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LABOR ORGANIZATION AND TEXTILE TRADE IN NORTHERN THAILAND IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

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The Thai peasant economy has frequently been characterized as a "subsistence economy" in which villagers planted their own rice and wove their own clothing. The uncritical use of the phrase "subsistence economy" has contributed to a series of significant misunderstandings about the character of the Thai peasant political economy, including the social process of cloth production.¹

Because most scholars have assumed that obtaining clothing was not a problem for villagers, they have tended to minimize the significance of differences in dress between rich and poor in traditional nineteenth century Thai society. I believe that a better understanding of the process of cloth production will provide a different view of the statements of contemporary western observers of the period, who wrote, "Rich and poor all dress alike, except that the higher classes vary the universal style a little by inserting a very showy strip of wrought silk into the skirt near the bottom" (Cort 1886:348).² Even though such nineteenth century writers are in fact pointing to the differentiation between rich and poor, they are nonetheless in effect minimizing the class differences between rich and poor in fact being represented through their dress.

¹The assumption of "subsistence economy" has led to a minimization of the role of trade and market relations in daily life. It has encouraged a view of village relations as egalitarian rather than class stratified. It has also led to a serious underestimation of the extent of poverty in the lives of many villagers, subsistence economies connoting self-sufficiency and a certain simple contentedness (see Bowie 1988).

²Taylor, another nineteenth century missionary wrote along a similar vein, stating tersely, "Silk or very fine cotton for the upper classes and the wealthy; coarser cotton, homespun and homewoven, for the peasant classes" (Mss:9).

This minimizing of the social significance of dress occurs not simply in historical accounts of Thailand. Frederici writes of the nearby Burmese kingdom of Pegu, "In Pegu the fashion of their apparel is all one as well the noble man as the simple: the only difference is in the fineness of cloth" (1581:268; quoted in Reid 1988: 85). Reid goes on to conclude from this ambiguous quote that "the difference in dress between rich and poor, servant and master, king and commoner, was less marked than in pre-industrial Europe, where each man's station and even vocation could be read in the prescribed style of dress" (Reid 1988:85).

The failure to understand the process of cloth production has contributed to a serious misunderstanding of the social significance of cloth in the Thai peasant economy. The image of villagers universally weaving cloth in the old days in part results from a failure to counteract the elite and urban bias of archival sources with the voices of the peasants. However, if archival records are combined with oral histories a much fuller and richer picture emerges.

The research for this paper is based on both archival sources, primarily the accounts left by British consular officials and American missionaries, and oral histories. In earlier research I interviewed over 500 villagers over the age of 80 living in about 400 villages for their recollections of life in their youth, and in the days of their parents and grandparents (Bowie 1988). Last summer I returned to Thailand and interviewed another 90 villagers over the age of 80, primarily living in 6 districts in the Chiang Mai Valley (Hang Dong, San Patong, Saraphi, San Khampaeng, Hot and Basang) of northern Thailand. I was specifically interested in their recollections of cloth production in the days of their parents and grandparents.³

I shall divide this paper into two main parts. In the first part I shall describe the dress of northern Thai peasants and lords in the nineteenth century. I shall emphasize the poverty of many peasants and the wealth of the ruling lords. In the second half of this paper, I shall discuss the process of cloth production, arguing that not all villagers planted cotton, spun thread, or wove cloth. As a result of this division of labor, market exchanges played an important role in determining access to cloth. As cotton was by far the predominant fabric for textile production in northern Thailand, most of this paper will focus on cotton; I shall also touch briefly on silk and other finer textiles which were worn by members of the village elite as well as the members of the court.

I: NINETEENTH CENTURY NORTHERN THAI DRESS: FROM RICH TO POOR.

Commoner Dress:

Northern Thai men wore a phaa toi about their loins, a length of cloth placed around the back and brought to the front, where the surplus cloth was twisted in a cord and brought down between the legs and tucked into the waist in

³The Chiang Mai Valley is the site of the former capital of the northern Thai kingdom of Chiang Mai. The ruling lords of this kingdom intermarried and had close relations with the other northern Thai (also referred to as "Lao" or "Western Lao" in the nineteenth century) kingdoms. These northern Thai kingdoms were formerly independent kingdoms, with tributary relations with Burma historically and later central Thailand. Chiang Mai today is Thailand's second largest city.

