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**PATRIARCHY AND
PURITANISM IN SOUTHEAST
ASIAN MODERNITY**



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PATRIARCHY AND PURITANISM IN SOUTHEAST ASIAN MODERNITY

ABSTRACT In the 1980s I drew attention to the relatively balanced gender pattern of pre-colonial Southeast Asia, and the economic autonomy of its women, as one of the then most distinctive social characteristics of the region. I believe that this position is now accepted, at least by historians. It does however raise another question I have hitherto ducked - what happened in colonial and high modernity, to allow western feminists to think they could help 'liberate' their Southeast Asian sisters? This paper asks two central questions: 1) Was the indigenous Southeast Asian response to colonial modernity ineffective (yielding economic innovation to Chinese and others) because of the very poor fit between Southeast Asian balanced gender patterns, with women largely in charge of business, and the exceptional maleness of colonial modernity. 2) If so, was it simply a case of Southeast Asia being a century behind Europe in adjusting to the only kind of capitalist, industrial, urban modernity we know, which was necessarily male-led? Or could we imagine different modernities, with Southeast Asian gender patterns being able to challenge and change the male-dominant model we know from Europe?

In the 1980s I drew attention to the relatively balanced gender pattern of pre-colonial Southeast Asia, and the economic autonomy of its women, as one of the most distinctive social characteristics of the region (Reid 1988, 146–72, 212–24; 1988A). Though initially controversial particularly in relation to Viet Nam, I believe that this position is now broadly accepted (Andaya 2000, 2006; Peletz 2009, 20–83). The newer anthropology of gender salutes the region as “the only region of the world as we know it which features such androgynous or at least sex-similar systems” (King and Wilder 2003, 265). This does however immediately raise another question I have hitherto ducked - then what happened in colonial and high modernity. The gender literature of the high colonial period seems as much as anywhere to portray Southeast Asian women primarily as victims. We have all seen, both in the literature and the world around us, contemporary pressures to recast female roles in a more domestic and constrained direction. Because I am currently embarked on a broader History of Southeast Asia, I can no longer defer dealing with this issue.

I will ask two questions that seem important, and just begin the process of answering them. 1) Was the indigenous Southeast Asian response to colonial modernity ineffective (yielding middle-class roles to Chinese and others) because of the very poor fit between Southeast Asian balanced gender patterns, with women largely in charge of business, and the exceptional maleness of colonial modernity. 2) If so, was it simply a case of Southeast Asia being a century behind Europe in adjusting to the only kind of capitalist industrial, urban modernity we know, which is necessarily male-led? Or could we imagine different modernities, with Southeast Asian gender patterns being able to challenge and change the male-dominant model we know from Europe?

MODERNITY AND C19TH EUROPE

I take Modernity (as opposed to Early Modernity) to be epitomized by Western Europe, specifically England, France, Holland and Germany, in the century before 1914. It incorporated a belief in progress, science, technology and rationality, and a fundamental democracy that asserted the equal



worth of individuals (at least males) before both God and the state. The work of Jürgen Kocka and others in Germany (Kocka 1995; Kocka and Mitchell 1993) identifies the same long 19th Century as that of the *bürgertum*, essentially tied to the city, and more sharply defined in German in opposition to the aristocracy than is the case with English or French *bourgeoisie*. The bourgeois category has not been used in Southeast Asia except in Marxist or anti-Chinese polemic, and I must therefore prefer Modernity to explain the *mentalité* or mind-set I am describing.

From the vantage point of post-modernity, it appears that the modernity of Europe in the Century before 1914 was accompanied by a particular kind of public piety-- ascetic and puritan in sexual morality; patriarchal in the home where respectable married women should focus; hard-working, frugal and disciplined in the essentially male workplace; committed to the city, to progress, rationality and technology.

The religious face of this modernity was a quest for personal, individual salvation through a direct relation with God which showed itself in frugal habits, hard work, the exaltation of the nuclear family over which a breadwinner father presided and respectable women were confined to very active child-bearing and nurturing as well as church and charitable activity. It was puritan in dress and sexual morality; patriarchal in the home. Its heroes were disciplined progressive men actively applying what they believed to be a higher morality and rationality to city, state and church, at the same time as believing in progress, rationality and technology.

