1. Introduction

In 1882, a wild rumor swept Bangkok: that Queen Victoria wished to adopt a young princess named Dara Rasami from Lan Na, a small kingdom roughly 300 miles north of Bangkok, one of Siam’s principal tributaries. The threat of such a move greatly alarmed the Siamese king, as the annexation of their old enemy and neighbor Burma was well underway by the British. And they weren’t Siam’s only European threat: The French had also begun pressing in on Siam’s eastern peripheries from Cambodia and Laos. If such an adoption took place, it would expand England’s colonial reach uncomfortably close to Bangkok’s back-doorstep.

It was nearly unheard of for Siam’s king to reach out to individual families in asking for their daughter’s hand, as young women were usually “gifted” to the Siamese palace as consorts (literally in the hundreds, in King Chulalongkorn’s case). But this rumor sparked quite a different response: Chulalongkorn acted quickly, sending a gift of jewels and a letter of engagement to secure Dara Rasami as his royal consort in 1883. Princess Dara Rasami, the only surviving daughter of the ruling line of Lan Na’s hundred-year-old Chao Chet Ton dynasty, was at that time nine years old.

This story highlights the intense sense of contingency felt by Siam’s rulership during the 1880s. It also illustrates the collision between two very different views of how states were defined and how they expanded themselves. On the one hand, the rumor at the heart of the story reflects a local and regional awareness of European colonial reach. The details mirror the story of India’s young Maharaja Duleep Singh, who Queen Victoria really did adopt as a youth and bring to England.

1 On the other hand, the Siamese reaction to the rumor – reaffirming the regional practice of marital alliances between kingdoms – was firmly rooted in traditional modes of statecraft that had been practiced in Southeast Asia for several millennia.
And yet, the story also disrupts the dominant narrative of Siam as a sovereign kingdom that successfully avoided colonization by adapting to the “modern” political practices of European nations. Not only does it highlight that what is now called northern Thailand was until recently a separate and sovereign kingdom in its own right; it also demonstrates how central polygamous practices still were to Thai statecraft during this era. And yet, royal polygamy remains largely untouched by Western historians in their survey of this period of Thai history. Dara Rasami’s story raises for us a number of questions which the existing historical scholarship has not bothered to answer: When did the practice of royal concubinage begin, and when did it end? How did the system of royal queens and concubines work, exactly? Could and did non-Siamese (and/or non-Buddhist) women become wives of the Siamese king? Who were the wives, queens and concubines of the kings of Siam, and where did they come from? While we are dimly aware of the fact that polygamy was practiced by the kings of Siam (as well as many other places) until relatively recently, these questions remain unanswered by English-language scholarship. Which leads to the critical question: Why not?

**Tracing the Place of Women in Thai Historiography**

Modern Thai historiography was constructed by Siam’s royal elites on the nineteenth-century model of European histories which celebrated the nation-state. In this type of “modern” history, as Hong Lysa succinctly puts it: “The male-associated activities of building and defending the country against hostile neighbors and colonial threats dominated the historical narrative, in which women hardly featured at all.”2 Ironically, many of these narratives can be traced to the “father of Siamese history,” Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, who was himself both a product and a practitioner of polygyny.3 Though Damrong himself wrote important biographical accounts of several royal consorts, the practice of royal polygyny is notably absent from his historical accounts of Siam the nation.
Western historians have perpetuated the disappearance of polygyny from Siam’s political history in twentieth-century scholarship. The seminal English-language political histories of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Siam emphasize the activities of its “modernizing” monarchs: King Mongkut (Rama IV), his son Chulalongkorn (Rama V) and grandson Vajiravudh (Rama VI). The scholarship focusing on Rama V, King Chulalongkorn, depict his reign as an era of rapid – and successful – modernization, viewing it in terms of the systemic administrative changes undertaken by Chulalongkorn and his team of half-brother ministers. On the rare occasions royal women or consorts are mentioned in these works, it is in passing – if indeed they are mentioned at all. If, as Joan Scott puts it, “[p]olitical history has… been enacted on the field of gender,” then these ostensibly political histories obscure the roles of women in their assumption that Siamese statecraft was by default driven exclusively by men.

Historians of that generation may well have been made suspicious of the topic of palace women by the efforts of a lone forerunner in the field: Anna Leonowens. Her 1870 book, *The English Governess at the Siamese Court: Being Recollections of Six Years in the Royal Palace at Bangkok*, brought her literary fame in both England and the United States, although whether she was either English or a governess has since been largely debunked. Leonowens continued to capitalize on her unique experience in exotic erotic Siam in her second book, *The Romance of the Harem* (1872). In both texts, Leonowens plays up slavery, the “hot button” issue of the day, to align her portrayal of the women of the Inner Palace with those of the decadent harems of India and Ottoman Turkey – already a well-established and marketable literary genre by the 1870s. In Leonowens’s Siamese harem, every woman was a slave, subject to the whims of a tyrannical and capricious king. The Thai objections to these works and their subsequent adaptations into film and musical forms have resulted in their being banned in Thailand. Whether out of distaste for Anna’s titillating treatments of the subject, or for the perceived
political illegitimacy of the Siamese harem, Western historians have avoided tracing Anna’s footsteps into Siam’s Inner Palace for nearly 150 years since her departure from Siam.

Finding “Lost” Palace Women: Materials, Methods and Approaches

The absence of palace women in the scholarship is due in some part to the challenges that face any researcher in Thai history. The archival records of the Inner Palace are sparse, and the documents which do exist offer slender but deep pockets of data on a very limited number of aspects of royal life (legal cases and medical care, in particular). The habit of keeping personal diaries and daily journals so common among Western royal figures in the same era was not practiced by Siamese royals. There are several possible reasons for this absence: while illiteracy or inconvenience could be the culprit, I suspect that the Thai cultural importance of being “up-to-date” devalued the act of recording the minutiae of daily life. Given the high status of the inhabitants of the Inner Palace, however, such personal accounts could actually have been dangerous for palace women to keep, due to their royal subject matter. It simply may have been safer to keep one’s secrets, critiques and complaints to oneself, rather than risk that written words fall into the wrong hands. This is where rumors become especially important to the narrative: as anonymous reservoirs of memory which could circulate freely without consequence to their originators.

To construct a comprehensive picture of the social world of the Fifth Reign’s Inner Palace the scholar must draw from a broader range of source materials, many of which can only be found outside the traditional archive. Many details of life in the Inner Palace can be gleaned from the memoirs of women who lived and worked there, or in the works of historical fiction (such as Kukrit Pramote’s *Four Reigns*). Cremation volumes, which are biographical memorial volumes published in conjunction with an individual’s funeral cremation, make up another significant source of accounts of life inside the palace. Another important source is oral history:
interviews with surviving palace ladies and other royal descendants, like Mom Chao Jong Jitra Thanom Diskul, a daughter of Prince Damrong and niece of King Chulalongkorn, who was interviewed in her later life by prominent Thai scholar and social critic Sulak Sivaraksa. Last but not least, museum collections, textiles, and photographs (of which there are many for the Fifth Reign) provide a tremendous trove of data for the cultural historian of this era. Thus the research for this book has drawn upon a broader notion of the archive, drawing on written, oral, visual and material “documents” to construct a picture of the lives of the Lan Na women who lived within King Chulalongkorn’s palace.

In keeping with my use of a broader cultural “archive,” I also attempt to include as many visual images as possible to aid the reader in imagining the space and environment of the Siamese palace afresh. Thus each chapter is accompanied by an appendix of maps and images to complement the written narrative.

**Chapter Themes and Arguments**

My next section begins by familiarizing the reader with the geography and early history of Lan Na. I situate the kingdom as part of a greater “Inland Constellation” of city-states between Burma and northern Vietnam, a model intended to de-center the notion of Chiang Mai (and its neighboring polities) as “northern,” as it is only so from a Bangkok-centric view of the region. The cultural, geographic and economic background I’ll discuss in this chapter demonstrates Lan Na’s distinctiveness in contrast to Siam, and sets the scene for the events of the mid-to-late-nineteenth century. At that time, Lan Na’s loyalties to Siam came into question as Britain consolidated its colonial presence in Burma, and British-Burmese loggers increasingly conflicted with Lan Na’s rulers. Rumors that the Queen of England wanted to adopt young princess Dara Rasami played upon Bangkok’s colonial anxieties in that moment, prompting the Siamese king to extend an offer of engagement to Dara’s family. The resulting marital alliance of Dara Rasami
and King Chulalongkorn, intended to cement the political relationship between Lan Na and Siam, illustrates the contingency of the historical moment produced by European colonial encroachment in the region.

Chapter One examines Dara Rasami’s career in the world of Siam’s Inner Palace, the walled palace-within-the-palace where the king’s consorts and female relatives lived. This female-only environment, which was off-limits to the male Westerners of the time, has long been incorrectly assumed to be a “harem” in the same sense as Ottoman Turkey or Mughal India. The Inner Palace, considered an oriental odalisque, obscured from Western eyes the real political power relationships created and expressed there. Nonetheless, the Inner Palace represented the embodiment of the monarch’s political reach: a microcosm of the Siamese polity, where the peripheries were represented quite literally by women’s bodies.