the back. This cloth was generally a blue cotton (Richardson Mss:38, Lowndes FO69/55/1871). The men were also generally bare-chested, and carrying a kind of plaid scarf called a phaa khaamaa, which has a variety of uses including as a turban, facecloth, belt, and loincloth. Sometimes the phaa toi covered only the loins, leaving the tattoos visible; other times the phaa toi seems have been worn long, covering the waist down to the knees.⁴

Northern Thai women wore a kind of tubular long skirt called a phaa sin. One of the most detailed descriptions dates from 1866:

But the dress of the Laosian women is very unlike that of the Siamese women. The main article of their dress is a very peculiar petticoat--made always of four pieces sewed together so that their seams pass around the body. The upper piece is white about 6 inches wide; the next below is red, 12 inches wide; the next 24 inches woven with stripes of white and black shaded, with motley colours, the stripes being an inch wide; the bottom piece is red and 14 inches wide. The ends of the garment thus made are sewed together, and when placed on the person is kept in its place just as the Siamese do their panoong, by using a white strip for a belt as a band of a sheaf of wheat is twisted and tucked under itself.

The women very generally have a white, yellow, or pink sash which they tie around their chests. (Bangkok Recorder, August 30, 1866).

This account is essentially confirmed by later descriptions of nineteenth century visitors to Chiang Mai. The differences in the accounts involve the number of strips (whether three or four), and the colors used.⁵ The scarf is generally described as being pink in color (1866; Lowndes 1871; Hildebrand 1875), although white and yellow are also mentioned (1866). Jackets seems to

⁴Shirts or jackets appear to have become more popular later on, as did the kind of long blue pants now commonly worn by village men (daew chador). Ironically, the indigo shirts and pants have become adopted as the "traditional" Thai peasant dress.

⁵There is agreement that the top strip was generally white, although one source mentions black, dark brown, as well as white (Bock 1986[1884]:326), and that the bottom strip was generally red (Cort 1886:348; Taylor Mss:291; Bock 1986[1884]:321), however Bock also says dark brown was used on the bottom as well (Bock 1986[1884]:326). For the largest central section, the colors given include white, black, yellow, blue and red, with one source suggesting that the predominating color in northern Thailand was yellow (Taylor Mss:291) and two British officials from Burma noting the predominant colors were red and yellow (Lowndes FO69/55/1871; Hildebrand FO69/65/1875).

have become more popular later on among commoners, perhaps because of changes in fashion, or perhaps as more village women could afford them (Stringer Trade Report, in RGWB: 16 May 1891).

However, as more important than what was worn is how accessible was such clothing. From oral histories come accounts of tremendous poverty. Many villagers commented on the scarcity of cloth in the past, saying that few villagers had more than a couple changes of clothes. To save on cloth, many village women wore an abbreviated skirt (sin kot, literally a "stunted skirt") which was only knee-length. Villagers recalled that in the old days clothes were often worn thin from use and very much patched. In fact one villager commented that in those days their clothes were so patched that the host fabric had long been worn away and all that remained were the "guest patches" (chaw khaek).

Cloth was so scarce that some villagers were forced to beg for old clothes to wear. Slaves and tenants wore the old discards (khiisak chaw, literally "refuse," "garbage") of their masters. Theft was also not unknown. One villager told of thieves stealing the freshly woven cloth straight from the loom; another told of thieves stealing her grandfather's clothes basket. That cotton was a valuable commodity is also seen in the fact that there were travelling minstrels who literally "sang for their cotton" (soo laek faj)!⁶

Elite Dress:

By contrast to the simply woven clothes of ordinary villagers, consider the dress of the aristocracy. One American missionary described the state robes of one of the northern lords as being "entirely of cloth of gold" (Dodd 1923:201). Another missionary described another ruling lord's dress during his audience as follows:

The King entered and ascended the throne. He was a slight man arrayed in golden sandals and red-and-gold coat and pahnoong, a strip of cloth a yard wide and nearly 4 yards long...The golden crown upon his pompadoured, gray head sparkled with precious stones (Taylor Mss:73).