Particular 19th Century expressions of this trend were Methodism in England, Pietism in Germany, Groen van Prinsterer (1801–1876) and the Anti-Revolutionary party in the Netherlands. In Catholic France the anti-clerical and sometimes revolutionary Left was a bigger factor, but at the same time there was a Catholic revival in the French industrial cities, led initially by Lammenais and giving rise to an enormous rise in celibate and disciplined religious orders directed to reforming urban poor (Little Sisters of the Poor, Marists, Vincent de Paul).. These new religious movements sternly opposed drinking and gambling, the great scourges of the poor in industrial cities, and made clear their mission to ‘save’ working-class people from the degradation to which they were exposed in these anonymous cities. “When a man becomes a Christian, he becomes industrious, trustworthy and prosperous”,

¹ Elie Halévy, *Histoire du peuple anglais au XIXe siècle* (6 vols, 1912-13? English trans 1987), to some extent followed by E.P. Thompson, argued the importance of

said John Wesley, and he was then expected to give generously to the church and the poor.¹

European women in the *ancien régime* had played prominent roles through high birth, marriage and in religious communities, even if never in commerce in quite the manner of Southeast Asia. Their spheres of action were markedly restricted by modernity, to some extent in the Protestant reformation and the subsequent the enlightenment, but more so with 19th century industrialization and its emphasis on male work, entrepreneurship, the universities, and an aggressively male public sphere, rather than inheritance or status. The dynamic new capitalist order and its bourgeois politics had little place for women (Gray 2000, 16–17).

SOUTHEAST ASIAN URBANIZATION AND INDUSTRIALIZATION FOLLOWED THOSE OF EUROPE BY ABOUT A CENTURY

Southeast Asia encountered this type of modernity at its height around 1900, but in an exceptionally male and alien form, embodied in exclusively male European officials and technocrats, European and Chinese entrepreneurs; and Arab religious reformers. Modernity was therefore picked up selectively, by a tiny number of elite western-educated males, even if it is these people who are understandably celebrated by our national histories.

In the early 1900s Southeast Asian indigenous societies were overwhelmingly rural and peasantized, more than ever before or since. Comparable socio-economic conditions to those which had given rise to modernity in Europe --rapid industrialization and urbanization, as massive numbers were drawn from a relatively stable countryside into the competitive, anonymous cities—arose roughly a century after those of Europe. The urban population of England (and Wales) increased from 2.3 million to 20 million between 1801 and 1891, by which date England was 72% urban. The other countries (France, Holland, Germany) that shared in the invention of modernity were not far behind, though Europe as a whole was still only 37% urban in 1925. In Southeast Asia, by contrast, the crucial economic effect of high colonialism was to retard and stifle indigenous urbanism even as the rural population mushroomed. Java’s rate of total urbanism declined from 6.7% in 1815 to 3% in 1890, and Burma and Viet Nam also showed declines

Methodism in directing England’s working class away from revolution and towards modern industrial virtues.



(Boomgaard 1989, 111). Southeast Asia as a whole was still only 13.6% urban in 1950, wealthy Malaya and the Philippines lifting the average with much higher proportions. The proportion of the indigenous populations in cities was still lower, so that the dominant cultures were particularly late in feeling the full effects of modernity. The transformation of Southeast Asia to a normal (by global standards) pattern of urbanism was effectively delayed until the boom after 1970. Indonesia was 15 percent urban in 1971, 31% in 1991 and 50% in 2010. Southeast Asia as a whole was then 44% (Kelly and McGee 2003).

All this is to say that we should not be surprised if in some respects the spiritual needs of today's rapidly urbanized and upwardly-mobile generation of Southeast Asians resemble those of puritans of Victorian England. In both, the newly urbanized masses were no longer served by the rural cycle of religious festivals, agricultural and life-cycle rituals, and fixed hierarchies. They needed a more abstract and rationalized faith, both individual in focus and national/global in reach, that could provide meaning, discipline, respectability and moral equality before God in the dangerously competitive conditions of the city. We live in a kind of post-modernity and of course find plenty of it also in Southeast Asia, but this should not obscure from us that the *mentalité* of the upwardly-mobile newly urbanized majority is as modernist as it is puritan in character.