To analyze Siamese royal polygyny, I adapt Marx’s theory of money to the notion of the “circulation of bodies,” in which value accrues via circulation and movement (or the restriction thereof). I intend this notion to animate the idea that pre-modern Thai statecraft depended on a currency of human bodies – particularly those of palace women – as an important part of its political economy. This metaphor also speaks to Thongchai’s notion (from Siam Mapped) of the “geo-body,” and the mapping technologies by which Siam’s political landscape was re-shaped during the Fifth Reign. I problematize that characterization by showing that the bodies of palace women – and Dara Rasami in particular – continued to function as political currency throughout the Fifth Reign era.

In Chapter One, I explore the notions of circulation and social currency which governed the seclusion of elite women, and the idea that high status equated to invisibility in the traditional Siamese worldview. As the highest stratum of Siamese elite society, the Inner Palace represented a cultural crucible within which Siamese culture was produced and reproduced. Here I also
consider Dara Rasami’s social and political significance in terms of space and proximity to the king himself. I also consider the various ways in which her life (and that of her ladies-in-waiting) in the palace were shaped by the distinctly Siamese customs that informed the culture of the Inner Palace. Dara Rasami’s early palace career reflects the politically central role played by provincial consorts like herself, and how their lives in the palace – as hostages for their family’s loyalty – ultimately depended upon Siam’s king himself.

Chapter Two explores the various ways in which Dara Rasami performed ethnic difference within the palace in her later career: in particular, through her hairstyle and dress, her participation in dance-drama productions, and through different gestural forms. Even as her value as a political pawn declined towards the end of the nineteenth century, Dara exemplifies how palace women’s roles took on new significance in creating and expressing notions of siwilai – the Siamese hierarchy of civilizations – in the early twentieth century. I posit that Dara Rasami performed the role of an “Other within”13 Siamese elite society via cultural expressions like the Siamized Madame Butterfly, against which notions of cultural hierarchy were formulated. As the Siamese aspired to “modern” notions of the hierarchy of civilizations – or siwilai – in their worldview, Dara Rasami provided an immediately accessible elite non-Siamese Other. At the same time, she retained enough agency to “write back” against Siamese discourses of her “Laoness.” Here I utilize Spivak’s notion of strategic essentialism14 – a tactic utilized by members of a minority group to make use of an “essentialist” version of their identity to resist domination by the majority – to explain how Dara consciously shaped the discourse around Lan Na identity, ultimately improving both her own status and wider Siamese perceptions of her homeland and its people.

Strategic essentialism also helps us to understand the events of Dara’s later life, which I trace in Chapter Three. This chapter examines the final years of Dara Rasami’s life at Suan Dusit
palace following King Chulalongkorn’s death in 1910, and the nearly twenty years between her retirement to Chiang Mai in 1914 and her death in 1933. Looking at Dara’s later life and activities in her hometown reveals her ongoing interest in enhancing elements of Lan Na’s cultural and economic uniqueness, and her efforts to promote the educational and agricultural interests of Chiang Mai’s people. This chapter also discusses how Dara Rasami has figured in Chiang Mai’s popular memory in the decades since her death. While one would imagine that Dara would be considered an elite “insider” as a member of Chiang Mai’s old royalty, the many years she spent in Bangkok had transformed her into a cultural “outsider” by the time of her return in 1914. This ambiguity affects how her memory has been maintained and expressed in contemporary Chiang Mai.

The political fortunes of Siam’s elite women were subject to a similarly ambiguous fate. In the space of a single generation after King Chulalongkorn’s death, royal polygyny fell out of vogue with Siam’s monarchs (beginning with King Prajatiphok, Rama VII, 1925-1935). After 1932, when Siam became a constitutional monarchy, the new political system provided no equivalent spaces for women’s participation. As the consorts of Dara’s generation lived out their days secluded in their luxurious residences, palace women faded from Siam’s political and cultural center. As I discuss in the conclusion, as royal polygyny was phased out in favor of a Westernized, “modern” political system, elite Siamese women suffered a great loss of political capital. However, although their political value evaporated, their social cachet remained: even today, the surnames of their royal descendants continue to dominate both the society pages of Bangkok’s popular magazines and the ranks of the country’s military and bureaucratic elite.

My analysis of Dara Rasami’s political and cultural roles as a consort during Siam’s Fifth Reign aspires to do more than simply insert women into the historical narrative. Rather, the narrative of Dara Rasami’s life and career provides fresh historical perspectives on the regional
history of Southeast Asia, Siam’s political history, and the role of the Inner Palace as a crucial intersection of the two.

**Lan Na and Siam: Stars in a Shifting Constellation**

To most people residing outside Thailand, the term “Lan Na” has little significance. Even for most modern Thais, Lan Na brings to mind a kingdom from Thailand’s ancient past, whose relationship to Thai history they only vaguely understand. But Lan Na’s history and cultural orientation is quite distinct from Siam’s, and it is this distinctiveness that deeply informed Dara Rasami’s worldview, making her an outsider to Siamese culture when she arrived in Bangkok to marry the King of Siam in 1883. Her role in bridging the great cultural and political differences between her homeland and Siam are what make her story both historically significant and personally compelling.

So when and where did the kingdom of Lan Na arise, and how was it distinct from Siam? Although Lan Na was once a kingdom on a par with that of Siam or Burma, with a distinct language, social structure, and cultural traditions of its own, these differences have been largely obscured. The dominant historical narratives of the Thai nation-state minimize the impact of Siam’s expansion of control over its neighboring city-states by describing it as “bringing them under the protection of the Siamese [royal] umbrella.” To combat this act of historical erasure we need to re-orient our view of Lan Na’s role in the regional economy and politics. This move, in turn, will demonstrate the importance of Dara Rasami’s union with the Siamese king in the late nineteenth century.

**Region and Environment: Lan Na as an “Inland Constellation”**
Lan Na’s historical territory comprises what are today Thailand’s eight northernmost provinces: Chiang Mai, Lamphun, Lampang, Chiang Rai, Phayao, Phrae, Nan, and Mae Hong Son. At one time or another, Lan Na has included parts of what is today upper Burma, Sipsong Panna in China’s Yunnan province, Thailand’s northern and northeastern regions, and northern Laos. As this region is “northern” only in terms of how it is viewed from Bangkok, I prefer to reframe it as an “Inland Constellation.” This term both denotes the polities’ landlocked inland location, and references Stanley Tambiah’s notion of the “galactic polity.” Reframing the region in this way also provides us with a convenient shorthand for a constantly shifting group of city-states – *muang* – whose peripheries often overlapped, fluctuating with the waxing and waning of the political strength of capital cities at their centers, and the pull of neighboring states. These *muang* and the satellite polities under their control were linked by commonalities of geography and economy which resulted in shared elements of culture and religion. Whether or not geography is destiny, the particular political and environmental challenges posed by this physical landscape produced a cohesive cultural environment in Lan Na which was highly distinct from (though sometimes influenced by) those of Burma, China and Siam.

The physical characteristics of the Inland Constellation’s terrain are markedly different from those of central Thailand. (See Illustration 2.1 for a historical map of the region.) Starting north of today’s city of Phitsanulok, the terrain rises sharply to high, thickly forested mountain ranges separating many narrow, flat river valleys. These mountain ranges, which run mostly from north to south, are extensions of the Yunnan mountain ranges of southern China and the eastern Himalayas. The snowmelt waters winding through these ranges flow into the Mekong River to the east, the Salween in the west, and Chiang Mai’s Mae Ping river, into a host of tributaries that feed the Chao Phraya River in the central Thai plains, facilitating trade, travel and communications in the region. The mountainous terrain provided rich resources for both
hunter-gatherers and small-scale agriculturists. However, it also made overland travel difficult and slow-going, and even movement on the waterways was largely limited to the rainiest months of the year (typically July through December). These geographic factors made it essential for settlers to choose sites which could remain largely self-sufficient for much of the year.

The narrow riverine highlands and valleys, while resource-rich, were sparsely populated compared to the wide, flat lowlands of Siam. Due to the steep, mountainous terrain separating them, Lan Na’s small river-valley communities had limited farmland, necessitating periodic interaction with other communities for continued survival. Thus, the fabled self-sufficiency of northern villages was largely mythical. In reality, most Lan Na village economies depended on the trade of local crops and goods with larger towns in exchange for supplemental rice and necessities like salt. Additional trade came via seasonal visits from overland caravans traveling between Burma and China. A number of such caravans linked in turn to a trade route even further north called the “Tea Horse Road,” which stretched between Sipsong Panna and Tibet. At the same time, rivers also served as trade routes running north and south through the steep valleys, giving overland routes connections to entrepots with oceanic access, such as Phitsanulok in the west and Luang Prabang in the east. Such trade facilitated a continuous flow of cultural and religious elements among the towns of the Inland Constellation, from crafts and textiles to religious concepts and practices. Another characteristic shared by the people of Lan Na and the rest of the Inland Constellation was a preference for glutinous (sticky) rice, over the long-grain rice grown in Siam’s low-lying Chao Phraya River basin. Such flows gave Lan Na’s cultural and economic exchanges a markedly inland orientation, versus the distinctly oceanic orientation of the Siamese entrepot-kings of Ayutthaya and Bangkok (which we could think of as part of a “Maritime Constellation,” à la Anthony Reid’s formulation).

