

government policy, are responses to the shrinking and difficult economy? On the other hand, some people believe that demographic change is the result of an interacting influence of increased literacy levels in the context of a shrivelling economy. It is said that improved literacy levels enhance the mobility aspirations of the population and changes in demographic behaviour are the first-level adjustment strategy of the population to deal with the failure of the economy to satisfy escalating aspirations. These conjectures can only be satisfactorily answered by a detailed micro-level study of family formation patterns and mobility and consumption aspirations of the population.

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A New Generation: Missionary Education and Changes in Women's Roles in Traditional Northern Thai Society

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Nineteenth-century American Presbyterian missionaries introduced new women's roles into northern Thai society through their churches and institutions. While appreciating northern Thai women's social freedom, the missionaries, influenced by an ideal of "true womanhood", found women's low religious status in Buddhism and lack of educational opportunities repugnant. They sought to change women's roles by educating convert women, thus creating the first corps of women professionals in northern Siam. The missionaries unintentionally secularized education and thereby expanded the social roles available to northern Thai women. In doing so, they repeated in northern Siam a pattern of the Protestant role in social change and secularization common in American social history.

In the last decades of the nineteenth century and in the midst of larger forces of social change the "Laos Mission" of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America introduced into northern Siam a new understanding of the religious and social roles of women, one which differed radically from that of northern Thai culture itself. That mission then created an educational network of schools, classes, and programmes bent on redefining the place of women in order to facilitate the Christianization of northern Thai society. Through these educational activities, the Laos Mission promoted new ideas, new attitudes, and new patterns of behaviour that challenged the fundamental elements of women's life in traditional society.¹

Between the missionary understanding of women's roles in society and the traditional view of those roles, stood first and foremost the small community of northern Thai Christian women, converts and the

daughters of converts. These women lived in close proximity to the distinctive culture of missionary homes and institutions and experienced the fundamental change in the religious role of women which the missionaries sought for the whole region. They achieved literacy before other women; they attended the first girls' schools. From them came the first salaried class of women, namely, professional teachers. As a consequence of their educational opportunities, they played an important and active leadership role in their religion. Thus, the Laos Mission's educational work with women, the lives of northern Thai Christian women, and the events which shaped them provide a unique and relatively well documented window on the earliest stages of northern Thai women's journey from a traditional to a pluralistic, secular society.

The Laos Mission began in April 1867 when Daniel and Sophia McGilvary and their two children arrived in Chiang Mai, the region's major city. By 1900 the mission's churches, schools, and hospitals stretched across northern Siam and played an important role in northern Thai social change.² Like their colleagues around the world, the Presbyterian missionaries in Siam displayed a profound commitment to delivering their religious message to non-Christian women, and they quite naturally focused a portion of their attention on northern Thai women.

On the one hand, the missionaries saw much that led them to actually praise northern Thai society for the way in which it treated its women, particularly in comparison with other "heathen" races. They observed that northern Thai women received kind treatment from their men, had relatively high status, and enjoyed an unusually high degree of personal freedom and social equality. According to missionary accounts, women participated fully in family life, and they held and managed family property. Divorce laws favoured women, who could separate from their husbands and keep all of the family property for themselves. Northern Thai society also made few distinctions between men and women with regard to labour.³ The missionaries found northern Thai women lively, comely, self-possessed, mannerly, and generally superior to northern Thai men in industriousness, family devotion, administrative ability, and even in physical health (Crooks 1942, pp. 207-16; Peabody 1881, p. 25; Bowman 1897; Irwin 1902; McGilvary 1912, p. 145).

Not every aspect of women's life in northern Siam, however, received such wholehearted praise, and the missionaries expressed particular

indignation over the passive role women played in northern Thai Buddhism. By and large, it appeared to them that women did little more religiously than sit, listen, and offer gifts to the monks and the *wat* ("temple"). Women could not be monks or even lay leaders, and northern Thai traditional religion dictated that monks could have nothing to do with women. The missionaries felt particularly troubled because, as they understood it, this lowly religious status left women ignorant. Since northern Thai Buddhism associated learning with religion and instruction with the *wat*, women simply did not learn to read and received no formal education. Society in fact frowned upon and distrusted the few women who could read. In seeming contradiction to their praise of women's place in northern Thai society described above, the missionaries observed that as a result of their lowly religious status northern Thai women tended to move in narrow social circles and that their ignorance actually made them both more religious and more conservative than men: they did not know any better (Crooks 1942, pp. 216-17; Dodd 1923, p. 307; McGilvary 1905 and 1912, p. 418).