PATRIARCHAL EUROPEAN MODERNITY MEETS SOUTHEAST ASIA'S OPPOSITE GENDER PATTERN

The dramatic achievements of electricity, railways, steamships, the telegraph and printed newspapers, coupled with the beginnings of western-style education, were of great importance in convincing the elite youths that a new age of technology and progress had indeed dawned. I therefore distinguish the 20th Century as Southeast Asia's century of full modernity, distinct from the early modernity that had been in place since the long 16th century. Of course this embrace of modernity came rather earlier for the Filipino *ilustrados*, and later for most of the rural mass, but something did change relatively quickly around 1900, roughly in step with China but significantly later than in Europe itself, the New World, India and Japan.

While this watershed is widely acknowledged, the exceptional maleness of the model of modernity on offer at that high colonial time has not been sufficiently emphasized. All its agents were

alien males, western European or southern Chinese, who no longer found Southeast Asian female partners to bridge the gap with local realities. This model had no place for the economically active Southeast Asian woman. It even excluded the realities of the European poor, with their necessarily pragmatic sexual and working arrangements, presenting instead a disembodied abstraction of respectable bourgeois European society with total male dominance in the workplace. The European women who began to come to Southeast Asia from the 1880s represented a totally unfamiliar domestic dimension of this modernity. As Anne Stoler puts it, they

confronted profoundly rigid restrictions on their domestic, economic and political options, more limiting than those of metropolitan Europe at the time and sharply contrasting with the opportunities open to colonial men (Stoler 1997, 344).

We have been misled by two images of Southeast Asian women which became immediately popular in Europe and America-- the Javanese aristocrat Kartini learning 'liberation' from her Dutch correspondent, and the daughters of King Mongkut being defended by their tutor Anna Leonowens against the cruel oppression of arranged marriage. Because the European model of bourgeois respectability had the prestige of being on top around 1900, a discourse of 'female liberation' as a western import seemed plausible for the tiny aristocratic elite with particular needs to control female sexuality. But the reality of the high colonial period was closer to the reverse. Up until the late nineteenth century the great majority of Southeast Asian women had much more freedom and economic agency than their European (or Chinese or Indian) counterparts, and played economic roles equivalent to (though different from) those of men. Free of the status preoccupations of men, women in Southeast Asia generally managed the money of the household, and engaged in business such as marketing, buying and selling.

In Java, for example, Raffles noted: "The women alone attend the markets, and conduct all the business of buying and selling. It is proverbial to say the Javanese men are fools in money concerns" (Raffles 1817, 353). In southern Viet Nam Crawford found women performing many of the tasks reserved for men in Europe or India. "They plough, harrow, reap, carry heavy burdens, are shopkeepers, brokers, and money-changers. In most of these cases they are considered not only more expert and intelligent than the men, but what is more extraordinary...their labour is generally of equal value" in terms of pay (Crawford



1830, 522–3). When slavery was being abolished in northern Siam in the 1880s, female slaves were found to be worth more than men because “the woman is decidedly as a worker worth more than the man” (Hallet 1890, cited in Baker and Pongpaichit 2009, 86).

At the end of that century, however, the modern absolutist state and modern corporate life were constructed by largely foreign and exclusively male hands. Where royal courts were partners in this enterprise – notably in Siam/Thailand but to some extent also Cambodia and Malay states such as Johor—their desperation to be accepted as “civilized” ensured that they were equally exclusively male. Since entrepreneurship, saving and budgeting had never been among the skills developed by such men, they left modern business to the Chinese and only an increasingly circumscribed arena of domestic business to their wives.