Enduring Patterns: Lan Na Rulership, Burmese Colonization and the Khon Muang
Informed by these geographic and physical constraints, Lan Na’s rulers favored a style of rulership that depended on familial connection, in which women played a key role. Thirteenth-century king Mangrai, for example, not only arranged marriages with a number of local women to consolidate his political authority, but also arranged his sons’ marital alliances with the daughters of neighboring kings in order to align the loyalties of the satellite cities with the capital at Chiang Mai. This pattern of “daughter-in-law” succession, which granted local women important roles in localizing the rule of invading rulers, persisted as the dominant political pattern in Lan Na until the late nineteenth century. The practice was distinct enough from those of its neighbors to warrant special mention in Ming dynasty chronicles, where Lan Na was described as “the land of 800 daughters-in-law.”

In the mid-sixteenth century, Lan Na became desirable to the Burmese as a northern base for their incursions into central Siam. In the 1560s, the Burmese took advantage of political instability in Lan Na to take control of the region, marking the start of a period of indirect colonial rule and cultural continuity. The potential for rebellions was quelled by deporting most of Lan Na’s noble families to Burma; whatever relatives remained were forbidden to intermarry, effectively disrupting the old networks of marital and kinship ties between the constellation’s muang and allowing the Burmese to divide and rule. The long-term Burmese presence in Lan Na imparted certain influences to local foodways, dress and language. Nonetheless, Burmese control was strongest in Chiang Mai and Chiang Saen, while it was much looser in the further-flung muang of Nan, Phrae, and Lampang.

By the eighteenth century, Burma’s efforts to impose changes in Lan Na were felt to be increasingly oppressive, and sporadic rebellions erupted on the peripheries. After a Chinese invasion in 1771 weakened Burmese control, Lan Na’s remaining nobles were able to oust the colonial official from Chiang Mai. When the rebels got word to the Siamese General Taksin at
Bangkok, he rapidly sent troops to assist them in Chiang Mai and Lampang. As Siam’s Chakri dynasty began in 1782, Kawila was crowned king of the refounded Lan Na kingdom. However, the capital he inherited was nearly desolate, having suffered decades of warfare and wholesale deportation of its populace. According to a chronicle of the era:

At that time Chiang Mai was depopulated and had become a jungle overgrown by climbing plants, it turned into a place where rhinoceroses, elephants, tigers and bears were living. There were few people [left], only enough for building houses to live in and roads to facilitate communication with each other. Thus, there were no opportunities for clearing [the jungle].

Before the king could take up residence in Chiang Mai once again, the capital needed to be rebuilt. The new king then embarked on a process of repopulation and resettlement called “putting people into cities as vegetables into baskets.” The first step was persuading several groups who had fled the area to return: some were residents who had fled to Mae Hong Son in the 1760s and from Tak and Lampang to Siam some 20 years before. Though this met with some success, “…the severe losses of population caused by war, famine, and epidemics could… hardly be compensated for” by voluntary migration. Consequently, Kawila embarked on a long-term campaign to resettle Lan Na’s cities in three waves: the first from 1783-86, the second from 1798-1804, and the final wave lasting from 1808-13. Though some of these efforts began with rulers sending gifts to the local elites to entice them to relocate their villages, more often than not they ended with military forces rounding up people and forcibly moving them to Chiang Mai. To the east, the regional center of Nan, which had also sworn allegiance to Siam but was unconnected with Chiang Mai’s ruling elites, similarly repopulated their villages with people from Sipsong Panna.

These campaigns resulted in an ethnically diverse population, including the Lüe of Sipsong Panna, the Khoen of the Chiang Tung area, and the Tai Yai from the muang of Sat, Pan, and
Phu. These resettled peoples “were seen by the Yuan not at all as *khon tang chat* [foreigners], but were viewed as people belonging to a greater Lan Na cultural zone,” since they spoke mutually intelligible dialects and utilized a similar writing system. There were also numbers of Karen, Lawa, and other upland peoples among the war captives. Due to the old pattern of cooperative upland-lowland relationships, these peoples were seen as semi-civilized, and thus appropriate for urban resettlement. These groups were allocated land in the outlying areas surrounding the walled center of the capital city, and their populations scattered across multiple communities to prevent uprisings. In and around contemporary Chiang Mai, a number of these communities still bear place names that reflect the origins of these resettled peoples, who often named them for their home villages.

From this ethnic diversity sprung the *khon muang* identity (lit. “people of the *muang,*” a *muang* being a village, town or city) in Lan Na. This supra-ethnic category was forged by Lan Na’s rulers – themselves ethnically Yuan – as a coherent identity for the peoples recently resettled from the hinterlands. As a multi-layered identity, which allowed relocated highland peoples to retain elements of their ethnic difference, *khon muang* came to denote a shared identity amongst Lan Na lowland city and village dwellers over decades of intermarriage and exchange. While resettled groups’ linguistic and ethnic heritage was never erased, it was subsumed by the *khon muang* identity, distinguishing Lan Na city-dwellers from their upland counterparts.

**Shifting Economies, Shifting Allegiances: Lan Na in the 1850s**

Lan Na scarcely had time to enjoy its newfound peace and prosperity before global events destabilized the balance of power in the region once again. In faraway England, the dispensations of the 1824 Treaty of London gave Britain control of the trade ports of Ceylon (India), Malacca (Indonesia), Singapore and Penang (Malaysia). British rule in northeastern India culminated in
conflict with the Burmese in the first Anglo-Burmese War (1823-26), forcing the Burmese to sign extractive treaties that financially devastated the kingdom. Great Britain had defeated Lan Na and Siam’s old enemy, Burma, to become an ascendant power in the region. Even more worrisome, however, was British control of the territory of Tenasserim, which shared the common boundary of the Salween River with Chiang Mai. For the first time, Lan Na and Siam were confronted with a Western colonial power as an immediate neighbor.39

At the same time, Siam was experiencing problems on its eastern frontiers as well. Possibly influenced by news of the British victory in Burma, the king of Vientiane (Laos), Chao Anouwongse, launched a military offensive southward towards Bangkok in 1827. This incursion has been interpreted differently by Siamese and Lao historians. Was it an attempt to re-establish the ancient kingdom of Lan Xang, an effort to “liberate” thousands of Lao who had been re-settled by the Siamese in Nakhon Ratchasima in the 1770s, or a pre-emptive strike against “Thai aggression” aiming to dismantle Lao independence entirely?40 In either case, Chao Anou’s campaign was perceived as aggression by the Siamese, who responded quickly and ruthlessly. In addition to destroying Chao Anou’s capital city of Vientiane, the Siamese deported the entire population (estimated conservatively at 100,000 people) from the east bank of the Mekong River westward to the interior of Siam’s Khorat Plateau. After Chao Anou’s capture in 1828, he was taken to Bangkok and imprisoned publicly in a cage, where he died after several days of direct exposure to the punishing forces of both the blistering sun and the derision of the Siamese populace.41

Why did the Siamese treat a former vassal so brutally? The open rebellion of one of its tributary rulers – particularly a Buddhist one – was thought to undermine the dharmic authority of the Siamese king. And as European pressure increased on both Siam’s eastern and western frontiers, a harsh response signaled their intolerance of internal challenges to their monarch’s
increasingly centralized power. For Lan Na, whose nobles’ loyalties were somewhat divided over the episode, Siam’s message was clear as to the fate awaiting any vassals foolish enough to openly display disloyalty to Bangkok.  

The British presence in the region did not appear to threaten the Lan Na rulership; in fact, quite the contrary. Upon the conclusion of the First Anglo-Burmese War (1825), Lan Na’s king sent a number of letters to the British at Moulmein requesting formal contact, presumably to establish trade relations. The renovation of Moulmein by the British as an inland trade center also brought an increased flow of trade between Chiang Mai and Burma, and initiated two new industries that would quickly become major revenue streams for the Lan Na nobility: cattle and teak.

Starting in 1826, British troops stationed at the Moulmein garrison required a steady supply of beef, as standard rations for British soldiers included a pound of fresh beef per soldier per day. When the garrison was smaller, the average demand was about 700 head of cattle per year; by the later 1830s the demand had grown to 2,500 – 3,000 head per year. The “Shan bullocks,” as they were called, were considered to be higher quality beef than either buffalo meat or that of the cows to be had from Madras or Bengal, and their worth was accordingly higher. In 1841, for example, around 200 Moulmein traders were said to be waiting to buy cattle in Chiang Mai with 100,000 rupees – a sum that could purchase up to 5,000 head. Cattle remained the most profitable export from Lan Na until the mid-1850s, the only surpassed by the value of teak in the 1860s as the forests were depleted.

As cattle and teak became the most profitable export products, the Lan Na economy’s center of gravity shifted from Siam to British Burma. However, it wasn’t until Siam’s attempts to extend their political control over Lan Na in the 1850s that the relationship between the two mandalas became strained nearly to the breaking point.
Turning Point in the Lan Na-Siamese Alliance: The Chiang Tung Wars, 1848-54

Following a succession crisis in 1848, the Lan Na muang of Chiang Rung requested Siamese military assistance in quelling civil unrest. During this crisis some of the city’s nobles fled to (now-British-Burmese) Chiang Tung, where they sought the support of local Burmese nobles, highlighting the fluid relationship that still existed among the Burma-Lan Na muangs of the old constellation. The Siamese chronicle of the time quotes Siam’s king Rama III as stating, “If we can subdue Chiang Tung, Chiang Rung will be ours.” To this end, the Siamese king authorized Chiang Mai to conscript a total of 7,500 men to attack Chiang Tung, but the expedition was ultimately a failure.

