building activity in the area west of the old walled city, which was still largely occupied by farms and orchards. Among the new structures that went up were a “pavilions for . . . government officials, a ceremonial hall, movie hall, boxing field, orphanage and hospital,” at a cost of nearly 100,000 baht from the Siamese king’s purse.39 The festivities celebrating the end of Dara Rasami’s visit were held for the last two weeks of October, just before her return to Bangkok. Records of the Siamese officials in Chiang Mai at the time indicate that these events greatly improved the attitudes of the locals towards the Siamese officers and administrators who had recently taken over control of the area from the old royal family of Chiang Mai (Dara Rasami’s relatives):

The best thing is that we [Siamese administrators] are greeted with sweet [salutes] when we come to work . . . It’s given rise to a sense of purpose in almost everyone. This is the first time I can say that I’ve seen such [kindheartedness] from the people; several thousand people with abundant pride. The local people, who flocked to the events, said that they had never seen anything as large as this.40

Dara Rasami’s official visit to Chiang Mai in 1909 was a brilliant move on the one hand, greatly enhancing Siam’s public relations with Lan Na. During the prior decade, the influx of Siamese administrative involvement in the region had sparked rebellions and violence against Siamese officials in Chiang Mai, so Dara’s visit – as noted above – noticeably improved the local attitude towards Siamese officials posted in Chiang Mai. On the other hand, however, local perception of Dara Rasami’s other activities during her visit – particularly those related to Buddhism – was decidedly mixed. Evidence indicates that local people bore a healthy suspicion of Dara Rasami’s “Siamized” ways, and the lasting impacts they might have on local culture. Upon her return to Chiang Mai a few years later, these suspicions were revived. In some respects their suspicions were understandable: Dara Rasami represented a new model of noble matronage that combined elements of both traditional forms, as well as the unfamiliar new siwilai forms espoused by Siam’s elites. Yet at the same time, Dara Rasami’s siwilai-informed, self-orientalized pattern of “matronage” motivated her to maintain important elements of Lan Na identity against the encroachment of Siamese cultural hegemony.

Dara Rasami as a Very Modern Matron of Lan Na Culture: 1914–1933

Dara Rasami truly began to come into her own as a siwilai “matron” of Lan Na culture following her retirement to Chiang Mai in 1914, a few years after King
Chulalongkorn’s death. In the last period of her life between 1914 and her death in 1933, Dara’s activities reflected the orientation of her worldview, and its effect on the types of “matronage” in which she engaged. This period throws additional light on the gendered aspects of her activities, and the differences in the roles of Siamese and Lan Na elite women. In addition to promoting Lan Na arts and culture, Dara’s participation extended to activities more consistent with masculine forms of patronage practiced by *siwilai* Siamese elite males – but which were quite consistent with Lan Na elite female matronage of prior generations. In addition to her matronage of dance, drama, and textile arts, there were two other areas in which Dara demonstrates a matronage informed by notions of *siwilai*: (1) as a matron of medicine and agriculture, and (2) as an amateur scholar of Lan Na cultural history. Firstly, however, let us begin with a discussion of Dara Rasami’s arts matronage.

**Music, Dance-drama, and Textiles**

Since her days as a consort living in the Royal Palace in Bangkok, Dara Rasami and her ladies-in-waiting had practiced the musical arts – and also dance – within her palace residence. According to a palace woman’s memoir of the era:

> Upstairs, [the Princess] had many musical instruments, including the *jakay* (a three-stringed musical instrument), *saw* (a fiddle), *kluy* (flute), *glong* (drum), *tone* (a shorter, smaller tom-tom drum); *ramanah* (one-sided, shallow drum), a piano and a mandolin. But they did not play the *phipat* (Thai orchestral instruments), because they were considered instruments for men only. The [Princess] would sing central Thai songs. . . .

Note here the variety of musical instruments and styles being practiced: Western instruments like piano and mandolin as well as traditional Siamese and Lan Na instruments; the presence of Siamese songs in Dara’s repertoire; also the rejection of central Thai “*phipat*” orchestral music as a style that was masculine-identified, and thus inappropriate for royal ladies to perform. This blending of styles and instruments continued after Dara Rasami’s retirement in Chiang Mai.