The earliest large-scale manufactures in Southeast Asia, like the most recent ones, had relied on the productive tradition of its women. The Manila cigar industry, and the tobacco and *batik* factories of nineteenth century Java, had almost exclusively used female labour. The textile industry of Ilo-ilo (Panay) in the century before 1860 was an astonishing success, organised by a few Chinese-*mestizo* males and about 60,000 Filipina women around the city – virtually all the available female labour of the province. They wove local cotton and pineapple fibre, as well as abaca thread from Bikul and silk from China, on rudimentary bamboo looms. The industry supplied much of the population of the Philippines with its cloth, but also contributed large share of Philippines export income up to the early 1860s (McCoy 1982, 301–6). By 1870, however, this thriving industry was virtually wiped out by cheaper British machine-made cloth replicating the popular Filipino patterns. A male-run ‘modern’ sugar industry took over the export economy of Panay, and women had to work in domestic situations if at all. Women ceased to be independent producers; their “economic position declined absolutely and in relation to men” (Eviota, 1992, 59). Although female labour was in retreat for the remainder of the colonial period, it was dynamic enough in 1922 to spark a debate in the all-male Indies assembly (*Volksraad*). The Netherlands had signed one of the first attempts to regulate labour globally in the image of patriarchal Europe, an ILO convention which banned ‘the weaker sex’ from paid work at night. Employers in the Indies objected, and the enquiry that was commissioned as a result showed that the majority of the labour input in agriculture on Java was still by women.

Although the western-run sugar and other plantations routinely sought male labourers, even there around a third of the labour was done by women. The more thorough 1930 census ignored ‘unpaid’ labour in agriculture, but still found that women formed 43.5% of the formal-sector paid work force in Java, as against 22.5% in the Netherlands (Locher-Scholten 2000, 52–60).

Everywhere the modern economy of mass production displaced women from their traditional roles, and sought male employees on the model of Europe. The specifically female commercialized productions for the market -- cloth, ceramics, basketwork and medicinal herbs--were replaced by imported manufactures. When women did join the European-managed modern economy they were invariably paid less than men on the European model – on average only 60% in agriculture and 40% or less in factories and offices.

The exclusively male character of the model of the modern economy on offer in colonial Southeast Asia had much to do with the absence of any entrepreneurial middle class among indigenous Southeast Asians at the end of the high colonial era, and their perceived failure to respond to the profit motive of liberal economic theory. During the period from the 1930s to the 1950s much debate on the region focussed on what J.H. Boeke (1948, 1953) had labelled a ‘dual economy’, whereby a huge socio-cultural gap divided the traditional rural economy from the modern one. Indigenous societies, it was claimed, simply failed to produce the entrepreneurial movers and shakers needed to move the economy forward, or even the patient accumulation of savings that would facilitate such progress. With the work of Clifford Geertz (1963, 1963A) on the absent indigenous middle class in Indonesia, the debate shifted to how specific colonial policies favouring population growth within static and hierarchic social structures may have created this pattern. I believe the gender factor never entered this debate, so natural did male modernity seem to its principals. From a social-historical perspective, however, it becomes clear that Southeast Asian males were poorly prepared to adopt roles which had long been dominated by women, and that there was a grave economic cost to women’s exclusion from the modern economy as defined in the high colonial period.

SOCIAL IDEALS AND DOMESTICITY

Socially the fashions were set by Europeans in this high colonial period. Upward mobility in the modern lifestyle, even more than in Victorian



England and Holland, was seen to involve female withdrawal from the public and commercial spheres, to play a decorous role as upholders of an imagined pure 'national' essence of impractical modest dress, large hierarchic families, handcraft and domesticity. The more the Filipino *ilustrados* (enlightened ones) of the 1880s, pioneers of Southeast Asian male modernity, enjoyed the demi-monde of the ladies of Paris and Madrid, the more they adopted a haut bourgeois ideal for their sisters in the Philippines. In editing Morga's description of the sexually assertive women of the pre-Spanish Philippines, nationalist hero José Rizal glossed over all the evidence of female desire and freedom and instead defended the subordination and virtue of Filipina womanhood. He wrote home to tell his sisters to emulate German women (not French), who, he said, "are home-loving, and they study cooking with as much diligence as they do music and drawing" (Rizal 1886, cited in Reyes 2008, 239).