More recent anthropological findings substantiate missionary descriptions of the status of northern Thai women within their various social spheres.⁴ Most notably, A. Thomas Kirsch's study of the religious status of Thai women confirms that Thai Buddhism does, indeed, disadvantage women religiously. According to Kirsch, Thai Buddhism's spiritual programme seeks to transcend superficial worldly attachments while women's domestic and entrepreneurial activities chain them to those very same attachments. Women's natural religious state then starts at a point lower than that of men and more distant from Buddhism's ultimate goal. Indeed, the enticements of female sexuality present serious threats to the celibate detachment of monks. Women came to their lower condition through their lack of merit.⁵

Recent studies also note that the traditional Buddhist system forced women into a general state of ignorance because, as the missionaries noted, Buddhism associated learning with the *wat*. That condition prevented women from "acquiring knowledge (which included medicine and the arts) and, hence, from upward social mobility and direct political participation" (Darunee and Pandey 1987, p. 131). Changes in the educational status of women, then, provided one potential source of social change for northern Thai women.

The seemingly inconsequential educational and religious role women

played in traditional northern Thai religion offended the missionaries' sensibilities because such a condition appeared to thrust women into an "unnatural" state in spite of their freedom in other spheres. Indeed, their freedom and influence in those other spheres made their ignorance all the more reprehensible in missionary eyes because of the influence women thus exerted in daily life. They seemed to be a force for ignorance and superstition in society. Hence, the state of religious and intellectual deprivation northern Thai women seemed to suffer justified to the American Presbyterian missionaries their evangelization of women.

The Presbyterian missionaries' ambivalence regarding the roles of women in northern Thai society and their desire to change significant elements of those roles grew out of their own middle-class American Protestant ideological heritage which arranged and valued the spheres of female life quite differently from northern Thai culture.⁶ While northern Thai society and culture in the 1860s and 1870s remained traditional and agricultural, the United States had experienced decades of massive socio-economic change, and the transformation of the older, more traditional household economy into a commercial, industrial economy affected every aspect of society including the roles of women. This fundamental restructuring of socio-economic roles required finding new ways of expressing family and gender relationships since by the 1840s middle-class American women no longer fulfilled their earlier role as productive, economically necessary participants in a household economy (Douglas 1977, pp. 48-55; Hill 1985, pp. 25-28; Ryan 1975, pp. 173-74, and 1981, pp. 18 ff., 231-32).

In adapting to the removal of women, particularly middle-class women, from the processes of production, American culture made women's roles the exact opposite of their roles in northern Thai society. Where northern Thai women claimed a large degree of social and economic freedom, American women found themselves living within a constricted domestic sphere which denied them social equality and economic significance (Sklar 1973, pp. 155 ff.; Welter 1966). By the same token, American social thinking turned piety into an essentially female trait and extended women's domestic sphere to include extensive participation in religious activities. Though often denied primary leadership roles in religious institutions, the American ideal of "true womanhood" gave women the essentially religious "mission" of "civiliz-

ing" men and children through the creation of a pious, moral, and tranquil home which inculcated Christian values and restrained natural male aggressiveness (Sklar 1973, pp. 85-86; Porterfield 1980, pp. 27-37, 51-56, 67-70; Welter 1966, p. 152).

A pattern of circumvention of the "cult of true womanhood" emerged by which American middle-class women quietly extended their domestic sphere to include certain activities outside the home. As the nineteenth century progressed, women worked in Sunday schools, in moral reform and benevolence societies, and eventually in professions such as teaching, which could be construed as fulfilling woman's "natural" nurturing role. The cult of true womanhood also encouraged women's education on the premise that educated mothers and wives could better carry out their special civilizing mission in life (Rothman 1978, pp. 63-70, 97-99; Miller 1979, pp. 303 ff.; Sweet 1985). The churches remained, however, the most important arena into which women extended their sphere, and the large role women played in church life led to an equally significant participation in Protestant foreign missions. After the American Civil War (1861-65), Protestant women created an extensive system of missionary boards and societies which promoted missions and sent women missionaries overseas (Beaver 1968; Welter 1978; Hill 1985, pp. 45-54). One historian concludes that missionary work represented "the first area of American life where women achieved a more or less equal professional status with men" (Smith 1970, pp. 181-82).

