

RESEARCH NOTE

Evidence for Thailand's Missing Social History: Thai Women in Old Mural Paintings

ALEC GORDON AND NAPAT SIRISAMBHAND

With the burning of central Thailand's capital city, Ayudhya, in 1767 and the destruction of virtually all the records kept there by the centralized bureaucracy of that kingdom, and with the Burmese occupation of the north and the devastating years of fighting around 1800 to drive them out, there is virtually no written record left at all for Thailand prior to the nineteenth century. There is a little material on rulers and some of their activities, but for social history the record is nearly blank. Is there then no way to write a social history or a gender history for Thailand?

The absence of written evidence permits the presentation of opinions based on pure insight, on assumptions and sometimes, frankly, on sheer prejudice. What, for example, does one make of the following two viewpoints? A prominent women's rights activist assures us in a United Nations publication that in the nineteenth century women did all the work in agriculture.¹ Yet the government's women's organization tells us that women did no work at all outside the house.² At least one of these views is surely wrong.

In fact, it is from the paradox of those opposing answers on the historical work activities of women that our search for alternative historical sources began. There being practically no written evidence, what might the historical mural paintings in old temples offer? These paintings cover the period from about 1660 to around 1900 and show ordinary people in various activities. Would they reveal, for example, a gender division of labour or aspects of gender relations?³

In this contribution we want to accomplish two things. First, establish

1. Siriphon Skrobaneek, "Appropriate Technology for Rural Women", in *idem*, *Women in Agriculture* (Bangkok, 1985), pp. 7–8.

2. National Commission on Women's Affairs, *Long Term Women's Development Plan* (Bangkok, 1983), p. 2.

3. The temple murals are only *one* alternative source; manuscript paintings are another source.

the legitimacy of using the murals as a source for social history. And second, present and discuss some pictorial evidence on the gendered division of labour in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries.

TEMPLE MURALS AS SOURCES FOR SOCIAL HISTORY

The Thai murals have been studied extensively before. They have been widely used to identify styles of Thai architecture in certain periods of the past according to the buildings shown. It is a commonplace to ascertain past styles of clothing by reference to murals. Ceremonies both courtly and common are studied as they are shown in the murals. And even today professional dancers are taught correct postures for classical dancing by reference to the many historical portrayals. Consequently, our endeavour, though new in itself, follows a well-established path.

Nevertheless, further discussion is necessary. The common viewpoint is that all the murals and everything in them express immanently religious meaning and instruction. We must, however, remember that there are different ways of interpreting that statement. For example, some writers, in insisting that even the scenes of daily life must have a religious meaning, take a functionalist position. For them, by definition, everything in the painting equally serves religion. This definition denies the possibility of relative autonomy of the parts of the picture or denies that they may differ from each other in intent or that they may even contradict each other. According to this view, representations of daily life can have no function or meaning other than to display some aspect (usually unspecified) of religious teaching.

Now if this were true, any attempt to use the pictures of daily life as direct evidence would fail because they could not display independently real life at all. Our "evidence" would be utterly controlled by and subservient to the painting's overall ideological message of religious and/or political morality. In that case, a picture of, say, a couple making love ought to have a deeper significance and its real meaning transcends what the eye can see.

We believe that in general this approach has to be rejected. In the first place, it is based solely on assumptions and then develops merely through assertions derived from those assumptions. Everything depends on the functionalist supposition that every part of the whole, in this case a painting, must serve to benefit and positively support the functioning of the whole. Secondly, this type of approach can be advanced without even seeing the painting! It exists with superior status outside the painting. (Or even before the picture was painted.) According to that approach we actually can know the meaning of a painting before we see it since we know in advance what must be in it.