When Siam’s King Mongkut (Rama IV) inherited this enterprise from his older brother in 1852, Chiang Rung had requested assistance once again – but this time, the Siamese felt Siam’s reputation was at stake. This time, the conscripts from cities throughout Lan Na, plus troops sent from Bangkok, totaled 30,000. Though King Mongkut sent his own brother, Prince Wongsa Thirat, to head up the new offensive on Chiang Tung, the effort was plagued by both tactical and supply problems; food supplies ran out due to a bad harvest in Chiang Mai that year. By the time the troops from Bangkok arrived to relieve Lan Na forces, they heard that the Burmese were sending reinforcements, and withdrew, ending the offensive.

Meanwhile in Burma, after Britain’s victory in the Second Anglo-Burmese War of 1853, its trade monopoly in Burma’s rice-rich delta region was solidified, forcing Burmese king Mindon (r. 1853-1878) to seek out new sources of royal income. King Mindon was described by Western observers as a forward-looking, “modernizing” monarch (in much the same vein as his Siamese contemporary, King Mongkut). In response to the export of much of Burma’s rice production by the British, Mindon endeavored to find new ways to generate income. Mindon’s strategy was two-fold: He established industrial factories at Mandalay, and encouraged trade with southern
China, the Shan States, Lower Burma, India, and Europe to offset the loss of agricultural revenues to the royal coffers.52 Due to these efforts, the 1850s saw a marked increase in the level of trade (and the number of Burmese traders) flowing from upper Burma to Chiang Tung and into southern China.

Siam made one last attempt to take Chiang Tung in 1854, but it was also unsuccessful. Though Mongkut and his ministers wanted more than ever to take Chiang Tung once and for all, it proved impossible to gather the 30-40,000 additional soldiers that the Siamese estimated were needed. Many conscripts fled, leaving the commanders with fewer than 10,000 troops, and the timing of the new offensive coincided with the start of the rainy season, making overland travel difficult and ox-cart transportation of provisions all but impossible. By all accounts, Lan Na’s heart just wasn’t in it: the lack of support by the nobility and abysmal troop morale were the main reasons why the effort was finally abandoned.53

In material terms, however, Siam’s losses were paltry compared to those endured by Lan Na. Not only had Chiang Mai been ignored in its rulership’s requests to delay the final attack, but it was Lan Na – not Siam – whose cities had borne the loss of the humanpower expended in the offensive. Siam, as Lan Na’s supposed protector, had failed them, and at a high cost. Additionally, Lan Na still had both family and economic links with Chiang Tung, now a rapidly growing trade center which Lan Na could ill afford to alienate. Thus, the period following the Chiang Tung Wars of the mid-1850s found Lan Na scrambling to recover from the significant human losses it suffered through Siam’s failed attempts to prove its military strength, and to repair its relationship with an important trade partner in the region. As for Siam, they had “lost face” to both Burma and Lan Na, and gained nothing on their northern frontier. If anything, the necessity of King Mongkut’s intervention in matters of Lan Na’s succession in 1855 highlighted
the insecurity of Lan Na’s peripheries, and the increasing contingency of the regional situation of the British presence in Burma.

**Lan Na’s Loyalties, Tested: Overtures to the Burmese?**

In the late 1850s, Burmese loggers, now nominally British legal subjects, made their way into Lan Na’s forests in increasing numbers, cutting timber to send to Moulmein (Burma) for processing and sale. Lan Na’s nobles held the rights to logging Lan Na forests, which were traditionally viewed as a local resource, not a source of commercial income. At first, there were no fixed fees for cutting trees in Lan Na; individual loggers negotiated a per-tree price, which was collected by officials and divided three ways: between the forest owner, the collecting official, and finally the ruler himself. During the 1850s, however, the policy changed as the forest trade rapidly expanded. Fees were revised and separated into three categories, depending on the size of the tree cut. For example, a tree measuring eight- to ten-hands’ breadth cost one rupee; eleven- to thirteen-hands cost two rupees, and 14 to 16 hands cost three rupees. These fees went up over time, presumably as the forests of upper Burma were depleted; by 1896 (when Siam’s Department of Forestry was established) the fee had risen to twelve rupees per tree.

The rising value of teak forest leases led to a corresponding rise in the number of disputes with the nobles of Chiang Mai. King Kawilorot (r. 1854-1870) was involved in a number of legal disputes with British-Burmese parties in Chiang Mai, for which he was summoned to Bangkok to defend himself in court. Though he ultimately won his case, the handling of the matter by the Siamese resulted in the northern chao leaving Bangkok “resentful” and with hurt pride. Absent any other means of controlling Kawilorot, Siam’s king Mongkut decided to adopt a policy of appeasement towards the Lan Na rulership.

In 1856, rumors about the loyalties of Chiang Mai’s king began to circulate. Apparently King Kawilorot found the anti-Western attitude of the Burmese elite more appealing than the
conciliatory stance of the Thai. After a round of correspondence with the Burmese king at Ava, King Kawilorot allegedly ordered the execution of his Burmese translator, so that no one could divulge the nature of their communications. Kawilorot’s exchange of elephants with the Burmese king was reported to Bangkok by two members of a rival faction in the Chiang Mai court. Unfortunately for them, when Kawilorot was called to make his case to King Mongkut in Bangkok, he managed to convince Mongkut that his activities were innocent, and carried the day. Kawilorot’s rivals, in turn, were held in Bangkok where their questionable loyalties could be more closely monitored.

This episode showcases Kawilorot’s dissatisfaction with Lan Na’s place in Siam’s tributary scheme, and his consideration of a plan to re-align Lan Na with a powerful old neighbor who had had its own recent troubles with Western interests. Though Kawilorot’s original plan to align himself with Burma’s northern king may ultimately have failed, his brilliant – if duplicitous – performance in Bangkok resulted in both his vindication in the eyes of the Siamese, and the elimination of his political rivals in Chiang Mai.

This episode was instructive in terms of the lessons it offered the Lan Na nobility in how to manage their role in the region’s shifting political balance of power. Firstly, they learned the power of rumor, by which threats could be made indirectly to the Siamese while maintaining plausible deniability. Secondly – and perhaps more importantly – Lan Na had learned the advantage of playing Burma and Siam against each other. This knowledge was passed on to the next generation of Lan Na’s rulership: Kawilorot’s daughter, Chao Mae Thipkraisorn and her husband, Inthanon, who became the next rulers of Chiang Mai.

The 1874 Chiang Mai Treaty: Undermining Traditional Relationships

In 1873, the year of Princess Dara Rasami’s birth, two other major political events occurred in the region. Firstly, the young Siamese king, Chulalongkorn, was finally crowned,
having spent five years under a regent following the death of his father, Mongkut, in 1868. Secondly, in Lan Na, Dara’s father Inthanon was officially recognized by Chulalongkorn as successor to the throne of Chiang Mai. On Inthanon’s annual visit to Bangkok that year, he received the title of chao luang (high king) of Chiang Mai, and given the enhanced reign name of Inthawichyanon. However, his visit was not entirely triumphant: not only did Inthawichyanon not receive the higher title he was hoping for (phra chao) on this occasion, but he was also saddled with fines from legal cases left over from the prior king’s reign. These fines, totaling hundreds of thousands of rupees, were too much for the new king to pay at one time, so a seven-year period was granted for repayment. This annual payment was to be made in teak: one hundred logs per year, for seven years. (Source? Saraswati?)

This fine reflects the increased importance that the teak trade had earned in Lan Na – but also the increasing concerns of the Siamese over the dealings of the Lan Na nobility in teak-related disputes with British-Burmese loggers. By 1851, the annual income to the Chiang Mai nobility from timber leases had spiraled to nearly 150,000 rupees, plus nearly as much in bribes and fees charged by nobles.59 British officer Thomas Lowndes, sent from upper Burma in 1871 to survey the situation in Chiang Mai, described frequent overlapping of forest tract leases, and cases of outright double-leasing by local nobles.60 Conflicts over these problematic leases, thefts, and many unresolved lawsuits resulted in British demands for Siamese intervention. By 1873, the British government in India was actively campaigning for an agreement that would guarantee their subjects some protection in their timber dealings in Lan Na.

The Chiang Mai Treaty was concluded in 1874 rather hastily between the British Indian government in Calcutta and the Siamese in Bangkok.61 The treaty’s name is ironic, as the Chiang Mai rulership in reality played no part in drafting the document. Though the British requested that Chiang Mai’s king be included in the negotiations, the Siamese demurred, claiming that his
involvement would require lengthening the already-long negotiation process by at least four months, to allow for the necessary travel time between Chiang Mai and Bangkok – a delay which the British rejected. Thus, the Siamese and British excluded Lan Na’s rulers from the creation of a treaty which affected local judicial practices, economy, and ultimately the kingdom’s own sovereignty.

The 1874 Chiang Mai Treaty included several provisions which directly affected Chiang Mai’s governance. Firstly, a system of “dual government” was established, with a full-time resident Siamese kha luang or commissioner stationed in Chiang Mai. The second provision established a permanent police force, with posts along the Salween River to prevent thefts and banditry on loggers traveling through the area. Thirdly, new regulations were put in place to control the leasing of teak forests. Lastly, a new system of taxes and monopolies was introduced which would greatly impact Chiang Mai’s economy and society.

Under the dual government, a high-level Siamese administrator called the kha luang (lit. “king’s slave”) was appointed to investigate and decide all legal cases brought by British subjects against Lan Na or Siamese subjects. Civil disputes involving timber leases between British-Burmese loggers and local forest holders were to be heard in a special court jointly overseen by the Siamese commissioner and the British consul (who visited only periodically). Those charged with regular criminal offenses were to be tried in the Siamese courts regardless of their nationality, and if a British subject was unhappy with the Chiang Mai court’s decision, the case could be sent to the British officer in Burma for review.