The dress of one of the princesses is described as follows:

The skirt with the many colored stripes and the dark green border is used in the ordinary court dress. To this is added a second border of large flowers solidly embroidered in gold thread,

⁶Poverty was a factor not only in the acquisition of clothes, but other household items of cloth such as mattresses, pillows, bedsheets, blankets, and mosquito nets.

each flower four or five inches in diameter and costing a rupee a flower. In the body of the skirt also is there woven much gold thread, and the border of green velvet is bordered on either edge with sequins in silver tinsel put on in points. The same sequins trim the two or three inches of underskirt showing, which usually trails on the ground. With gold embroidered slippers, gold bracelets and many gold ornaments in the hair set with spangles, you want to get a Kun princess out in the sunshine to see her sparkle (Dodd 1923:200).

Not only were the clothes worn by the aristocracy very beautiful, generally woven of silk with gold and silver threads, but they were also very expensive. A few references provide a glimpse into their cost and labor time. Richardson, a British official who travelled to Chiang Mai in 1830, writes that, "the cloth or petticoat of some of the higher ranks is richly embroidered, one of which is occupation for 4 or 5 months" (Richardson Mss:40). Lt. Younghusband, writing in 1888, notes that a silk lungi sold for 18 rupees (1888:58). In the passage quoted above is noted that each flower in the princess' skirt border cost a rupee (Dodd 1923:200).

Some comparative insight into the cost of a silk skirt over a cotton skirt is made possible from the account of the British traveller, Carl Bock, writing in 1881-1882:

When the "body" is made of silk, this border is made of the same material, often beautifully interwoven with gold and silver threads. These rich borders sometimes cost as much as 60 rupees apiece, while the whole garment, when made entirely of cotton, strong and durable as it is, does not cost more than from 1 1/2 - 2 rupees (1986[1894]:326)

The elite also had numerous other items of cloth far in excess of that owned by ordinary villagers. Palaces had Oriental rugs and lovely reclining pillows (Taylor Mss:73). Cloth of varying types was kept in store for use as gifts to visitors and for robes to be given to monks on merit-making occasions. Royal elephants, horses and boats were decorated with beautiful cloths. Gold elephant trappings were worth thousands of rupees, while silver trappings were worth hundreds of rupees (Cort 1886:349).

The impact these lavish cloth trappings had on their viewers can be surmised from one missionary's description of one princess during her visits to her relatives with her retinue. He writes that "when she rode through the market in her state robes with gold trappings on her pony, her coming was the event of the year" (Dodd 1923:201). Another account describes one of the annual celebrations which always occurred on big bazaar days. The ruling lord rode on a "very richly caparisoned elephant" in his golden state robes and "pagoda-like

coronet" also covered with gold. As the lord passed by, the crowd fell into absolute silence (Dodd 1923:201).

But to know that the aristocracy were dressed in silks, owned numerous expensive cloth items, including caparisons for their horses and elephants; to know that some of the fanciest clothing could take as long as 4-5 months to weave; to know that some of the silks cost anywhere from 18 to 60 rupees and animal caparisons decorated in gold could cost thousands of rupees still gives us only a preliminary sense of the social meaning of cloth. Although knowing that cotton cloth skirts costs 1 1/2 - 2 rupees tells us that elite clothing cost some 18-60 times as much as ordinary peasant clothing, it gives us little insight to the social value of cloth. To fully understand the significance of cloth to northern Thai villagers and elite alike, it is important to understand the process of production itself.

II: SOCIAL PROCESS OF PRODUCTION: THE SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF CLOTH.

In the second half of this talk, I would like to turn to describing the social process of textile production in northern Thailand in the nineteenth century, using peasant oral histories to fill in the gaps of archival sources left by Westerners who interacted primarily in urban and court environments. Let me begin with the geography of cotton cultivation.

The first and most important point is the realization that not all villagers planted cotton. In fact, of the 73 interviews in which I specifically asked about cotton cultivation, 73 percent (53 informants) responded that little or no cotton was grown in their village. The remaining 27 percent (20 informants) responded that at least one person in their village cultivated a significant amount of cotton (by significant I mean a ngaan--1/10 acre--or more of cotton).

Cotton cultivation was most likely to occur in more upland regions. Villages with access to fertile irrigated paddyland were very unlikely to use such prime land for cotton cultivation; rather they planted rice, tobacco, and a variety of other cash crops.⁷ A significant portion of cotton growers belonged to various upland tribal minorities, such as Karen and Mussur in particular (McLeod Mss(1836):57; Lowndes FO69/55/1871; McCarthy 1900:149).