Some of the modernizing legislation on names, marriage and inheritance explicitly required a shift to patriarchy, notably where Asian men themselves were in a position to impose it – in Japan and Siam. In 1875 all Japanese males were required to select surnames which their wives and children were obliged to adopt. Meiji Japan appears to have perceived male control of property as intrinsic to the European model of modernity, and so narrowed inheritance to this same male surname line. In 1913 King Vajiravudh also imposed surnames in Siam, claiming that this would make Thais 'civilized', and promote "the maintenance of family tradition... as an incentive to everyone to uphold not only personal honour but the honour of the family as well" (King Vajiravudh 1914, cited Reid 2009, 31). In a hitherto surname-free region (except for Vietnamese on the Chinese model), the only colonial government to require a shift to male-inherited surnames was the Philippines, in 1849, in an explicit attempt to strengthen family control over its members across time. Both Siamese and Philippine changes succeeded in creating powerful patriarchal families across the generations, largely because the introduction of surnames coincided with the merging of wealthy Chinese-mestizo families into the local elite, adopting local names to become the Thai and Filipino corporate 'big families', where there had been none before (Reid 2009).

The nineteenth century European ideal of permanent monogamy altered the general pattern of Southeast Asian marriage chiefly in its disapproval of divorce, especially female-initiated, and its domesticizing of a subordinate wife. Polygamy was one of the pretexts Europeans used for not

granting 'civilized' status to Asian societies and for demanding extraterritoriality in them, but in reality it was restricted to a tiny minority of royals and rich Chinese and Arabs. Southeast Asian kings had taken women from varied communities into their palace to cement alliances, and one of the Shan complaints against King Thibaw in the 1880s had been his failure to continue this practice. For the Chakri kings of Siam, however, an abundance of wives and children became an obsession, both signifying royal potency and facilitating royal monopoly of all high offices in partnership with the Europeans and Chinese. The first five Chakri monarchs sired a total of 324 children through 176 mothers, but the two reformers, Mongkut and Chulalongkorn, were the champions with 60 plus and 153 wives respectively. Each designated a clear heir along the lines of European kings (avoiding the fratricide of the past) but used their brothers and children to staff all crucial positions in the cabinet, diplomacy and the army. This unique royal dominance of the 'modernity' project ended abruptly with the next king, Vajiravudh, thought to have been homosexual, who took only four wives late in life in a vain attempt to produce a male heir. Nevertheless, Siam was unable to legislate against polygamy until 1935 after the absolute monarchy was abolished, despite the huge and acknowledged cost to its 'civilized' status (Loos 2006, 100–120).

NEGOTIATING MALE COLONIAL MODERNITY

Given my theme of unusually autonomous and economically active women, it is disappointing to find so little explicit female contestation of the maleness of modernity. Men readily embraced not only the government positions made available only to them, but also the modern spheres of journalism and political association. Women appear to have conceded these to have been part of a male sphere of public discourse, status and hierarchy. Formal ideology, especially as associated with the male-centric scriptural religions, was itself in the male domain, so that women tended to evade ideology rather than contest it. It was not so much that modernity usurped their roles in the economy (though this happened too as production was mechanised in textiles and agriculture), as that industrialization, bureaucratization and the spread of foreign ideologies expanded the 'male' spheres of life in unprecedented ways. Foreign models of religion (first and foremost), healing and medicine, production, the organization of knowledge and even business were conceded to men because they resembled the hierarchic and status-filled world of male politics.