The new tax farms and monopolies created by the treaty undermined the authority of Chiang Mai’s nobility, even while filling their coffers. The new tax farms were essentially licenses auctioned off to the highest bidder granting holders the right to collect specified taxes from the populace on behalf of the government. As these auctions required substantial up-front
investment, which few common folks in either Siam or Lan Na could access, such auctions were usually won by members of the Chinese merchant class, which had access to larger cash reserves. Monopolies on the sales of commodities like sticlac, betel nut, and cloth – worth several thousand pounds annually – had been the province of the local nobility in the past. Under the new structure, they were bought up mainly by Chinese tax-farmers “hitherto unknown in the state.”

While Chinese immigrants had been flowing into provincial Siam and Lan Na from both Bangkok and Yunnan since the 1850s, the new tax farming system prompted a new influx. The Siamese commissioner also created new tax monopolies on guns and ammunition, tobacco, ivory, pork, and rice-whisky. Due to Chinese tax collectors’ “social and spatial distance from the local people,” they were not obliged to trade as fairly with local people as Lan Na’s nobility had been. Additionally, these new tax collectors insisted on payments in cash rather than goods-in-kind – a practice which became increasingly burdensome on the common populace of Lan Na.

The Siamese commissioner also benefited personally, setting up a number of tax farms and monopolies to benefit both himself and the Siamese king. He persuaded the Chiang Mai king to divide the new tax and monopoly incomes into three parts, with one part paying for the administrative expenses of the kha luang himself.

As for the rest of the new tax income, however, most went into the pockets of the highest-ranking Lan Na nobles. Besides the income from teak, the monies brought in by monopolies on gambling and cloth increased the Chiang Mai king’s income to roughly 280,000 rupees a year – a lavish sum in the late 1870s. To understand the impact of this income on the lifestyles of Chiang Mai’s elites, we can compare the accounts of two Western travelers to Chiang Mai both before and after the institution of the new tax system. An 1871 account describes the houses of Chiang Mai’s king and his next-in-command as “merely substantial, but rather plain, wooden
houses with tile roofing.” In 1876, only a year after the implementation of the new tax farming system, Lowndes reports that the houses had become built up like “enormous edifices, broken up into gables and separate roofs that give them the appearance of small villages. The houses of the other chiefs are large, rambling structures, but considerably smaller than the above.”

1874’s Chiang Mai Treaty effectively increased the incomes of the ruling elites through extractive tax measures meted out upon the common people. Yet the actors most closely identified with the exploitive taxes and monopolies were not the nobles themselves, but the new Chinese tax collectors. Utilizing outsiders as the instrument by which they implemented the unpleasant new measures, Lan Na’s chao insulated themselves from criticism by their subjects, even as they benefitted from their complicity with the Siamese administration. At the same time, by increasing the level of income derived from the new tax system – effectively buying off Lan Na’s senior chao – the Siamese government mollified the Lan Na’s rulership, distracting them from the very real loss of their political autonomy.

Thus the Chiang Mai Treaty of 1874 set in motion a number of policies which began to undermine the traditional social and economic ties between the Lan Na nai (elites) and phrai (commoners). It also marks the beginning of Lan Na’s long transition to a cash economy. But the Treaty’s ultimate failure to enforce British claims in Lan Na eventually resulted in an even more intrusive agreement in 1883: the Second Chiang Mai Treaty.

What Went Wrong: Or, Why A New Chiang Mai Treaty was Necessary

Under the first Chiang Mai Treaty of 1874, the British were empowered to periodically send an official from Burma to Chiang Mai to judge cases which had not been satisfactorily settled in the Siamese court. The first such officer, A.H. Hildebrand, was deployed to Chiang Mai in early 1875 to settle several legal cases in tandem with the new Siamese commissioner, Phra Narin. However, after only three months in the city, Hildebrand left in frustration at his
inability to get satisfactory responses from Phra Narin. Due primarily to indecision by the British colonial office at Calcutta as to how best to proceed after that, there was no new British official visit to Chiang Mai until 1879, which “virtually spelt the epitaph of the 1874 Treaty arrangements,” as there had been no British representative present to ensure that new cases were settled to the satisfaction of the British subjects involved.

While Phra Narin’s mission in Chiang Mai may have failed in the eyes of the British, his main objectives from the Siamese point of view were quite different. His presence in Chiang Mai satisfied their two major goals: First, it kept problematic Chiang Tung in check; second, it ensured the repayment of Chao Inthanon’s debts (fines from the various teak-logging lawsuits levied in 1874) to the Siamese.

On the first count, the Siamese still feared that the Lan Na rulership’s relationship with the Burmese via Chiang Tung was too close. Chiang Mai’s nobles had become friendly with the Shan resettling the deserted city of Chiang Saen. Word reached the Siamese that Lan Na’s king had sent a “friendly mission” to Mandalay in January of 1874. And in early 1875, Siamese learned that “a number of amicably-worded letters passed between Chieng Tung and Nai on the one hand, and [Chiang Mai’s King] Inthanon on the other,” further fueling Siam’s anxieties.

King Inthanon’s debts also figured into Siam’s new presence in Chiang Mai. In the past, the only regular payment that Chiang Mai had made to Bangkok was a triennial tribute payment. It was part of Phra Narin’s responsibilities to ensure the collection of the loan repayment, which was in the form of one hundred teak logs per year for seven years. This payment plan completely altered the financial situation of the Chiang Mai nobility, who had come to depend on their leases of teak forests as a major source of income. So it came as no surprise that in 1873 when the new Siamese commissioner suggested that the Chiang Mai king grant a host of lucrative new monopolies, he was more than amenable.
Even *Phra* Narin himself was not immune to the temptations of his high post. Local American Protestant missionary Dr. Cheek accused *Phra* Narin of “…systematically robbing this country and prostituting his office.” Cheek estimated that the Siamese commissioner was making between 20- to 30,000 dollars annually “on the side” by 1879. *Phra* Narin also appeared susceptible to bribery when it came to lawsuits. The British consul at Bangkok, writing to his London superiors about a legal case sent to Chiang Mai in 1880, describes that “after some subterfuges on the part of the above-mentioned Commissioner [Phra Narin], the Plaintiff was abruptly informed that the proceedings have been burnt and that consequently the case was at an end.” Moreover, the commissioner was known to be an opium-smoker, and the keeper of a “harem which grew to almost unmanageable proportions.”

Despite optimism following the enactment of the 1874 Treaty, the British were ultimately disappointed in the progress of legal procedure in Chiang Mai, and lobbied the Siamese government for a new agreement in 1882. The timing was right for a new treaty, as the British government had finally found the funds to keep a vice-consul stationed permanently in Chiang Mai. Ultimately, the setup of the international court in 1883 under the second Chiang Mai Treaty became the “model for the Siamese modern court system.”

But the new Treaty and court system were not popular with the Chiang Mai rulership. Losses of timber-related legal cases drained the coffers of Lan Na’s nobility, and the Siamese – not the British – were perceived as being to blame. As new tensions arose between King Inthanon and Siamese commissioners, so did a renewed awareness of the potential benefits of playing the British/Burmese and the Siamese against each other. It is here that Lan Na’s traditional patterns of family rule – and women’s roles in creating political alliances – enter again into the story.

*Lan Na Women and Rulership: Thipkraisorn and Ubonwanna*
As mentioned earlier in this chapter, women played roles of particular prominence in political and social life in the Inland Constellation. Lan Na society, like that of the Lao and Isaan areas, was matriarchal and matrilocal. From early times, marrying a local chief’s daughter was an important element of Lan Na statecraft, resulting in the Chinese chroniclers’ nickname for the area, “Land of 800 daughters-in-law.” Queen Chamathewi, founder of the seventh-century Mon Buddhist kingdom of Hariphunchai in the Lan Na city of Lamphun, remains a prominent figure in Lan Na mythology and historical thought.

Lan Na’s political patterns reflected women’s prominence as well. In the Lan Na pattern of royal succession, the throne devolved not to the king’s eldest son, but rather to the husband of his eldest daughter. In contrast to the European practice of male primogeniture, this pattern of succession is consistent with practices in earlier Lan Na history. The local historical exemplar of these practices is King Mangrai, the first ruler to unite a true Lan Na empire, who married his sons “out” to the daughters of noble families in neighboring Lan Na towns as a means of integrating political control. This mode of rule appears to have shaped the unique pattern of royal succession that emerged during the latter part of the Chao Chet Ton dynasty. This pattern, identified by anthropologist Gehan Wijeyewardene as “son-in-law succession,” flowed from father-in-law to son-in-law, through marriage to the daughter of the prior ruler. This pattern was practiced by both royal and common families within La Na, and traced its evolution over the first hundred years of the Chao Chet Ton kings. Though we have no solid data on royal marriages before the fifth king of the Kawila dynasty (King Mahawong), royal succession from that time onward adheres to the pattern of the successor marrying the prior king’s daughter. For example, King Kawilorot was married to Chao Mae Utsah, the daughter of his predecessor, King Mahawong.
Upon King Kawilorot’s death in 1870, the Lan Na throne passed not to his son, but rather to the husband of his eldest daughter, Chao Mae Thipkraisorn. Thus, succession flowed from Kawilorot through his daughter, to be held (at least nominally) by her husband. According to contemporary sources, Chao Thipkraisorn was allowed to choose her own husband – giving her unprecedented influence over the succession process. Though her chosen spouse Inthanon had already married (twice!), Thipkraisorn forced him to give up his previously acquired wives. Wrote visiting explorer Carl Bock in 1884:

He looked – as he had the reputation of being – a kindly-disposed man, but weak. He was, it appeared, quite overruled by his wife [Thipkraisorn], who seemed to be quite a sufficiently strong-minded individual to make up for his weakness. She was his third wife, and when he married her she compelled him not only to enter the priesthood, but to put away all his concubines. He did not wear the yellow cloth long – only seven days – but that was considered long enough to cleanse him.