Back in Chiang Mai, Dara Rasami’s younger half-brother (and new city governor) Chao Kaew Nowarat had built her a new residence within his palace compound in anticipation of her return. The new house was located – as were many elite residences in early twentieth-century Chiang Mai – on the banks of the Ping River to the east of the old walled city. In addition to their residences, there was also a space called the “Rong Kii” (or “Kii Hall”), described as a “long, open room flanked by columns, used as a rehearsal space for dance and *lakhon*. . . .” There, Dara Rasami oversaw the training of many young women in the traditional forms of Lan Na dance, as well as the new Siamese styles. Among her students were many of the daughters of the Chiang Mai nobility (as well as those of the Siamese administrators living in Chiang Mai). These high-born students included her own foster-daughter *Than Phuying* Chatrsudha Wongtongsri (née Chatrchai), who later became a teacher.
of palace dance herself; also Chao Jamrut na Chiang Mai, Chao Sang Sawang Zerorote, Chao Butsaban Zerorote, Chao Wowdao na Chiang Mai, Chao Khrua Gaew na Chiang Mai, Samruay (Manowong) Bunnag, Sompun (Duangsing) Chotana, and others. However, it was not only the elite that danced at the Rong Kii. Another source notes that “[there were] children of average villagers who were interested in dance – not a few – that she took on as dancers at the palace.”

Dara Rasami employed several teachers to instruct the pupils of the Rong Kii, several of whom had trained in the palace of her late half-brother, the previous governor Chao Inthawarorot, whose troupe had been instructed in the Bangkok palace style. The teachers of Dara’s troupe at the Rong Kii included Mom (Lady) Sae, Kru Pun, Kru Puen, and Kru Thuy. Though she wasn’t teaching herself, Dara appears to have taken a personal interest in the training at the Rong Kii, often observing the practices that were held there every morning from 10am to 12pm, and afternoons from 3pm to 6pm.

In addition to employing dance instructors, Dara Rasami assisted in recording and refining the various positions and gestures of both Lan Na and Bangkok dance styles. For example, she recorded the dances like the “fingernail dance,” which she adapted from old palace dance forms, and the “candle dance” – both of which became styles identified with traditional Lan Na culture (even as she updated them to appeal to contemporary audiences). She codified local forms of dance-drama that utilized northern instruments, rhythms, and vocalizations called lakhon saw, creating a dramatic form much closer to the new Siamese form of lakhon rong, or “singing plays.” The similarities of lakhon saw style to the “modern” lakhon rong, blended with elements of exotic northern difference, appealed greatly to the new Siamese audience in Chiang Mai. Most significantly here, however, Dara Rasami went a step further in creating her own lakhon saw play, called Phra Loh Waen Kaew (Lady Crystal Ring), sometimes also called Noi Chaiya. In contrast to the tragic northern heroine that typified Sao Khrua Fa (the Siamese Madame Butterfly), the female protagonist of Dara’s play rejects the man her parents choose to be her husband, and instead runs away with her lover, even though he is of lower social status than she is. Parts of this play were often performed during receptions of official guests or celebrations of high holidays, and particular songs from it (such as “Noi Chaiya”) are still well known and performed in functions around Chiang Mai today.

While Lan Na’s nobility had a long tradition of court lakhon dancers, they were typically supported by the male ruler’s household. Dara Rasami’s patronage of the arts in Chiang Mai was significant in consolidating existing local traditions and extending the appeal of Lan Na dance and music, which were in danger of losing ground to Siamese dance and dramatic styles following the “integration” of Lan Na into a new Siamese administrative structure in the 1890s. Although Chiang Mai continued to see an increasing flow of Siamese officials and Siamese culture into the area, Dara Rasami’s patronage ensured the continued relevance of Lan Na dance and dramatic styles. The dance and dramatic training she provided guaranteed ongoing employment for local dancers by cultivating demand for their services among the ever-increasing number of Siamese administrators and officials from Bangkok who came to work in Chiang Mai in the 1920s and 1930s.
Dara Rasami also continued to promote Lan Na’s distinct textiles, which she had worn daily throughout her career in Bangkok. In her brother’s compound in Chiang Mai, she had two rooms set up at the Rong Kii with looms for the weaving of phasin textiles. This may relate to the need for special textiles on the part of palace dancers in particular, as “The [phasin] of northerners used in dance especially demonstrated the status of the wearer as well. If it was a ‘dance’ phasin, materials of silver and gold thread were woven into [its] stripes.”

But Dara Rasami promoted Lan Na textiles separately from her interest in dance and performance. At the home she later built on a piece of rural farmland, Dara Rasami installed looms in the shady area underneath her raised house where local girls could learn traditional patterns. Her interest in textiles and weaving was likely greatly influenced by her aunt, Jao Ubonwanna, who was a major figure in Chiang Mai commerce, owning interests in local timber, distillery, and textile factories. In addition to being an astute businesswoman, Ubonwanna had direct experience in managing the production of textiles at her household, where many of her female servants could often be seen working at the looms on the front veranda of her house.

Dara was also interested in maintaining the local patterns practiced in the rural villages scattered among the mountains near Chiang Mai, and traveled to collect them, as well. Her foster-daughter Chatrsudha Wongtongsri relates that Dara Rasami would ride miles to visit the village of Mae Chaem, where the highest-quality teen jok patterns could be found. It also appears that she knew her way around a loom herself: Chatrsudha notes that in the months prior to her death in 1933, Dara Rasami had woven several traditional-style shoulder bags to distribute to monks at her sixtieth birthday celebration.