However, it still seems reasonable to suppose that the painting in

question will convey the ideological message of the time to a greater or lesser extent. And if the portrayals of women were heavily ideological – that is, if they portray women as they were supposed to be according to then current male-dominated social prescriptions rather than as they were – then they may not form a basis for real direct evidence. The weight of ideology cannot easily be avoided once the teaching, moralizing intent of murals is accepted, even if only in part. Moreover, since precepts about proper behaviour involve social conduct, there is inevitably a strong infusion of ruling-class ideology. In many cases the figures in the celestial and princely scenes are meant to be associated with the actual rulers. “It is well known that kings and chiefs of principalities were eager to connect their history and that of the people over which they governed with events recorded in the legends of the Buddha. The Jataka tales were freely put under contribution [...]”⁴

We may divide mural paintings very roughly into three areas that may even be physically more or less separate in one painting – the upper part usually for celestial beings, the middle for princely personages, and finally the bottom for the daily life scenes of ordinary people, who constitute the *pharb kark* or “dregs”.⁵ The daily-life scenes are apparently straight and realistic renderings of people’s lives and relationships that are not strictly subordinated to the official or political morality of the painting(s) as a whole.

Of course, the “dregs” of society are portrayed as their “betters” think fit. The term, *pharb kark* or “dregs”, is a technical term used in the description or criticism of Thai murals by experts and others. It refers to the genre part of the mural painting that contains portrayals of ordinary people and their lives as distinct from the scenes of deities and/or rulers. It is used by experts apparently without derogatory connotation towards ordinary people. However, it must be said that the word contains its own meanings. Dregs are, after all, found at the bottom. And this has never been a prestigious position. It is also the usual location of ordinary people in the paintings. Physically, the pictures of deities are usually at the top, royals in the middle, and common people at the bottom. It is hard to avoid regarding this as symbolic of their status in society.⁶

The main characters are of royalty or the nobility and are shown in incidents of appropriate behaviour to each other in the princely sphere as well as receiving the respect, deference, adoration, services, and tribute

4 O. Frankfurter, “Note to ‘The Story of the Records of Siamese History’ by Prince Damrong”, in *Siam Society Fiftieth Anniversary Commemoration Publication: Selected Articles*, vol. 1 (Bangkok, 1954), p. 42.

5. Very often the middle and lowest portions of the murals merge as in the case of the preparation of Buddha’s last meal on earth before achieving *nirvana*.

6. Ironically, because the *pharb kark* are located at the bottom of the picture, they have suffered the worst damage of the painting from damp and flooding and vandalism.

from their followers and from the common people. Social and political hierarchy is well displayed and supported. In this respect the “princely” scenes are idealistic. They seek to show what is proper and what the ruling ideology thinks ought to be rather than what might actually have been the case. This does not render them completely invalid as evidence. However, it does introduce a substantial layer of mediation which, if present in the daily-life scenes, would create serious problems for our project to use them as direct evidence.

What we argue is that the daily-life scenes with the “dregs” lie mainly outside the ideological spheres of the celestial and princely portions. We remain reasonably confident that the scenes with which we are dealing, such as two farmers courting or a woman drawing water or a peasant smoking, do not form part of the panoply of power. Possibly, it might be argued that they form the sugar coating to the pill of elite ideology to help ordinary people swallow the claims of the power holders made in other parts of the murals. If so they remain distinct and separate in their identity. The function as well as the actual personnel of the daily-life scenes reduces their ideological content. There is no religious reason for their being there at all. Their presence is explained by the argument that they were meant to entertain rather than to instruct or to moralize. This does perform a role in relation the message of the whole.

The daily-life scenes provide a relief from the serious, solemn, dignified, sometime terrifying, and possibly occasionally boring scenes elsewhere in the mural. After all, many of the real life scenes are very funny indeed. This induced relaxation on the part of the viewer may help the eye more easily to return to the serious parts.⁷ However, the process it permits actually requires that the high-ideal norms be relaxed or neglected in the sphere of the real-life parts. In other words, not only can they be separated from the other parts of the painting for consideration, they have to be considered separately.⁸

WHAT THE MURALS SHOW

We are not proposing to use the murals as “mere” illustrations of women’s history. There is no such history. We are hoping to construct a scientific

7. We might compare this with the birth of Italian *opera buffa* in Europe. Originally it began as a comic *entre-acte* between the ostensible real business of *opera seria* that grew increasingly dull and boring. Then, why should theatre goers always have to suffer the undue pain inflicted by the “serious” stuff? And the entertaining *opera buffa* took off as an independent art form.