Though Inthanon’s lineage was traceable to another of Kawila’s brothers, he held a relatively minor rank amongst the royals; his marriage to Thipkraisorn raised his status considerably. In this case, the custom of “son-in-law” succession linked two branches of Chiang Mai nobility. From this perspective, Inthanon’s marriage to the king’s daughter, and subsequent assumption of the throne, was consistent with traditional Lan Na marital practices. In any event, it meant no loss of power for Chao Mae Thipkraisorn, as we will soon see.

Lan Na women, both elite and common, benefited from cultural practices which accorded them a high level of agency and status. Lan Na women retained rights over their property after marriage, and could inherit equally alongside their brothers – though typically ownership of the family’s domicile and lands fell to the family’s youngest daughter. In Lan Na social practice, this correlated with a “more general expectation that women remain in the place of their birth, while men may move.” Late nineteenth-century Western observers also noted that “it was the normal Lao [sic] rule that a man altered his allegiance to the home state of his wife if it differed
from his own.” This in turn contributed to the largely matrilocal orientation of Lan Na villages. Upon marriage, the Lan Na groom typically moved into his wife’s household for at least the first year following marriage.

Traditionally, Lan Na’s communities were not strictly matrilineal, but were “organized into matriclans, [where] \textit{muang} matrilocal ideology is closely linked to a matrilineal mode of descent.” These matriclans were organized around women who maintained their family’s relationship with their ancestral spirits, particularly through their roles as spirit-mediums. This combination gave Lan Na women a higher level of influence and agency than even their relatively high-status sisters in Siam.

In terms of the high level of agency enjoyed by Lan Na women, perhaps no better examples can be found than Kawilorot’s daughters, \textit{Chao Mae} (queen mother) Thipkraisorn and her sister, \textit{Chao Ubonwanna}, both of whom possessed great personal charisma and exercised considerable political and economic influence in Chiang Mai. According to several contemporary Western observers, Thipkraisorn was the real power behind the throne in Chiang Mai. Wrote one American Protestant missionary: “The present queen [Thipkraisorn] is the one who truly has ruling power in her hands. As for her husband, he is the king in name only.” Her younger sister, Ubonwanna was a wealthy businesswoman in her own right, trading in timber and the local caravan trade, as well as textiles produced by the sizable atelier of women weavers working at her residence.

Within both Lan Na and Siam, many recognized Thipkraisorn’s intelligence and political acumen. Brailey mentions that one faction in the Siamese court favored the \textit{uparat}, Ubonwanna’s husband \textit{Chao Bunthawong}, while (Siamese) King Chulalongkorn’s circle favored Thipkraisorn, who was more receptive to the young king’s pro-Western stance. Some local
observers saw Thipkraisorn as a check against Bunthawong, who missionary Daniel McGilvary called “ambitious and less-principled” than either Inthanon or Thipkraisorn.94

Bunthawong’s influence, however, ended at the same time as Kawilorot’s reign. The very next day after King Kawilorot’s death, Bunthawong was found dead by his wife, Princess Ubonwanna. According to McGilvary:

“The Princess wished to get my judgment whether he was really dead beyond all hope of resuscitation. But it required no skilled physician to answer that question. He had evidently died by a dose of opium administered by his own hands… Whether it was intentional suicide… or simply designed to ease the troubles of the night, they could tell as well as I…”95

Whether the princess had any hand in the overdose, the good doctor is too kind to speculate. I will leave it to the reader to make their own judgment.

Ubonwanna was a powerful figure both politically and economically. As the second daughter of the prior king, she leveraged her timber-derived wealth to engage in a number of different industries, from overland caravan trade to textile weaving to liquor distillation. Her business interests brought her into contact with foreigners of many stripes: Burmese foresters, Yunnanese and Indian caravan traders, even Western explorers, surveyors and diplomats. She was said to be fluent in English and well-versed in Western customs, and was particularly interested in spending time with Western visitors to Chiang Mai (including the local community of American missionaries). Several of those travelers, including A.H. Hildebrand, Holt Hallett, and Archibald Colquhoun, noted Ubonwanna’s friendliness and curiosity about their ideas, and she frequently invited them to dine and socialize at her home. Hallett describes how keen Ubonwanna was to discuss the possibility of a British railway connecting upper Burma with southern China, as she could see the immense mercantile benefit that such a trade conduit could potentially afford.96
But it may have been Ubonwanna’s capacity as the official royal spirit-medium which provided her with her greatest influence upon Chiang Mai’s political landscape. As Hallett noted: “As an instance of her [Ubonwanna’s] power, Wilson [an American missionary] stated that when called in to consult the spirits after the late…Second King [uparat] was struck down with sickness, she boldly told him that the spirits were displeased at his oppression of the people, and advised him at once to abolish certain vexatious taxes, particularly the monopoly of arrack, or rice-spirit.97” In Carl Bock’s description of the incident, it was Thipkraisorn – rather than the second king – who was ill.98 In either case, the message was the same: that the (Chinese-held) monopoly on rice whisky offended the local spirits; according to both accounts, it was soon revoked. Beyond causing offense to “the spirits,” however, the real-world impacts of the liquor monopoly likely outweighed supernatural ones: it negatively affected Ubonwanna’s distillery business.99 Thus, Ubonwanna’s spiritual connections provided her with an expedient means of influencing Chiang Mai politics. Though Lan Na’s royal women had enjoyed the power to choose kings in the past, Mae Chao Thipkraisorn and Ubonwanna exercised an unparalleled level of status and power between them in Chiang Mai during the later nineteenth century.

Though there is little more data available to us regarding Thipkraisorn and Ubonwanna’s lives, the above stories can at least hint at the how they likely influenced young Dara Rasami’s upbringing. Certainly in the context of her immediate family, Dara Rasami’s early life was exceptional; but even relative to the comparatively high level of agency enjoyed by Lan Na women, her mother and aunt were uniquely powerful, high-status role models. Between them, they appear to have prepared her well for the great personal and political challenges awaiting her in the Bangkok palace, as Dara Rasami’s career trajectory in the palace eventually bears out.

Dara Rasami, Rumors and Realigning Allegiances
Sometime between 1881-82, the rumor began to circulate in Bangkok that Queen Victoria had offered to adopt Dara Rasami. The best Thai-language source states that “a British official from southern Burma approached King Inthawichyanon [of Chiang Mai] in 1881” to sound him out as to an offer of adoption. Several Thai authors note that no records of such an offer exist in the Thai archive; but what about the British side?

A focused search of the records of the British Consuls at Bangkok and Chiang Mai, as well as Rangoon (Burma), the India Office at Calcutta, and the Foreign Office in London (including the “Political and Secret” records housed at the British Library) reveals that Dara Rasami’s existence registered only faintly on the consciousness of British diplomatic officers in Siam. One of the few mentions of her found in the British consular records of the period indicates, if anything, some disdain on the part of the British consular officials towards her. In an 1888 letter from the British consulate in Chiang Mai, William Archer, to Gould, the consul at Bangkok,

> The marriage of the daughter of the Chief of Chiengmai with the King [of Siam], about two years ago, was another important step [in the extension of Siamese control into the region], for she is, as you know, the only true heiress-apparent of Chiengmai – though it may be said that here, even more than in Siam, the succession is by no means necessarily by descent. Still, the child, if any, of the Princess might justly be looked upon as the rightful future ruler of Chiengmai; but I am told that there is thought to be little chance of any issue…

Nonetheless, the question of the adoption rumor persists. Nearly every Thai-language biography of Dara Rasami mentions it, as do local Chiang Mai sources (such as the Dara Phirom Palace museum, located in Dara’s last home in Mae Rim). If the British never considered making such an offer, where did the rumor come from? Rather than undermining its significance, the fact of the rumor’s untruth makes it even more historically interesting, as it betrays other actors and motives. Why would such a rumor have been invented, and whose interests did it serve?

The answer provides new insight into the imperialist pressures felt by both Lan Na and Siam in the latter nineteenth century. Though there is little data to support a definitive answer,
one Thai account credits Dara Rasami herself as the source of the rumor.\textsuperscript{102} As Dara Rasami was only eight or nine years old when the adoption rumor began to circulate, it is doubtful that she herself originated the story. However, there were others in Chiang Mai more than capable of such an invention. Lowndes notes in 1871 that King Inthanon had “…asked about the Queen, the war, and my own personal affairs” during his journey to Chiang Mai, illustrating that the Chiang Mai nobility knew who Queen Victoria was.\textsuperscript{103} Given their numerous contacts with Western visitors over the prior decade, the Chiang Mai nobility’s cosmopolitan awareness of world events and leaders is not surprising.\textsuperscript{104} Most likely Dara Rasami’s parents – Mae Chao Thipkraisorn and Chao Luang Inthanon – invented the story as a means of improving their political currency with the Siamese.