Those professing nineteenth-century American ideology of gender could not help but find northern Siam's alien arrangement of gender roles repugnant. However happy a woman's lot might be in some ways, the whole structure of society seemed to them to degrade women and deny them knowledge of their true womanhood. Denied that knowledge, northern Thai women could not assume their "proper" domestic role. Men went untamed and children untrained. Thus, the missionaries could not ignore the relationship of northern Thai women to their religion for at that point, they believed, the degradation of women in ignorance began. When the McGilvarys arrived in Chiang Mai in 1867, they carried with them a heritage of assumptions and premises which dictated that they must cut northern Thai women's ties to their old religion and substitute a new relationship to a new religion.

The process the Laos Mission used to Christianize northern Thai

women's roles through education began with Sophia McGilvary, co-founder of the Laos Mission, who, along with her husband, set the tone for Presbyterian work with women in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. From the moment they arrived in Chiang Mai, the McGilvary family excited attention, and for months huge silent crowds gathered around the open, porch-like *sala* ("pavilion") where the foreigners lived to stand, stare, and listen as the McGilvays preached and taught their religion. The crowds felt particularly attracted to Sophia and the two McGilvary children, the first foreign woman and children they had ever seen. Sophia McGilvary magnified her strange appearance by going out among the crowds and talking with people about her religion in an obviously literate, educated fashion (McGilvary 1870 and 1912, pp. 78-79).

Thus, the very fact of her physical presence and that of the many missionary women who came after her introduced new images of how women might conduct themselves generally and religiously. Over the years, missionary women reinforced their high visibility through frequent contacts with Chiang Mai royalty and the Bangkok government's local officialdom. They also extended that visibility by frequent trips into even the most remote parts of northern Siam (Crooks 1942, pp. 127-31; Swanson 1982, pp. 302-4, 307-8). At the very least it must be said that the presence of educated missionary women teaching religion as religious functionaries suggested to northern Thai society that women might be other than what they were traditionally.

Although the persecution of Christians in 1869 and the social pressure thereafter slowed the emergence of a convert community, missionary evangelism in general and work with women in particular finally led to the conversion of the first two northern Thai women in January 1876. During the next few years, the number of women joining the mission's churches increased slowly but steadily.⁷ As of the late 1870s, a few northern Thai women took the initial steps towards a religious life quite different from that of traditional religion. Those steps began when, for the first time, women by their own choice withdrew from their traditional religious sphere and joined a voluntary association of other individuals who had made the same choice. Joining such an association created a new set of expectations of and responsibilities for women converts.

Among those expectations, literacy stood as one of the most important. The missionaries believed that all Christians should be able to read the Bible, that literacy contributed to spiritual growth, and that literacy made converts more intelligent and faithful Christians.⁸ They sometimes postponed baptizing converts until they learned to read, and they showed much more enthusiasm for converts who did learn to read. Converts, missionaries thought, confirmed the seriousness of their intent by learning to read.⁹ Sophia McGilvary initiated literacy work among women in 1868 when she established a small women's literacy class. Eight years later, in 1876, she started a girls' literacy class which led, in turn, to the founding of the Chiang Mai Girls' School in 1879 (McGilvary 1878). From its inception the Laos Mission placed much of its hope for transforming women's lives on literacy and learning.

Years later, Daniel McGilvary reflected on the reasons behind the founding of the girls' school, and his justification unconsciously but quite accurately reflected the nineteenth-century American Protestant ideology of gender. He believed that the Christian community required educated, intelligent Christian women to raise Christian families, convert non-Christian husbands, and provide suitable wives for Christian men. He argued that northern Siam's uxori-local family structure made the education of women all the more important because of the influence women exerted in the home (McGilvary 1912, pp. 177-78). McGilvary began with the American conception of the religious importance of women, combined that conception with the high domestic status of northern Thai women, and extrapolated an evangelistic strategy for Christianizing northern Siam through women's education.