8. This is what Boisselier appears to have conceded when he remarked that the artistic rules require that no divine being, no prince should conduct himself/herself like the ordinary beings. In the last analysis, for everyone a clear class distinction holds. Some obey a whole ensemble of very strict rules of conduct, the others [ordinary people] show themselves according to their true nature; Jean Boisselier, *La Peinture en Thaïland* (Fribourg, 1976), p. 74.

beginning by using the murals as evidence. Clearly this is a different enterprise from assembling illustrations.

We are simply trying to find out what sorts of work women actually did in historical Thailand. In the current literature much is assumed about this on the basis of remarkably little written evidence. For our part, modestly we hope to identify a series of portrayals of what women actually did. Possibly, and more ambitiously, since the relevant pictures go back as far as the Ayudhya period, we hope to identify changes over time. Gender relations, however, are not limited to the division of labour. Consequently other scenes of people relaxing or relating to one another must be examined.

Broadly speaking then, we can identify five main categories of real life scene that we shall attempt to analyse: outdoor work; work in and around the household; public scenes of the street, *sala* (open sided pavillon), or fairground/festival that cover both work and play; scenes of personal relationships (including sexual ones); and lay religious activities (like merit making).

We began with the earliest available relevant paintings – those of the Ayudhya period. And yes, they do provide valuable if scattered pieces of evidence. Our findings cover many aspects of the relationship between men and women then. The pictures show thirty-one tasks, including eighteen tasks done by Thai women, twenty-three by Thai men; women alone do eight tasks and Thai men alone, nine tasks; and eleven tasks are done by either sex. This is in addition to illustrating important aspects of personal gender relations, and the activity of women in public. And they show other things too about attitudes towards women. And they usually do all this in a most lively fashion.

We have to wait until the seventeenth century for women in work scenes. What do we find? Not surprisingly, many illustrations of women street vendors, at food preparation and caring for children. But there are also several unexpected finds.

Amongst initial surprises, perhaps the greatest, are the women shown as *mabouts*, elephant drivers, a task generally regarded as an exclusively male task. One may think, of course, that the close retinue of queens or princesses at times had to be composed of females and consequently female *mabouts* here should not be entirely unexpected. On the other hand, in other pictures men are also shown as *mabouts* to princesses. Unfortunately, the early murals showing women *mabouts* are in poor condition, but study of the reproduction from Wat Chong Nonsi, Bangkok (1660–1670) reveals at least one woman *mabout*. The picture shown here (Figure 1) is from the Ordination Hall of Wat Nong Bua, Nan Province, dated about 1890.

The evidence provided by the temple murals is supported by other visual sources. Clear examples of women *mabouts* are to be found in *samut khoi*

Table 1. *Work tasks in Ayudhya murals by gender*

TASK	Female	Male	TASK	Female	Male
Acrobat		X	Mahout	X	X
Alms giving	X		Management	X	X
Bearer	X	X	Massage	X	
Boating	X	X	Medical	X	(X)
Butchery		X	Midwife	X	
Cattle herding		X	Milking		X
Childcare	X	X	Monk		X
Construction		X	Musician	X	X
Cooking inside	X	X	Potter	X	
Cooking out	X	X	Porter		X
Dancer	X	X	Rice pounding	X	X
Digging		X	Soldier		X
Fishing		X	Street vending	X	(X)
Food preparation	X		Tree climbing		X
Hunting		X	Wagon driving		X
			Water fetching	X	

manuscript paintings. One volume has no fewer than six reproductions of such paintings with female *mabhouts* including one that is dated to the reign of King Prasat Thong (1629–1656).⁹ Other *samut khoi* examples of female *mabhouts* are reproduced in the standard Thai work on Ayudhya paintings.¹⁰ From their postures in the pictures they appear to have been drawn from life and show that women could undertake this task when permitted.