The vernacular model of the upwardly-mobile family being presented in the 1920s and thirties was one in which the wife and mother was not in the workforce at all. Male-written manuals for domestic behaviour, such as 'Husband and Wife' (*Soeami-Isteri*), eight times reprinted by the Indies government publishing office, between 1921 and 1941 (Hadler 2008, 79–81), emphasized that girls should be educated, as the European model decreed, but only in an elementary school close to home so that they could be prepared for a domestic life of keeping a clean and regulated household. David Marr (1981: 206–14) describes twenty-five such books written in *quoc-ngu* in the 1920s, almost all retaining Confucianism's 'three submissions' of women to father, husband and eldest son in succession, but within a context of a 'modern' nuclear household. The radical transformation of the family required by urban modernity proved a great opportunity for puritanical religious reformers to emphasize female pre-marital virginity, submissiveness and domesticity as if they had been normative. In Europe too, nineteenth century industrialization and urbanization had called forth revivalist religion in a puritan and patriarchal form. The real and imagined dangers of urban anonymity and industrial mixing required strict new codes for separating upwardly-mobile respectability from the urban flotsam. Salvation depended now on individual morality which showed itself in frugal habits, hard work, and the exaltation of the nuclear family over which a breadwinner father presided. 'Respectable' women were unprecedentedly constrained in dress, deportment and domesticity.

The few young Southeast Asian women who did persevere to western-style education beyond puberty would often find themselves living away from home and in male-majority schools, mixed in both gender and race. This kind of adolescent mixing was indeed different, though in reality more controlled, than that which occurred in every rural market or festival. The novel image of 'modern' youth free to mix, much stimulated by Hollywood films, did indeed create a false dichotomy in the minds of both progressives and conservatives between modern freedom and traditional constraint. When articulate elites took up the 'women's question', therefore, it was on westernized assumptions about the 'emancipated woman' of the 1920s and '30s, with indigenous male literature eroticizing the tempting European or Chinese female other much as European literature fantasised the oriental feminine.² The

imagined harmonious village became the symbol of virtue as against the temptations of the city, reversing the 'exemplary centre' pattern of older Southeast Asia (Barmé 2002, 213–4). Debate pitted neo-traditional males championing novel concepts of male supremacy and female domesticity, dependence and subservience as understood through textual Buddhism, Islam, Confucianism and Christianity, against westernizing men and women who saw female emancipation in largely western terms.

When Ingrid Rudie was doing fieldwork in a Kelantan village in the 1960s, *kerja* covered a wide range of activities, including ceremonial activity and all sorts of domestic activity, in all which women prominent. But when she returned in the 1980s, after NEP had opened many more industrial opportunities for men, most women told her they had no work (*kerja*), i.e. not in formal permanent employment. Men fared better than women in the new labour market (Rudie 1993, 109). Her earlier work stressed the economic autonomy of women, who "had important tasks in the economy and local community. They owned, inherited, bought and sold land in their own right, they took part in agricultural production, and they dominated bazaar trade." (Rudie 1993, 105). But in the 1980s there was "an increased dependence on the labour market, and a corresponding reduction in the number of small niches for creating household viability. Males fare better in the labour market than females" (Rudie 1993, 109).

The women's movements of the colonial era, particularly as reconstructed in the subsequent official-nationalist narrative, appear a disappointing handmaid of male initiatives. The realm of modern political associations had already been conceded to men, as an extension of their traditional preoccupations with status and public talking. The biggest organisations were women's wings of originally religious organisations like Muhammadiyah, Sarekat Islam and the YMBA. Their pronouncements represented "quite strongly entrenched western bourgeois notions of femininity...that had little basis in the lives of most Indonesian women" (Blackburn 2004, 19). In the 1920s such movements aligned themselves generally with the nationalist trend, to the point of muting their pursuit of specific advances for women. The banning of polygamy was an issue on which European reformers and women's organizations could agree, and the revolutionaries finally achieved it in Siam/Thailand as part of their

² In Abdul Muis' *Salah Asuhan* (1928), she is half-French Eurasian.



anti-monarchy agenda. But even though it was only a tiny Muslim elite that indulged the practice in Indonesia, the women's movements ducked the opportunity to support such a law in 1937 on the grounds that a Dutch-dominated government should not meddle with Indonesian marriage customs. Semi-legendary warrior women from the less patriarchal remote past, like the Trung sisters of Viet memory, sexually-ambiguous Sri-kandi of the Javanese *wayang* tradition, and the romantic heroines of Luang Wichitwathakan's plays, were recycled only to show that women too could sacrifice for the nation.