The consequences of this evangelistic strategy unfolded in the lives of Christian girls and women such as Chantah, daughter of one of the two converts executed during the persecution of 1869. After her father died and while still a child, Chantah went to live with the McGilvays, and in 1875 she reached an age when she could care for the McGilvary's son and work as a domestic servant. In addition to learning to read, her education in the McGilvary household included learning to sew and to perform American-style household chores. When Sophia McGilvary began that girls' class in her home, Chantah took on the role of teacher's helper as an extension of her domestic duties. In 1879 two young missionary teachers, Mary M. Campbell and Edna S. Cole, arrived in Chiang

Mai to take over McGilvary's class of six girls and turn it into a formal school, and McGilvary sent Chantah over to help them teach and to study under them as well. In that more formal institutional setting, the missionary teachers promoted Chantah to what amounted to the position of assistant teacher.¹⁰

By the end of 1879 the new girls' school grew to include eighteen boarding students, twelve day students, and a smattering of younger boys. Although some of these children did not come from Christian homes, most did, and within the first fifteen months of the school's existence eleven of its students joined the Chiang Mai Church as members (Peabody, 1881, pp. 26-32). Campbell and Cole encouraged the girls to board at the school under their watchful supervision because, as a later missionary teacher wrote: "One can have so much more influence over the girls when they are under one's control all the time" (Fleeson 1893). At one point in 1882, Cole had eight homeless girls living with her permanently, and she consciously attempted to create for them a pious, disciplined, and literate environment with the hope that some of them might become church leaders. One of these girls, Buk, eventually took Chantah's place as the assistant teacher in the Chiang Mai Girls' School and held that position until 1885 when she, like Chantah before her, married and quit teaching (Cole 1882*b*, 1883; Warner 1885).

In 1888, when the Girls' School had three northern Thai assistant teachers, another of the girls who studied and lived with Cole and Campbell achieved a new status, that of "head assistant teacher". Kom Tip, daughter of the first northern Thai convert, had not only boarded at the Girls' School but also helped Cole and Campbell as an interpreter. By the time she became head assistant teacher, she too had long lived within the counter-culture of missionary homes and institutions, a culture based on the values and attitudes of middle-class American Protestantism. Unlike Chantah and Buk, however, when Kom Tip married she continued to teach although not at the Girls' School. Under the auspices of the mission, she started a small school on the porch of a missionary home in Lamphun.¹¹

The lives of Chantah, Buk, and Kom Tip suggest a pattern by which teaching emerged as a profession among northern Thai Christian

women. Chantah began as a servant girl residing in a mission home before she became the first northern Thai woman to earn her living as a Western-style professional educator. Buk attained a similar position after also living in a mission home. She, however, did not begin her teaching career as a servant but rather as the product of the Girls' School itself. Kom Tip's advancement to the position of head assistant teacher evolved the teaching profession one step further, giving northern Thai women administrative as well as classroom responsibilities. The process reached a culmination of sorts in 1892 when the Girls' School promoted Nyawt Huan, one of its assistant teachers and a former boarding student, to the position of full teacher, without any mention of being a missionary assistant. She held that position for ten years (McGilvary 1903).

The process which began with Chantah and culminated with Nyawt Huan set the pattern for the emergence and early expansion of the teaching profession in northern Siam. By 1896 ninety-eight students, including seventy-seven boarders, had studied at the Chiang Mai Girls' School. Two-thirds of its students were Christians, many of whom planned to return to their homes to start small village church schools. The school had three assistant teachers and one full-time northern Thai teacher, all former pupils. Meanwhile, Katherine Fleeson in Lampang opened the mission's and the region's second girls' school and repeated the pattern of Chiang Mai. She began with a small group of girls, some of whom lived with her, and from this informal beginning developed a full-fledged boarding school which opened in 1893 with twenty-five students. The Lampang school eventually developed its own corps of northern Thai women teachers.¹²

As the Laos Mission opened new stations beyond Chiang Mai and Lampang, the pattern of those two stations repeated itself again and again. Within weeks of the opening of the Phrae Station in 1893, for example, both women missionaries there began teaching informal literacy and religious education classes to groups of girls and women. At the end of two years, more formal, regular classes for women and for girls emerged.¹³ At the Nan Station, founded in 1895, a number of unsuccessful attempts to start mission schools for both boys and girls finally achieved success for girls in 1911 when Eula Van Vranken founded a