Another unexpected task for women is *management*. This is a role that does not leap at one immediately on viewing a painting. It tends to emerge after reflection. And here it becomes very clear that in matters of organizing hospitality in (or from) the household women play a most important role. In the preparation of a feast the individuals have their appointed roles but their organization and the timing of their efforts are shown to be a task of management on quite a substantial scale that is invariably undertaken by women. Certain other tasks of management are undertaken by men. Happily, both types of management are in one painting on the walls of what had been the private residence of Rama I before assuming the throne (i.e. around 1770–1780) and now located in Wat Rakhang (Thonburi) (Figure 2). Here the managing of building is

9. Sompop Chantararapa, “Khrueng nung hom samai Ayudhya” ([Thai] Ayudhya apparel), in *Nangsue ngarn sop (Volume for Cremation)* (Bangkok, 2520/1977).

10. *Wannipa Na Songkhla: Chitakham thai rapae nee (Paintings in the Ayudhya Period)* (Bangkok, 2535/1993), p. 4.



Figure 1. Mural painting from Ordination Hall of Wat Nong Bua, Nan Province, dated about 1890, showing a woman *mabout*, elephant driver.

Photograph by the authors

undertaken by a man and the management of the women of the household by his wife to provide a meals for the workers exist side by side.

A third surprise concerns *rice pounding*. The earliest scene showing gender relations is a wonderful one from the Ayudhya period, located in Wat Chong Nongsi in Bangkok that displays a courting scene combined with rice pounding (Figures 3 and 4). Dated about 1670, this theme became a favourite of Thai painters although it has nothing to do with the supposed theme of the paintings. The task of rice pounding is not one normally associated with male activity. However, it is being done together with a woman and extends the fields of enquiry into courtship and sexuality. Indeed the whole scene of which this is a part is deceptive and complex and calls for analysis.

Is this evidence that gender roles were less fixed than usually thought or in this case misrepresented by modern writers? This need not necessarily be so on the sole basis of this particular picture because this scene seems to be as much a humorous courting scene as a portrayal of work. Although he appears to be well acquainted with how to set about rice pounding, the man has to pound the rice in order to approach the woman in question. Moreover, he is about to get a nasty shock when the mischievous boy in the picture snares his genitals in a noose!



Figure 2. Mural painting from Wat Rakhang (Thonburi), showing on the left a women managing the preparation of food for workers and on the right her husband supervising the construction of a sala.

Photograph by the authors

Obviously, many work tasks shown in the murals are not surprising at all. The best known tasks today are textiles making and trading/vending. The first of these is beautifully shown from the northern Wat Phumin in Nan where there is a spinning scene that is again enlivened by a male courting element and a famous weaving scene. These date from 1890. Although faded and damaged in parts, a seventeenth-century scene from Wat Ko Kaew in Phetchaburi (Figure 5) not only displays excellently several women vendors in the main street of Ayudhya but also shows that the “main street” was the quay of a canal in which elephants are bathing next to another woman vendor, this time afloat.

Also in the field of “expected” entertainment we have a glorious rendering of a female court orchestra in Wat Khongkaram (Figure 6) and another of orchestra and dancers from the Bhuddhaisawan Chapel at the National Museum in Bangkok (Figure 7). Some pictures show men playing similar instruments but we show a male wind and percussion band from Wat Chong Nonsi (Figure 8). On the lower social scale, a picture of man



Figure 3. Mural painting from Wat Chong Nonsi, Bangkok (about 1670), depicting the ostensible theme: Vidhura bidding farewell to his weeping family while Punnaka waits by his horse, plus humorous courting and rice-pounding scenes at the bottom, combined with a sexual scene in the mid-left.

Photograph by the authors



Figure 4. Detail of the mural painting shown in Figure 3, showing courting while pounding the rice.