The progress that did occur in bringing greater equality for women within this political realm appeared to be more the work of male liberals, European or Asian, than of the indigenous women's movement. The dyarchy reforms of India were extended to Burma in 1923, with the addition of equal female suffrage, in deference to the more balanced traditions of Burma than of India. They could vote, on a restricted property qualification, but not stand for election. That further step was strongly debated by the men elected to the Legislative Council, with neo-traditionalists claiming that Buddhism insisted on female inferiority, and that equality was a western idea. Elected Filipino male politicians also devoted much heat to debating this issue. Quezon eventually insisted that the women themselves should decide the vote in a plebiscite. Half a million women took part in 1937, opting ten to one in favour of having the vote. In Indonesia the men of the *Volksraad* narrowly defeated the government's proposal for equal female suffrage in 1925, ethnic Indonesians voting 9-8 against, but passed the measure in 1937. The various transitions to nation-statehood in the 1940s and fifties gave power temporarily to radical modernizers, and there was little further controversy about women getting the same political rights as men.

IS THERE A LESS PATRIARCHAL MODERNITY?

This record could be read to mean that Southeast Asia's historic gender balance was forgotten in the rush to embrace a pre-1914 western image of modernity with all its profound patriarchy, so that a return to greater balance in a modern urban context had to play catch-up with post-modern progress in the West. Neo-traditional religious reformers, and at times even authoritarian post-war governments, were ready enough to condemn sexual liberation as an unwanted western import. Does the region's remarkable heritage of relative gender balance and flexibility suggest anything by way of a less patriarchal model

of modernity? If so, neither well-meaning reformers nor the ever more influential religious neo-traditionalists seem inclined to celebrate it. Japan's experience is not encouraging, as well as Southeast Asia's last stands at autonomy in Siam/Thailand, Burma, Viet Nam and Aceh. Even here the European model of modernity was too strong, too attractive to Asian males, and too alien, for different experiments with the gendering of it to succeed.

So I will end with four, or perhaps 3.5 positive ways in which the Southeast Asian pattern has been different, and thankfully so.

Firstly, despite a century of tutelage in modern western ideas of fixed and binary sexuality, the new anthropology of gender recognises the widespread survival in Southeast Asia of flexible and heterogeneous gender and sexual identities strikingly at odds with western norms. Colonial regimes criminalized homosexuality, but could never enforce this in indigenous societies which continued to accommodate European and Chinese refugees from sterner systems. Wazir Jahan Karim (1995, 35-7) is one of the new anthropologists insisting that Southeast Asian bilaterality still means, as it always has, a preference for kinship terminology based on age rather than gender in everyday social relations. Male and female are free to explore and exploit their complementary sexuality, but also to transgress these through "the fluidity of sexual boundaries" and the acceptance of an "intersexual third dimension of behaviour". While gender theorists describe the readiness of Southeast Asian women to concede status superiority to men, especially in the realms of formal religion and politics, this relative freedom from status concerns still allows women more latitude in everyday business matters. Moreover the resilience of custom (Malay *adat*) and folk animism in everyday life renders it "the constant 'equaliser' or 'moderator' for women" against neo-traditional religion and normative ideology (ibid. 44).

Secondly, Southeast Asian women did make the transition to industrial wage labour more willingly and successfully than European women or Southeast Asian men, even if colonial capitalism insisted on paying them much less than men. The most 'indigenous' manufactures of the colonial era, in cigarettes and textiles, overwhelmingly employed women, and even European-run enterprises did so on a much larger scale than in Europe. The older male labour system of the region had been based on vertical ties of patronage and bondage. Free wage labour was slow to emerge except among Chinese and Indian migrants, so that employers even into the 1920s



complained of the stereotyped 'lazy native', and the need to create bonds of indebtedness as an incentive to work. 'Eating wages' (*makan gaji*, in Malay) for an impersonal or foreign boss was still a last resort of indignity for many Southeast Asian men into the 1970s. Women had always been freer of these status inhibitions, and readier to do what was necessary to feed the family. When large-scale manufacture for the world market did become a major feature of Southeast Asian economies, in the 1970s, it was a largely female work force that made this possible in electronics, textiles and food processing.