Most notable is Dara Rasami’s gradual movement from performer to patron – or in this instance, “matron.” Whereas many women of both noble and common birth participated in music and dance as performers, there are few examples of women as sponsors of such activities; that role was typically reserved for their husband, the nobleman or king whose prestige was enhanced by their presence in his household. As a matron devoted to sponsoring – and not merely performing in – Lan Na arts, Dara’s pattern of participation was more consistent with those practiced by Siamese noblemen than those of Siamese elite women of her era.

Dara Rasami as Modern Matron of Medicine and Agriculture

In addition to supporting, maintaining and preserving local traditions of Lan Na dance, Dara’s matronage took other forms consistent with those practiced by her Siamese contemporaries, especially relating to Western medical practices and facilities. Siam’s royals had had experience with Western medicine since the first Protestant missionaries came to Bangkok in the 1830s, and they eagerly accepted vaccination and surgery as complements to traditional Thai medicinal practices. King Chulalongkorn founded Siriraj Hospital in 1888, and sponsored the British-founded Bangkok Nursing Hospital in 1897. The standard of royal medical patronage was feminized around the turn of the twentieth century, as Queen Saowapha initiated the first branch of the Red Cross in Siam, modeling elite women’s support of medical enterprises.
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as siwilai practice. Saowapha had also sent young women to study midwifery in England, as complications during childbirth and infant mortality remained leading causes of death among Siamese women in the nineteenth century.56

Dara Rasami’s family had a similar history of exposure to Western medicine, also via Christian missionaries in Chiang Mai. Dara’s parents had maintained their belief in the efficacy of Western medicine despite having lost an infant son to a failed vaccination attempt in 1868.57 Nonetheless, Chiang Mai’s royal family continued to have a close relationship with the missionaries, encouraging their activities and granting them funds for land for their residences, hospitals, and schools in Chiang Mai. When Dara Rasami’s mother died in 1884, it was noted not only that missionary Dr. Peoples had been entirely in charge of her care, but also that “Mrs. McGilvary was with her at her death, and remained to see the body dressed for the coffin. We missed her very much as a friend. . . .”58

Dara Rasami appears to have had a similarly close relationship with the Protestant missionaries of Chiang Mai following her return to Chiang Mai, and played a similar role as a matron of medical activities and facilities between 1915 and 1933. She built on her parents’ legacy of support for the local Protestant missionaries, donating funds for the expansion of McCormick Hospital and the McKean Leper Colony.59 When the latter opened new housing for its patients in 1923, she even enlisted the help of her old friend Prince Damrong to assist in the ribbon-cutting ceremonies. Dara Rasami acted as the local representative of Siamese royalty by giving a speech at the reception luncheon held for the hundred local Western and Lan Na elites who had attended the occasion.60

Dara’s siwilai orientation familiarized her with other contemporary sciences, as well. She had enjoyed growing hybrid roses since her days in the Bangkok palace, and after her retirement planted rose gardens at her residences in Chiang Mai using hybrid bushes obtained from England.61 Her interest in growing things led her to consider the potential in cross-breeding new strains of crops. To pursue this interest, however, required a bigger plot of land than the rose garden in her brother’s palace compound. In the early 1930s, she began seeking a space of her own on which to build her own residence – and farm.62 She broke ground on a new residence on a piece of farmland in Mae Rim, a rural village several miles north of Chiang Mai in 1931.

There Dara Rasami became a local matron of modern agriculture for Chiang Mai. The seventy rai63 of land surrounding the Dara Phirom residence, known as “Suan Chao Sabai” (Garden of the Princess’ Rest) served as a sort of laboratory for the promotion of new agricultural techniques and crops. On her new farm, Dara Rasami experimented with growing both native and foreign species of both ornamental and fruiting trees, flowers, and crops. Dara appears to have recognized the challenges faced by local farmers as the local economy shifted away from subsistence farming, towards the raising of cash crops. She used her farmland to evaluate which fruits and vegetables farmers could “grow to sell.”64 Using her connections to the Bangkok nobility, Dara Rasami brought new several crops to Chiang Mai which subsequently became economically important. Using foreign seeds obtained from another noble friend, Siamese Mom Chao Sitthiporn Kridakorn,65 Dara introduced cabbage to northern farmers, who were able to sell their produce profitably to Bangkok. She
appears to have taken a personal interest in these agricultural pursuits, as is evident in the account of a Chiang Mai farmer whom she encouraged to grow cantaloupe melon:

I planted the ‘farang’ melon using the special-formula fertilizer of Chao Sitthi-porn (Kridakorn), and the fruit looked very good. They were smaller than Thai melon, but sweeter. I took one to give to Dara, and she was very impressed by its sweetness. I sent one as an example to a hotel in Bangkok – the Hotel Trocadero. Their manager answered me that if I had any more like the one I’d sent, he’d buy them all at thirty satang a pound – around three pounds for a baht.66

Dara Rasami is also credited with the introduction of a new variety of lamyai tree to Chiang Mai, whose fruit became another important cash crop for the northern Thai produce market.67 These are but a few of the species – both native and foreign – that Dara Rasami grew in her fields at Mae Rim. These particular forms of matronage demonstrate the high esteem in which Dara Rasami held scientific aspects of siwilai, and her interest in utilizing them to benefit the people of her home region. In the next form of matronage we will examine, Dara Rasami combines science and culture to become a matron of a wholly new kind: a matron of historical knowledge.

**Dara Rasami as Matron of Cultural History**

In addition to her support of medical activities, Dara Rasami also became a well-known repository of local cultural history. Her interest in Chiang Mai’s local history can be traced to two distinct sources: firstly, the familiarity of her aunt, Ubonwanna, with Lan Na history; and secondly, her friendship with Prince Damrong, who is often referred to as “the father of modern Thai history.”

Dara Rasami’s aunt, Chao Ubonwanna, was noted for her intellectual abilities. In addition to her aforementioned business acumen, she spoke English well enough to communicate with Westerners without having to use an interpreter. British explorer Holt Hallett, who visited Chiang Mai in the early 1880s, recounted Chao Ubonwanna telling him the legend of Queen Chamathewi,68 which prompted Hallett to call her “the historian of the Chiang Mai palace.”69 Other British consular officials of the time describe Chao Ubonwanna as “the person who knows the story of Chiang Mai better than anyone else.”70 As Dara Rasami had lived with her aunt for two years following her mother’s death in 1884, she would certainly have been exposed to these and other stories during her childhood.

During her career in Bangkok, Dara Rasami and Damrong shared a close association from early in Dara’s career that they maintained after she returned to Chiang Mai in 1914. Their relationship during this period is evidenced both by Dara’s numerous appearances in his (voluminous) collected correspondence, and by Damrong’s repeated visits to Dara Rasami in Chiang Mai. For our purposes, the most significant link shared by Prince Damrong and Dara Rasami was their appreciation of historical knowledge. Damrong, who had translated and published the corpus of Siamese royal chronicles in updated Thai language, traveled extensively in his later
life to archaeological sites all over Southeast Asia, and wrote extensively on Thai history and antiquities. Dara Rasami appears to have been influenced by his passion for knowledge, as she herself engaged in similar activities following her return to Chiang Mai. According to her foster-daughter Chatrudsuda Wongtongsri, Dara traveled extensively throughout the region surrounding Chiang Mai to gather historical data from surviving members of the old nobility, as well as any artifacts she could find. These journeys through the thickly forested, mountainous terrain of the region, often necessitated travel on horseback or by elephant, as paved roads had not yet been laid. On these travels, Dara Rasami was usually accompanied by Chatrudsuda herself, who was a skilled horsewoman. Dara Rasami’s horseback travels to the village of Mae Chaem to collect samples of the beautiful teen jok textiles are still known to people living in Chiang Mai today. Part of the impetus behind these activities appears to have been Dara’s consciousness of the importance of the past in maintaining a people’s cultural identity – and the potential for loss of Lan Na culture and/or history, as the Siamese became increasingly involved in the governance of Chiang Mai, and elite cultural expressions. Dara Rasami endeavored to ensure that her own generation of Chiang Mai’s royal family was not forgotten, enshrining part of her father’s ashes atop the region’s tallest mountain, which she then renamed in his honor.

Prince Damrong himself recognized Dara Rasami’s expertise in the cultural history of Lan Na on several occasions. When approached by scholars seeking information on topics related to Lan Na’s history, he would often refer them to Dara Rasami. In August 1923, Prince Damrong wrote to Dara about a young French woman on a scholarship from the French government to study the chronicles and customs of the countries of the Tonkin region. He mentions that this scholar:

> . . . would also like to go to Chiang Mai in order to see the country and study ancient history. She has told me that for knowledge of northern antiquities, your expertise is like no one else’s in Payap province . . . She wants to visit and talk with you . . . I think that Miss Karbolet is a proper person who loves learning, and would get along well with you . . . Please accept this letter of introduction and lend your assistance to her when she comes to Chiang Mai. . . .

In a 1931 letter, Damrong responded to a scholar seeking information about the use of currency in old Lan Na by saying “I will ask [Dara Rasami], because she knows better than I do.” In their subsequent correspondence on the subject, Dara described to Damrong the evidence she had found in traveling around the area, and also explained that she had been reading the “ancient chronicles” to see if she could find any additional past references.