Photograph by the authors

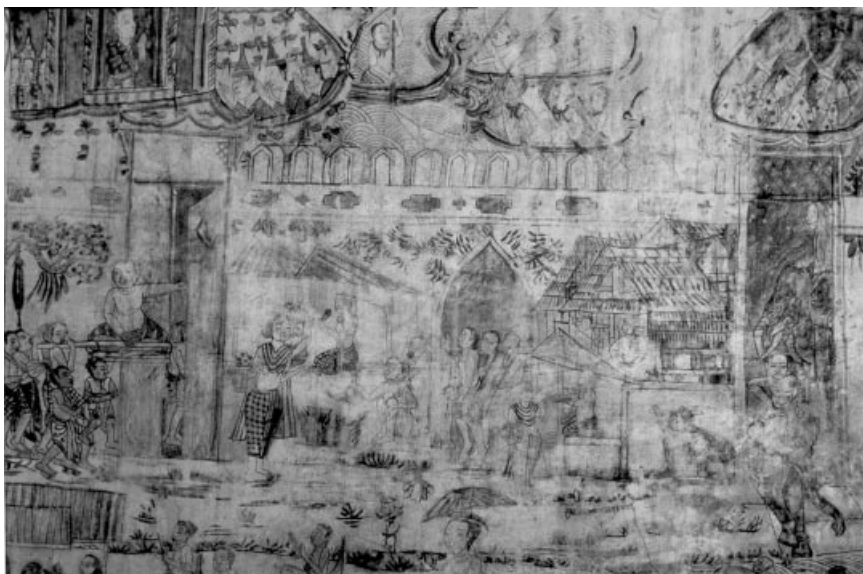


Figure 5. Mural painting from Wat Ko Kaew in Phetchaburi, seventeenth century, showing women vendors in the main street of Ayudhya.

Photograph by the authors



Figure 6. Mural painting from the Throne Hall at the National Museum, Bangkok, showing a female court orchestra.

Photograph by the authors



Figure 7. Mural painting from the Throne Hall at the National Museum in Bangkok showing women dancing, playing musical instruments, and presenting food to a royal guest.

Photograph by the authors



Figure 8. Mural painting from Wat Chong Nonsi showing a male wind and percussion band.
Photograph by the authors

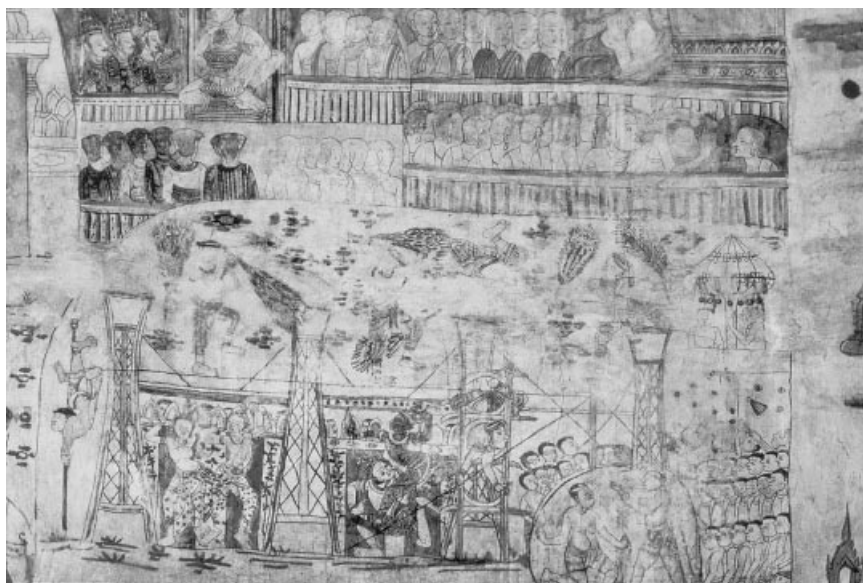


Figure 9. Mural painting at Wat Ko Kaew showing man and woman acrobats and other male circus performers.

Photograph by the authors



Figure 10. Mural painting from the northern Wat Pa Daet in Mae Chaem District of Chiang Mai Province, from around 1890–1900, showing the birth of Buddha.

Photograph by the authors

and woman acrobats and other male circus performers rounds off our survey of tasks (Figure 9).