Even if this wasn’t their strategy, it nonetheless succeeded in prompting Bangkok to upgrade the status of Chiang Mai’s rulership. Soon after the rumor reached royal ears in Bangkok in 1882, King Chulalongkorn ordered his new commissioner to Chiang Mai, Chao Phraya Phichit Prichagon, to act as his emissary to Chiang Mai, bringing Dara Rasami a gift of diamond earrings and matching bracelet along with a letter requesting her hand in marriage.\textsuperscript{105}

Such an offer was highly unusual, as the accepted practice among Siamese noble families was to “gift” female relatives to the king as consorts. According to Thai sources, this is the only instance in which King Chulalongkorn asked a family to send a woman to serve as his consort in the palace.\textsuperscript{106} It was so unusual, in fact, that Chulalongkorn made the Chiang Mai royal family promise to “[keep] this a private matter,” rather than offend Siamese noble families whose daughters weren’t so ardently pursued.\textsuperscript{107}

Only two years after the marital alliance between young Dara Rasami the Siamese king was brokered, Mae Chao Thipkraisorn died in 1884 – leaving king Inthanon grief-stricken and adrift. According to a Siamese administrator reporting to Bangkok at that time, Inthanon “…is
neither conscious nor unconscious. He sprinkled water [to purify] his wife[‘s body], but did not bring his child [i.e., Dara Rasami]. He goes out to hide away in the trees of the garden and won’t speak to anyone. All matters of state must be canceled or stopped. I don’t know if they can do anything at all…”

Although Inthanon retained his title as “Chao Luang” of Chiang Mai, another member of the ruling council, Chao Rachabutr, had to step in to handle the day-to-day duties of rule.

After her mother’s death, Dara Rasami went to live with her aunt Ubonwanna. Though Inthanon’s grief may have played a role in this decision, it was common practice in Lan Na for a deceased woman’s children to be taken in by her sister’s family. Thus young Dara Rasami spent the critical two-year period between Thipkraisorn’s death in 1884 and Dara’s departure for Bangkok in 1886 in Ubonwanna’s care.

Ubonwanna’s household was very different from the royal home where Dara had been raised. While Thipkraisorn was widely acknowledged to be the “hand behind the throne,” her younger sister was equally as powerful, but in the realm of commerce. Where Thipkraisorn was concerned with raising Lan Na’s status in the eyes of Siam, Ubonwanna was more interested in how Chiang Mai could potentially benefit from stronger links with the wider world – especially via the Burma-Yunnan railway proposed by Holt Hallett. Thipkraisorn embodied the strong yet proper (married) Lan Na noblewoman, while Ubonwanna, a free woman after her husband’s death in 1870, was well-known for having taken lovers from among the Burmese timber trade. One apocryphal story even claims that Thipkraisorn begged Ubonwanna to end her relationship with one of them – and when she refused, Thipkraisorn had him killed. No doubt the relationship between the sisters was a complicated one.

Nonetheless, young Dara’s education continued in Ubonwanna’s household. She was taught to read, write and speak both Thai and kham muang (Lan Na’s local language), in
preparation for her life in the Siamese king’s royal palace. Given Ubonwanna’s Western leanings, it’s very likely that Dara was taught some English, as well. Though Dara would have been instructed in weaving skills by her mother, she had ample opportunities to learn more at Ubonwanna’s house, where dozens of slave women wove textiles for commercial trade. In any event, despite her mother’s early death, young Dara’s education as a future political princess was completed at Ubonwanna’s feet.

In early 1886, thirteen-year-old Dara Rasami stepped aboard a houseboat to accompany her father, Inthanon, down the Mae Ping river on his semi-annual visit to Bangkok. This journey’s purpose, however, was unique: to present Dara Rasami for service as a consort to King Chulalongkorn in the Inner Palace. The trip was timed to coincide with the events celebrating the appointment of Chulalongkorn’s son, Vajirunhit, to the rank of Crown Prince. In these events, Dara Rasami’s father would play a special role – and receive a royal promotion, to boot.

Dara Rasami’s arrival in Bangkok, according to several Chiang Mai sources, was received with great fanfare. After her boat was received by King Chulalongkorn at Ayutthaya (about 40 miles upstream from Bangkok), she was fêted at the palace at Bang Pa-In with a grand feast attended by a number of the Chakri nobility. Having safely delivered Dara Rasami to Bangkok, Inthanon’s name was upgraded to “Inthawichyanon,” and he was given a prominent position (alongside the highest members of Siamese high royalty, the King’s own brothers and sisters) at the front of the royal cavalcade that traveled through Bangkok in celebration of Crown Prince Vajirunhit’s promotion in January of 1886. King Inthawichyanon also participated in the “water blessing” ceremony for the Crown Prince, marching seventeenth in the procession of royals. What is noteworthy here is that Inthawichyanon was the only ruler of a Siamese prathet sarat (tributary kingdom) to participate in these events. Chulalongkorn also presented King Inthawichyanon with the medal of the Order of Chula Chom Klao; he was also the only ruler of
any of Siam’s tributary kingdoms to receive this honor during Chulalongkorn’s reign.\textsuperscript{113} It appears that Inthawichyanon and Thipkraisorn’s gambit – circulating rumors of Queen Victoria’s desire to adopt Dara Rasami – had succeeded, to the great benefit of the Chiang Mai royal family. Whether the plan ultimately improved the fortunes of their subjects (or the future sovereignty of Lan Na), however, is doubtful.\textsuperscript{114}

Inthawichyanon’s promotion and new name accorded him an even higher level of social status back at home. At the same time, however, his actual political authority – and Chiang Mai’s sovereignty – were fatally undermined by Bangkok’s “blessing.” Dozens of Siamese officials were stationed in Chiang Mai permanently as part of Siam’s new \textit{thetsaphibaan} structure, by which King Chulalongkorn (Rama V) implemented a more “rational,” Western-style form of national government – one that no longer depended on local marital alliances, but rather military force and economic extraction, to succeed.

The marital alliance between Lan Na and Siam reflects the increasing pressures on Siam’s peripheral territories being felt by Chulalongkorn in the 1880s, and a strategic elaboration of the prior king’s policy of appeasement towards the Lan Na rulership. Dara Rasami’s arrival in the palace, however, was no tidy “happily ever after.” Over the next twenty years of her career as a royal consort, the struggle between the kingdoms continued to play out in the Inner Palace, rendering Dara Rasami both a hostage and diplomat in Siamese palace politics.
1. Born in 1838, the young prince was made king of the Punjab at the age of five, and taken from his mother to be raised by British missionaries at age ten, after which he converted to Christianity. He was brought to London in 1854 bearing the Koh-I-Noor diamond as a gift for Queen Victoria. You can learn more about him and his descendants here: http://www.duleepsingh.com/Biography.


3. Prince Damrong was one of King Chulalongkorn’s many half-brothers, and maintained a total of eleven wives and consorts in his household, ultimately producing 33 children. See Finestone (2000), particularly chapter twelve on Damrong’s descendants, who share the surname “Diskul.”


8. The well-known musical “The King and I” was adapted from Margaret Landon’s 1944 Anna and the King of Siam, a novelization of Leonowens’s “English Governess” text. Both the musical and all film versions have been banned in Thailand, including the 2000 film version starring Jodie Foster and Chow Yun Fat.

9. While Hong Lysa and Tamara Loos have mined the documents on palace judicial cases fruitfully, the archival files on illness and death amongst palace women of the Fifth Reign could provide a scholar of the history of medicine in Thailand with enough material for a fascinating thesis. See N.A.T. R5, กระทรวงวัง, 1.5 7.99, แปดเดือนสิ้น.


17. I will follow Tambiah’s usage of the term muang, which “…refers to centered or center-oriented space (as opposed to bounded space) and typically stands for a capital or town or settlement with the surrounding territory over which it exercised jurisdiction.” (112)

18. At the same time, while Lan Na made up part of the “Inland Constellation,” it should not be read as identical to it. The ‘Inland Constellation’ I propose has included at various times Lan Na, Lan Xang, the Shan States, and parts of Sipsong Panna in southern China.
These rivers include the Nan, Yom, Wang, and Ping River, which provides a continuous waterway between Chiang Mai and Bangkok (during the rainy season). The Ping River was used by the Chiang Mai nobles (and Jao Dara Rasami) in their semi-annual travels between Chiang Mai and Bangkok.

See also Katherine Bowie’s “Unraveling the Myth of the Subsistence Economy: Textile Production in Nineteenth Century Thailand.” *Journal of Asian Studies*, no. 4 November (1992), 797-823.

This route was known as *senthang baicha* (*เส้นทางบ้าขา*). See Foon Ming et al (2012), p 34; see also Michael Freeman & Selena Ahmed, *Tea Horse Road: China’s Ancient Trade Road to Tibet*. Bangkok: River Books (2011).


Chinese chronicles even referred to Lan Na as the “land of the sticky-rice eaters.” See Foon Ming, Grabowsky, and Wichasin (2012), and Pakdeekul Ratana (2009). See also the excellent *Zinme Yazawin, Chronicle of Chiang Mai*, a chronicle which details the role of cosmology in the siting of several ancient cities in the region. (2003: Yangon, Myanmar: Universities Historical Research Center.)