The knowledge of her home region’s history that Dara Rasami gained through travel, collecting oral history, and reading older texts, earned her a reputation over time as a local historical expert among Western and Siamese scholars alike. But it also represents a marked departure from the practices of her female Siamese counterparts. Culturally, femaleness tended to be far more strongly associated with “inside” than
the masculine, dangerous “outside” in mainland Southeast Asia. In Siam, the careers of royal consorts within the palace would have habituated them to the luxury and security of life behind palace walls, and few would have considered undertaking the difficult and sometimes dangerous journeys that Dara Rasami and her foster-daughter did – particularly without elite males to accompany them. In this respect, Dara’s activities appear more consistent with those of Siamese male contemporaries such as Prince Damrong, rather than Siamese elite women, for whom such solo travels would have been quite unthinkable. Despite her own long years living within the confines of the palace, Dara Rasami’s youthful experiences of the “outside,” while traveling between Chiang Mai and Bangkok with her parents, may have been a key factor in making imaginable the outdoor journeys she made later in life. Perhaps the proscription against “outside” among elite women was weaker in the north, where women’s status was higher, and “traditions of female governance were stronger . . .” than in Siam. In any event, Dara Rasami’s research travels represent a major divergence of cultural matronage practices from those of Siamese elite women of the same era.

Conclusion

Dara Rasami’s unique position as a “Siamized” member of Bangkok elite – and her adoption of the Siamese siwilai worldview – allowed her to recognize the value of Lan Na’s ethnic difference, and provided her the tools with which to preserve it. The Siamese adaptation of Madame Butterfly, Sao Khrua Fa serves as an exemplar of how Bangkok “orientalized” Dara Rasami’s culture, yet made Dara Rasami aware of its potential value to her home region. Her promotion of dance, music, and textile arts in particular reflected her awareness of cultural elements recognizable to Bangkokians as “northern” following the popularity of Sao Khrua Fa. At the same time, Dara Rasami’s matronage of practices like medicine, agriculture, and historical research demonstrates a desire to preserve valuable aspects of Lan Na’s cultural difference in anticipation of future economic and social changes. Not only does this reflect her enculturation to the siwilai worldview, it is emblematic of the particularly “modern” form of matronage practiced by Dara Rasami.

It is perhaps ironic that Dara Rasami – as an icon of Lan Na’s political and cultural integration with Siam – should have accomplished so much in terms of conserving existing cultural practices and traditions between 1914 and her death in 1933. In contrast, the new parliamentary democracy that succeeded Siam’s absolute monarchy following the 1932 “revolution” was far less amenable to maintaining local difference than the old monarchy had been. The post-1932 government actively pursued policies that promoted central Siamese identity as the “national” identity for all Thais, and elided northern linguistic and cultural difference. As Chiang Mai activists began to reclaim Lan Na identity in the 1980s–1990s, it was largely to Dara Rasami’s legacy that they looked in their efforts to recover local cultural history and “tradition.” Despite her sometimes-problematic role as a “Siamized” Lan Na elite, the cultural constructions enabled by Dara Rasami’s hybrid forms of matronage continue to survive – and thrive – in Chiang Mai today.
Notes

1 See Thongchai Winichakul’s article, “The Quest for ‘Siwilai’: A Geographical Discourse of Civilizational Thinking in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth-Century Siam,” *Journal of Asian Studies*, 59(3) (2000), 528–549. Here Thongchai delineates the term “siwilai” as the Siamese catchword which encapsulated various Western notions of civilization. He describes “the Siamese quest for siwilai . . . [as] a transcultural process in which ideas and practices from Europe, via colonialism, had been transferred, localized, and hybridized in the Siamese setting . . . The transliterated siwilai, meanwhile, remains in use, having become a common word that can be used as an adjective, a noun, or a verb, interchangeably, both in writing and speaking.”

2 Here I reference the concept elucidated by Carol Breckenridge in her article, “The Aesthetics and Politics of Colonial Collecting: India at World Fairs,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 31(2) (1989), 195–216. Breckenridge defines the Victorian ecumène as a “transnational cultural world” comprised of the United Kingdom, the United States, and “other places,” such as the colonial site on which her article focuses, India. Maurizio Peleggi, in his book *Lords of Things: The Fashioning of the Siamese Monarchy’s Modern Image* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2002), locates Siam among the “other places” which also aspired to Victorian modernity, particularly by means of elite consumption of luxury goods such as Western-style clothing and jewelry, household furnishings, art objects, and architecture.

3 Lan Na is the name of a formerly sovereign kingdom whose capital city was Chiang Mai. The region gradually lost its independence as it came under Siamese control in the early twentieth century, and is now the northernmost part of Thailand.

4 The “Fifth Reign” refers to the long reign of the fifth king of the Chakri dynasty, King Chulalongkorn, which lasted from 1868 to 1910.