Thirdly, the gender pattern also permitted women more labour mobility than was the case in other industrializing situations, even if this was concentrated in the informal sector and largely invisible to governments. Doeppers (1998, 150–3 and 171–2) has shown that the contemporary female majority in Filipino migration to Manila was already pronounced in the mid-nineteenth century, when employment in the women-dominant cigar factories was a major draw. Male migration prevailed during the revolutionary period of the 1890s and early 1900s, but a balanced pattern re-established itself in the 1920s and '30s, to be again replaced by the female-dominant post-war pattern. The Ilocos coast, to the north of Manila, was already a notable stand-out in the nineteenth century for the readiness of its women to postpone or forego marriage in order to seek economic autonomy and support for their families in the city. The abolition of slavery in Siam in 1905, later than elsewhere, ended one form of female urban migration but opened up a more free and commercial recruitment for the urban service sector.

The huge male domination among Chinese, Indian and European migrants to the cities created a demand for sexual and domestic services, covering the whole range from prostitution to stable marriage. Commercial prostitution flourished everywhere to serve this urban imbalance, but Bangkok and Rangoon were noted as especially freewheeling centres where poor rural women could hope to make some money when young without necessarily sacrificing the chance for a respectable family life back in the village. Bangkok was reported to have 20,000 prostitutes already in the 1920s, serving principally a resident clientele (Barmé 2002, 82). This was the high-risk edge of a much broader pattern of vigorous female participation in the commercial urban economy. From the 1970s, it had its extension in the massive international movement of female migrant workers out of the Philippines (the world leader), Thailand, Indonesia and Burma, serving

Asia and the world in the domestic, health, tourist and entertainment sectors. It has been argued that Southeast Asian gender flexibility has made it easier for women to leave children in charge of stay-at-home males, who could assume female roles without stigma (Resurreccion and Khanh 2007).

Politically, the revolutions of the 1940s offered unprecedented opportunities for change, though in a context of the unprecedented maleness of 'high modern' rational reordering of society. Vietnamese communists, like their Chinese counterparts, demonstrated their total rejection of Confucianism by recruiting women into revolutionary violence, warfare and leadership. One veteran remembered it as a time "when even the gentlest Vietnamese woman could be inspired to enter the male world of violence for her country" (cited Turner and Thanh 1998, 47). Women were most likely to be included in the heroic struggle stage, like Maria Ulfah Santoso and S.K. Trimurti in the second and third Indonesian revolutionary cabinets, or Nguyễn Thị Bìn (b.1927), foreign minister of the provisional communist South Vietnamese government from 1969 and a prominent figure at the Paris peace accords of 1973. The authoritarian phase that followed tended to retreat to tokenism, but there could be no going back on the principle of equality in law and politics. The election of Philippines Presidents Cory Aquino (1986) and Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo (2004) and Indonesian Megawati Sukarnoputri (2001), and the anti-establishment election victories of Aung San Syu Kyi in Burma (1990) and Yingluck Shinawatra in Thailand (2011) all owed something to a more aggressive male relative being *hors de combat*, but undoubtedly something also to a particular style of female charisma attractive to the region's voters.

Taken overall, Southeast Asians have so far managed the transition from rural peasant poverty to urban modernity with many fewer constraints on female employment and economic autonomy than in nineteenth century Europe or other such transitions. In a 2013 ranking of gender equality in terms of economic, political, and educational access and health status, the Philippines was rated fourth out of 136 countries, behind only the Scandinavians, and in a class otherwise occupied only by very wealthy (or in the case of Cuba, very revolutionary) countries (World Economic Forum 2013). Nevertheless the confident male ideology of puritanical piety, rationality, and suspicion of women outside the home that accompanied the transition in England, France and Holland (but largely died there after



1914) is still an aspect of modernity in rapidly urbanizing Southeast Asia. Neo-traditional Islam, in particular, imposes certain forms of puritan dress and behaviour on the model of respectability for upwardly mobile urban women. While in some respects this has echoes of Victorian England, Southeast Asia's contemporary women have long since arrived at a far more satisfactory place than

that analogy would suggest, close to equality with men in education and the professions, and with crucial roles as breadwinners and heads of households.

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