This pattern of “out-marriage” of royal sons to the daughters of local nobles is consistent with Lan Na’s cultural pattern of matrilocality, and would be utilized by later Lan Na rulers as well (which will be seen later in this chapter). Also see Gehan Wijeyewardene, 1984: “Northern Thai Succession and the Search for Matriliny.” *Mankind* Vol. 14, No. 4, 285-92.

Lan Na maintained this nickname until it was colonized by the Burmese in the sixteenth century, after which it became known as the “land of 800 stockades.” See page 102 of *Lan Na in Chinese Historiography : Sino-Tai relations as Reflected in the Yuan and Ming Sources (13th to 17th centuries)*, Liew-Herres, F. M., Grabowsky, V., & Arunrat, W., eds., (2008). Bangkok: Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University.

Elements of Burmese culture which are still visible in Lan Na’s culture today include the use of *luntaya acheik* textiles in local dress; the use of a flower behind one ear in women’s hairstyles; the eating of dishes like *mieng* curry and certain noodles; changes in the orthography of local language (which shifted from more rectangular characters to more circular ones following the arrival of the Burmese).

The Siamese version of these events – as written in Prince Damrong’s *Siam’s Wars with Burma* (1977) 483-485, ignores Kawila’s role in the victories, instead crediting *Phraya* Chakri’s troops and leadership. Thus the re-establishment of Lan Na was co-opted to become part of the founding narrative of the Siamese nation-state. See Grabowsky (1994) for further discussion of this issue.

From the *สิบห้าราชาสิมานต์ [Fifteen Kingdoms Chronicle]*, as cited and translated by Volker Grabowsky (1994).


See Saraswati and Grabowsky (1994) for slightly different periodizations of these “waves.”

Saraswati, 133.

Sipsong Panna’s lowland peoples were ethnically Tai Lüe. See Grabowsky et al (2012).


Ibid.

The language of the Yuan ruling elite was also adopted by the multi-ethnic *khon muang*. Today it is known by local residents as *phasaa muang* (“muang language”), or *kham muang* (“muang words”), and it is still widely spoken, although central Thai has been the official language in the region since the 1930s.

Grabowsky and Turton, 5.

See Maha Sila Viravong’s *History of Laos* (New York: Paragon Book Reprint Corp, 1964), for a persuasive argument that it was the Siamese preoccupation with a possible British intervention that encouraged Chao Anu to make his attempt; Mayoury and Pheuiphanh (1989, 1998) argue that there never was a “Chao Anu rebellion,” but only a “war between Bangkok and the Lao.” More recently, Grant Evans (2002) casts the episode as part of an ongoing ‘competition for resources in the Mekong basin’ between Siam, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam.


According to Saraswati, even though Chiang Mai had supplied troops to the Siamese to fight against Chao Anou, there were still nobles in eastern Lan Na who sympathized with the Lao ruler.
Ibid., p. 8. The earliest letter, arriving in March of 1825, could have come from either the ailing Khamfan, or his successor, Phuttawong, who was known for his more conciliatory attitude towards Ava (see Brailey).

Figures cited from British annual reports, in Grabowsky and Turton (2003).

Grabowsky and Turton (2003) ibid., 78.

See Charles Keeton’s King Thebaw and the Ecological Rape of Burma; the Political and Commercial Struggle Between British India and French Indo-China in Burma, 1878-1886. [1st ed ed. Delhi]: Manohar Book Service, 1974, for an in-depth exploration of this and the subsequent era in Burma, and the ecological exploitation of Burmese forests that also occurred under British Imperialism there.

See Saraswati, 157-159.


According to Saraswati, the conflict arose because the rajabut’s troops reached the city first, and attacked immediately in a bid for glory; when this attempt failed, the uparat deliberately delayed sending reinforcements, due to his antagonism towards the rajabut. Lan Na’s King Mahotraprathet even complained to Bangkok about the situation, which led to King Mongkut’s 1856 participation in the appointment of the next Lan Na king – ostensibly to prevent such problems in the future. (Saraswati, 144-45)

Saraswati, 163.

Ibid., 7.

Ibid., 164.


Saraswati, 169.

Ibid.

Brailey, 141.

Brailey (1968), Ibid.

Brailey, 201.

B.N.A., F.O. 69/55: Journal Kept by Captain Lowndes, Superintendent of Police, British Burma, Whilst on a Mission to the Zimme Court (Lowndes’ Journal), 27th March to 30th May 1871.

While it is not within the scope of this chapter to explore these events fully, the interested reader may find a complete account of the British-Siamese diplomatic affairs surrounding the Chiang Mai Treaties in Brailey’s 1968 dissertation, and also that of Ratanaporn Settrakul (1989).

Ratanaporn, p. 182.

Ratanaporn explains that the British Indian government had “long considered Thailand as part of its sphere of interest particularly since problems there mostly concerned British subjects. [And since] they also frequently disagreed with [Bangkok consul] Knox’s actions… the Calcutta officials responded delightedly” to the opportunity to refer unresolved or contested legal cases from Chiang Mai to Burma. Ratanaporn (1989), 174.

Brailey, 215.

B.N.A., F.O. 628/157, Memo on Taxes and Monopolies by Gould, 9th April 1885. As we will see later in this chapter, the rice-whisky monopoly was quickly rescinded through the efforts of spirit-medium sister of the queen, Chao Ubonwanna – but such “spirit”-induced interventions were quickly outlawed.

Ratanaporn, 207.

Ratanaporn, 205.

Ibid.


Ibid., 210.

F.O. 628/10/157: Progs. No. 25-12. From the Commissioner of the Tenasserim Division, May 31, 1875.

Ibid., 212.

Ibid., citing ประชุมพงสวดาน [Collected Chronicles] Vol 3, 127-29; Brailey notes that Phra Narin made sure these envoys also reported to Bangkok on their return in January 1875.


Brailey, 216.

Ibid., 220; cites B.N.A., F.O. 69/107, Palgrave to Lord Granville, 19th August 1880. Brailey notes that the case was finally dropped by the Indian Government in 1881.
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78 Ibid., 216. The practice of keeping consorts was not, however, at all at odds with the proscription against Siamese officials marrying locally, as concubinage did not entail the same formal bonds of loyalty on the part of the male participant. Women in such informal arrangements generally did not come from local elite families, but rather from the ranks of the poor, dance troupes and brothels.


80 Pakdeekul Ratana notes, “It is remarkable that Tai peoples who had a culture of consuming glutinous rice (Sipsong Panma, Chiang Tung, Chiang Rung, Lan Na, and Lan Sang) all shared the characteristic of being matriarchal societies.” Pakdeekul (2010), p. 43.


82 Interestingly, under the Chao Chet Ton dynasty of Lan Na, there were no queens. From that perspective, Thipkraisorn – given her choice of a “weak” spouse to take the Chiang Mai throne – was the nearest example.

83 Pakdeekul (2010), p. 43.

84 Brailey, 168.

85 Bock, 226.

86 Wijeyewardene, ibid. Relative to this practice, there is also a general expectation that the youngest daughter will also be the sibling who cares for the family’s parents in their old age.

87 Ibid., 288.


92 Brailey, p. 167.

93 McGilvary (1880), 145.

94 Ibid., p. 136.

95 See especially Hallett’s accounts of several conversations with Chao Ubonwanna in A Thousand Miles on An Elephant in the Shan States (London: William Blackwood & Sons), 1890.

96 Hallett, 105.

97 Bock, 340.

98 Additionally, it foiled the Siamese attempt to implement tax-farming monopolies in Chiang Mai as it had it Bangkok. Apparently her success in disrupting the liquor monopoly led the Siamese to ban such ceremonies in 1884. See Grabowsky (2005), pp. 268-278.


100 B.N.A., F.O. 69/117, November 12, 1888.

101 Saengdao, ibid., ช.


103 Ibid., 125.

104 Indeed, Holt Hallett notes the Western utensils used at a dinner party thrown by Ubonwanna in 1886. Hallett, 125.

105 Lawaan Chotamra, เขาใส่ดวง [Crystal Flowers], [Bangkok : n.d.], cites the journal of Phra Raghayakijaraj at Vangphor [Royal Daily Record], วันเสาร์วันเสาร์ ราคีนันท์, ต.ราชินี (Late July-early August 1883), 332-34.


107 Lawaan, ibid., 334-35.

108 N.A.T., R. ๕ ๕๐๔๐๔ เรื่อง รายงาน กรรมการ พิพิธภัณฑ์ (พุทธกิจ ร.๕.๐๓)

109 Source

110 Prani, 9; Saengdao, ibid.

111 Prani, 9-10. I must qualify this source as problematic, however, as it provides no source for this information, either documentary or oral (which is not inconsistent with many published historical works in Thailand as a whole).
The work appears to be written from data culled from oral interviews of and apocryphal data related by various informants and/or their descendants in Chiang Mai. However, as this source is the only one of its kind in terms of local Chiang Mai history, it provides unique data which, while otherwise unverifiable, should not be discounted entirely.

112 See Saengdao, 68-72.
113 Ibid.; also Phonsiri, 150. He also requested the promotion of Dara Rasami’s mother, Thipkraisorn, though she had been deceased since 1884.
114 Had Chiang Mai’s rulers exercised fewer, less exploitive taxes on their populace, and managed to avoid the numerous rebellions that broke out in response, they may have had a better chance at resisting Siam’s increasing involvement in the region. After Inthawichyanon’s reign, there were only two more local rulers of the Chiang Mai royal line, but the Siamese gradually reduced their political status from “kings” to local “governors” who ruled alongside the Siamese provincial administrator.