5 Typically her family then provided funds to build her a residence there, which was a means of effectively demonstrating the family’s wealth and position. If her family could not provide such funds, the royal purse would fund a small residence. Sara Miphonggit สุภาพร ภูมิพงษ์กิตติ [The Inner Palace during the Rattanakosin Era] (Bangkok: Samnakphim Museum Press, 2008), 161.

6 Prior to King Chulalongkorn’s era, the prior two Chakri kings had wives who were talented *lak hon* dancers. In the Third Reign (1824–1851) Queen Somanat was a *lak hon* dancer; during the Fourth Reign (1853–1868) consort-mothers Ngiu, Siriwan, and Khien (mother of Prince Narathip, who founded the Pridalai Theatre) were also talented dancers (Mattani Mojdara Rutin, *Dance, Drama, and Theatre in Thailand: The Process of Development and Modernization* (Tokyo: The Centre for East Asian Cultural Studies for Unesco, 1993), 148).

7 I have discussed the makeup and cultural function of Siam’s Inner Palace in greater depth in my 2009 dissertation in History at the University of California, Berkeley, entitled “A ‘Foreign’ Princess in the Siamese Court: Princess Dara Rasami, the Politics of Gender and Ethnic Difference in Nineteenth-Century Siam.”

8 In 1836, during the Third Reign (1824–1851), Somdet Phrachao Kromma Mun Luuk Ther (Royal Princess) Aporn Sudathet partially sponsored the construction and decoration of an ordination hall (*uppasi ka*) at Wat Thepthidaram in Bangkok, which is remarkable for the all-female statues within. (Conversation with Warunee Osatharom in Bangkok, Thailand, June 14, 2012.)

9 When Dara Rasami’s daughter was born in 1889, she was granted a parcel of land within the Inner Palace where a separate residence could be built for her. Her family provided funds for a three-story, European-style masonry house big enough not only for Dara Rasami, her daughter and entourage, but also relatives and officials periodically visiting from Chiang Mai.
12 Although the palace lakhon troupe had been largely neglected during Chulalongkorn’s reign, privately-run troupes gained popularity outside the palace. When several older palace ladies wanted to put on their own lakhon to celebrate King Chulalongkorn’s return from Europe in 1906, Queen Saowapha became their matron, funding their training and supervising their rehearsals personally in the Suan Siwilai garden adjacent to the palace (Matti Moidara Rutnin, 100).
13 In the early nineteenth century, the most powerful Asian empire in the Siamese worldview was that of the Chinese, to whom they continued to pay tribute every other year until 1853. According to Maurizio Peleggi, these tributary missions “constituted a major source of acquisition of luxury goods, a source complemented by the junk trade along China’s southeastern coast and SEAsia. This pattern of commerce understandably led to a considerable Sinicization of court taste, particularly evident . . . [by] the Third Reign” (Peleggi, 22–23).
14 See especially Thongchai; and Peleggi.
15 Thongchai, 529.
16 Mattani Moidara Rutnin, 142.
17 Mattani Moidara Rutnin, 120.
18 Prince Damrong held several high positions during his career, serving as Minister of the Interior, Minister of Education, and other important roles during the reign of his half-brother, King Chulalongkorn (1878–1910).
19 This library, located on the grounds of Damrong’s Voradit Palace, is accessible to the general public, but requires use of Thai language to access the directories and indexes of materials. See the palace’s website at http://prince-damrong.moi.go.th/index-2.htm (accessed September 29, 2015).
20 Mom Chao Phunphitsamai Diskul [หม่อมเจ้า พูนพิศมัย ดิศกุล], Collected Writings [ประชุมพระนิพนธ์] (Bangkok: Bamroong Bunthit, 1986).
21 In particular, his daughters Jongjitrathanom and Phunphitsamai both wrote of these visits in their memoirs. Damrong also assisted Dara Rasami in the opening ceremonies at the McKean Leper Colony in Chiang Mai in 1923, as I will discuss later in this article.
22 In many references to Dara Rasami’s hairstyle, it is described as “แบบญี่ปุ่น [baeb Yipun],” meaning “Japanese style.” From photographic evidence, Dara Rasami’s “muan” hairstyle became slightly more bouffant, like a Japanese geisha’s hairstyle. Whether influence for this subtle change came from Japanese images circulating in Siam, or perhaps from the popularity of Madame Butterfly at that time, there is not yet enough evidence to confirm or disprove.
24 Ibid.
25 Phunphit.
26 Wittaya Choompun [วิทยา ชูพันธ์], งานแผ่นดินกับนาฏสิลปดนตรี [“Statecraft and Dance”], ศึกษาไทยอุดมสุข 32, 1 กุมภาพันธ์ 2529, ณ ศาลา อ่างแก้ว, มหาวิทยาลัยเชียงใหม่ [Sala Ang-Gaew, Chiang Mai University, Chiang Mai (Thailand): Journal of Graduate Musical Studies, 17, February 2529].
27 Jullada Phakdiphumin [จุลลดา ภักดีภูมินทร์], และเร [Around the Palace], vols 1 and 2 (Bangkok: โพธิ์พัฒน์ [Chokchai Thewet], 1992).
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28 Romaniyachat Kaewgiriya (Mom Rachawong) and Pattanachat Raphiphun (Mom Rachawong) [M.R. Ramayani, Mom Rachawong, M.R. Phapaphun, Mom Rachawong, Dara Rasami: Tie of Love between Two Kingdoms] (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University, 1999), 88.