BALANCE

The murals do indeed seem to provide some historical evidence on women's work in Thai society from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. But these paintings also leave us with some unsolved mysteries. There is no doubt, for instance, that rice cultivation was the most common life-preserving activity historically carried out by Thai families. But why in the range of activities shown in the murals over three centuries have so few paintings of it been made of it? Almost every other activity is shown. In fact, so far we have found only one dating from 1890–1900.

Although the style of painting is not sophisticated, the rendering of the activity is magnificent in the northern Wat Pa Daet in Mae Chaem District of Chiang Mai Province. Here we have a wonderful picture of the division of labour, for as the male is ploughing the women are replanting rice shoots. Of course, in the painting the ploughman is a king. The scene is the birth of Buddha (Figure 10). But in the rendering despite his royal attire the man knows what he is doing. He is a real ploughman. Likewise the women are true northern Thai villagers.

But why only this one picture? It is possible that this arises from the literary sources of the murals, namely what the so-called *Jataka* says or does not say?¹¹ It certainly is true of them that the action occurs either in a town or in the palace or in the jungle. Consequently the painters may have felt constrained to follow the particular *Jataka* they were portraying and hence omit rice cultivation. That is one possible explanation, although it leaves untouched the fact that on so many other occasions the painters portrayed things not mentioned in the *Jataka* stories.

Does it show a peculiarity in the mental make-up of the Thai ruling class? Whereas in Europe the aristocracy loved work. They could look at it for hours in pictures. But the Sukhothai, Lanna, Ayudhya, and Rattanakosin nobles could not bear to look upon it? Is this some reflection of the fact that whilst in Europe the feudal lords actually owned the land shown, in Thailand this was not the case for the *sakdina* nobility?

More level-headed is the possible explanation offered in a personal communication by Kathleen Matics, a well known specialist on Thai iconography. She remarked that in general there are very few examples in

11. Most of the Thai murals that depict stories are of the historical life of Lord Buddha and of about 10 stories of previous lives of Buddha out of some 455 lives in all. These are the *Jataka* tales. On occasion, the significance of a *Jataka* tale needs further interpretation as its message is political rather than religious. See David Wyatt, *Temple Murals as an Historical Source: The Case of Wat Phumin, Nan* (Bangkok, 1993).

Thai historical murals of landscape painting in the Western sense. This might explain the absence of people cultivating rice. Also she suggests that most temples were located in urban areas and since the painters tended to paint what they saw around them they painted no rice fields.

Still, we could object to this by asking: were the rice fields so far away from the town that the artist never saw one? And what about the incident in the historical life of Buddha's historical life of the quarrel over irrigation water? This surely might have enticed someone to show rice cultivation.

Moreover, if we accept those explanations then we have to account for the other lesser mystery: why, with all the other artists avoiding a real-life rendering of rice planting, did the artist of Wat Pa Daet paint it in the realistic way he did? Certainly the temple was a rural one. Possibly because the other painters were court-trained artists. Whilst our painter was not quite rustic in his approach and treated the *Jataka* in classical fashion, he was by no means as sophisticated as the others. This does not detract from the specific beauty of his work. However, it does mean he may not have been so aware of the possible restrictions outlined above. Frankly, we are not truly convinced by any of these explanations.

A final question. Why has the most prevalent depiction of ordinary Thai women in the historical murals been of *domestic* duties? Woman's place in the home? Every historical painter in Thailand was a man. Is this rendering an example of a non-changing male prejudice? Is it the source of the claim that women did no work outside the home?

The evidence so far discovered only partially discredits the two opposing viewpoints on women and agricultural work that we mentioned at the beginning. Perhaps the "women at home" case is discredited by our finding female *mahouts* and potters, musicians, dancers, medicos and street-food vendors. But, as we said earlier, we found almost no pictures at all of women or men working in the rice fields. That women could have done all the work in agriculture, we doubt. The evidence for it is lacking. But for men at work too, the evidence is scarce. The jury is still out. More visual evidence than what we have so far found is required.