29 Mattani Mojdana Rutnin, 123.


31 From a letter dated June 29, 1909, as quoted in Mattani Mojdana Rutnin, 141.

32 Interestingly, evidence implies that Dara Rasami disapproved of the drama’s message. Not only did she request that palace women be shown Sao Khrua Fa separately from the men, she also wrote her own musical dance-drama entitled Phra Loh Waen Kaew (Lady Crystal Ring), also called Noi Chaiya (see Mattani Mojdana Rutnin). This play centers on a woman who rejects her parents’ choice of husband, and chooses to run away with her lower-status lover. Although it never garnered the same attention as did Sao Khrua Fa, however, songs from Noi Chaiya are still performed in contemporary Chiang Mai (W.R.N., 2012: interview with Ajaan Witthi Panichphun, Professor of Performing Arts at Chiang Mai University, July 10).


34 When Dara Rasami departed for Chiang Mai in early February, it was near the end of the dry season, at which time the waterways were too low for travel by boat going upstream from Bangkok to Chiang Mai. The timing of the return journey to Bangkok, at the end of the rainy season (July–October), made possible her return journey by boat.

35 These schools are still functioning in Chiang Mai today. The name of the boys’ school has since been changed to “Prince Royal’s College.” See their English-language website: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dara_Academy; or in Thai: https://sites.google.com/a/web1.dara.ac.th/dara-academy-chiangmai/ (both accessed September 29, 2015).

36 Prani, 4–5.

37 Prior to this, the ashes of royal consorts were sent back to their families for enshrinement in a temple, or to be kept in the family’s home ancestral shrine. The remains of royal-born women, however, became a problem during Chulalongkorn’s era, as there were so many royal offspring from the prior reign who had no family outside the palace. The cemetery built at Wat Rachabophit houses the remains of a number of King Chulalongkorn’s queens, consorts, and children.

38 Interview with Ajaan Kreuk Akornchinaret, curator of the Huen Derm (First Building) manuscript library at Chiang Mai University, January 10, 2008. The manuscript, now in a private collection, came from Wat Phra Phaeng (formerly Wat Chieng Mun), a temple in the Thammayut Nikai (Theravadin Buddhist) tradition. The notes in question were written in kham muang (northern Thai) language, and date from between July 29, 1909 and January 5, 1910, and are located on the last pages of the 48-page manuscript. I am indebted to Ajaan Kreuk for his assistance in locating and translating this information.

39 Prani, 4–5.

Phunphit Amatyakun.

Rujaphon, 27.

Ibid., 27.

The Thai term “Kru” denotes an instructor or trainer, particularly of activities requiring skill.

Rujaphon, 28.

Ibid.

W.R.N., 2012: Interview with Ajaan Witthi Panichphun, Professor of Performing Arts at Chiang Mai University, July 10.

They also frequently become concubines of kings and noblemen, making the boundary between palace lakhon troupes and royal/noble households a very permeable one. Protestant missionaries in Chiang Mai in the 1880s believed that “[t]he theatre girls belong in the main to the king’s harem,” resulting in attempts to “rescue” local girls from being recruited as court dancers (P.U.A.: Letter of Dr. Daniel McGilvary to Cornelia McGilvary, September 24, 1886. Accessed July 2012).

Rujaphon, 27.


W.R.N., 2006: visit to Dara Phirom Palace, Mae Rim, Thailand, August 2.

This was in large part due to the high number of indentured laborers she controlled: approximately 800 (compared to the Chiang Mai king’s household, which held 1,000). From Volker Grabowsky’s essay on p. 273 of Wongsak Na Chiang Mai [วงศ์สักก์ ณ เชียงใหม่] (ed.), จัดโดยศิลปินแห่งชาติ [Pride of Lanna Women] (Chiang Mai: Within Design, 2004).


Ajaan Aroonrut Wichienkieow says her mother used to tell her this story about Dara Rasami (W.R.N., 2008: Interview with Ajaan Aroonrut at Rajaphat University, Chiang Mai, Thailand, on January 10). Incidentally, Mae Chaem is still well known today for the quality of its intricate teen jok textiles, which frequently can be found at Chiang Mai markets and festivals.

Thipawaan, “Jao Dara Rasami at the Rank of Phra Rachaya”.

Unfortunately, at age fifteen, the girls were considered too young to be accepted to the English medical program to which they had been sent, and eventually returned to Siam empty-handed (Malcolm Smith, A Physician at the Court of Siam (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1982)). However, Saowapha founded her own school for midwifery in Bangkok in 1897 (Chula Chakrabongse, Lords of Life: A History of the Kings of Thailand, 2nd revised edn (Bangkok: DD Books, 1982).


Ibid., 257.

Nongyao Kanchanachari [นงเยาว์ กาญจนชารี], คารวินทร์ พระประวัติพระราชชายา เจ้าดารารัศมี พร้อมพระราชยศ ตั้งแต่พระวงศ์ [Dara Rasami: Royal Biography of Jao Dara Rasami, with Remarks and Introduction by Princess Kalyani Wattana] (กรุงเทพฯ: คณะกรรมการจัดทำาหนังสือ, 1990). The McKean facility, which once functioned as a haven for those disfigured by leprosy, has been re-named the McKean Rehabilitation Center, and now provides services focused on injury rehabilitation and care for the elderly. For more information, see their website: www.mckean.or.th/en/home/ (accessed September 29, 2015).
It is not clear, however, whether she spoke in Lan Na language, Siamese, or English—though the English text of her speech was run in its entirety in the missionary journal *Siam Outlook*, 3(2) (October 1921), 291–293.

She developed a hybrid strain of thornless, sweet-smelling pink roses that she named Chulalongkorn, in honor of the deceased king. See Romaniyachat Kaewgiriya and Pattanachat Raphiophun, 166–167.

After Dara Rasami moved to her new house in Mae Rim, her half-brother moved into the residence she had vacated. Today, the original teak house is gone, but the compound still stands, and is home to the U.S. Consulate in Chiang Mai. See details at the consulate’s website: http://chiangmai.usconsulate.gov/history.html (accessed September 29, 2015).

A *rai* is equal to an area of 1,600 square meters, making 70 *rai* equal to 27.675 acres.

Sittiporn Kridakorn had a double Lan Na connection: his father, Prince Boworadet Kridakorn, had served as Siamese commissioner to Chiang Mai for several years, and married two of Dara Rasami’s ladies-in-waiting. Sittiporn’s wife, Lady Siphroma Kridakorn, was herself a Lan Na woman, hailing from the city of Nan. See the Kridakorn Family genealogy website for more information: http://family.kridakorn.net/MLSaksiri/KridakornTree/persons/person236.html (accessed September 29, 2015).

*rai* is equal to an area of 1,600 square meters, making 70 *rai* equal to 27.675 acres.


Although we don’t have written evidence of Dara Rasami’s scholarly discoveries, Prince Damrong notes that she contributed her “ancient knowledge” to the volume she prompted him to write on the history of the river route between Bangkok and Chiang Mai, entitled “Notes from a Journey down the Ping River from Chiang Mai to Pak Nam Pho” [อธิบายระยะทางล่องลำาน้ำาปีง ตั้งแต่เมืองเชียงไหม่จนถึงปากน้ำาโพธื์], published by the Sophon Press, Bangkok, in 1927.

Thipawaan Wongtongsri [ทิพวรรณ วงส์ทองศรี], พระราชชายา: พระศรีมิ่งเมืองนครเชียงไหม่ [“Phra Rachaya: Lady Ming Muang of Chiang Mai”], จามจุรี [Jam Juree], 2(3) (1999), 49–56.

This mountain, now named “Doi Intanon” after Dara Rasami’s father (whose given name was Inthanon), is the highest mountain in Thailand today, at 8,415 feet.

Nuanchanok Witetwittayanusat [นวชนก วิเทศวิทยานุศาสตร์], บทบาทด้านการเมีองและ สังคมของพระราชชายาเจ้า ดารารัศมี ที่มีผลต่อการเปลียนแปลงของจังหวัดเชียงใหม่ [“The Roles in Politics and Social Change of Prarajjaya Chao Dara Russami in Chiang Mai (1873–1933 A.D.)”] (Master’s thesis, Kasetsart University, 2007), 107. Damrong may be referring to Suzanne Karpeles, a Frenchwoman who served as the director of the Cambodian Royal Library from 1925 to 1941, and also founded the Buddhist Institutes in French colonial Vientiane, Laos and Phnom Penh, Cambodia (Penelope Edwards, *Cambodge: The Cultivation of a Nation, 1860–1945* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2007), 186–194).

Nuanchanok, 105.

Thipawaan, “Phra Rachaya: Lady Ming Muang of Chiang Mai,” 106.

80 Ibid., 166.

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