Although many lowland rice-growing villagers did not plant cotton, many of them nonetheless spun and wove cloth. In order to acquire raw cotton for

⁷According to villagers I interviewed, villagers producing cotton in any quantity were located in the districts of Basang (Lamphun), Chom Thong, Hot, Muang Win, and San Khampaeng.

spinning or weaving, villagers engaged in a remarkable variety of exchanges. Villagers described walking from their lowland valley villages to upland cotton-growing villages in order to buy or trade for raw cotton. The trip could take several days round-trip. Some villagers sought cotton for their own household use and others were traders. Uplanders would walk down to the lowlands to trade their cotton and other goods for lowland goods.

Goods traded for raw cotton included: tobacco, miang (fermented tea leaves), rice, clay pots, fish, salt, chilies, betel nut and serivine. Many uplanders did not weave, although they grew cotton, or if they wove, used back-strap looms rather than the full-frame looms. Consequently finished clothes and items woven on larger more specialized looms such as mosquito nets, were also traded for raw cotton. Commercially manufactured thread (*faj lahaan*) dyed in bright commercial colors were also traded for raw cotton. In addition to goods traded for raw cotton, lowland villagers also engaged in labor exchanges with cotton growers; lowlanders would take the raw cotton, card, spin and weave it, returning to the cotton grower half of the final finished woven cloth.

Villagers, however they acquired the raw cotton, then engaged in a variety of labor relations before the cotton was finally woven. Of 67 informants who provided general information about the relative proportion of fellow villagers who wove, 30 villagers or 45 percent said that only a minority wove in their villages. Another 37 villagers or 55 percent said that a majority (not necessarily all) could weave. In trying to understand why some villagers wove and others did not, I received the following answer--profound, but frustrating--from one old villager, "You can't expect everyone to be the same. People are different. Some make a living weaving, others make a living doing other things!"

Interestingly enough villagers who wove did not necessarily spin. Although the overall proportion of weavers and spinners relative to the overall population was similar (53 % said a majority could spin and 47 % said a minority in their village could spin), there remained a certain division of labor. Of villages with both spinners and weavers, 47% said more villagers could spin than weave and 53 % said more villagers could weave than spin. What is interesting is the fact that there was a degree of specialization in spinning and weaving as well.⁸ Villagers who could spin but not weave, then hired weavers to make their clothing for them or sold their thread on the market.

Some weavers wove only to meet family needs. Other weavers wove extra cloth to sell to other villagers or cloth peddlers who walked from village to village

⁸Perhaps part of the reason why slightly more villagers wove than spun is because many weavers were using commercial threads either in part or entirely; if solely homespun thread was being used, one would expect more spinners than weavers as weaving is quicker than spinning.

buying up extra cloth to sell to villagers in non-weaving areas. Some weavers worked as hired weavers; indeed for poorer villagers this was yet another way of earning clothing for their families. Even villagers who could weave nonetheless hired fellow villagers to weave cloth for them, for example elderly women, or women busy with small children or other time-demanding family needs.

After the plain white cloth was woven, it remained to dye and sew it. These tasks were also specialized by villager and village. Certain villages were known as dying centers. Indigo was the most common dye used and was considered to be expensive. Even villagers who knew how to weave did not necessarily know how to cut and sew clothes. Especially if jackets or pants were involved, villagers were likely to hire another villager with a reputation as a seamstress. When sewing machines entered the region, the trend became yet more pronounced.

As village involvement in the various phases of cloth production varied, so too did the scale of production. From villagers on the margins of poverty, the scale ranged to very wealthy entrepreneurs. Such cloth merchants owned large oxen caravans or large boats able to transport as much as 4 tons at a time by river. One villager told of his father buying 2-3,000 kilos of raw cotton at a time. Such merchants were involved in hiring numerous villagers to work as spinners, weavers, porters, oxen caravan owners, or boat polers on their behalf.

In one weaving center in Basang district, there were 3-4 very large cloth weaving factories. Each factory had 20-30 weavers working full time in the factory, as well as hundreds of weavers working on a piecemeal basis in the surrounding villages. One such factory owner for example had 4-5 large boats (used also to transport rice to feed the fulltime weavers, as well as transport cotton and cloth) and over 300 part-time piecemeal weavers sending cloth to him.

However cloth was produced, it was marketed in a variety of ways. Goods in 19th century Thailand were transported on foot, by boat, by raft, by oxen caravans and ox-carts. After the turn of the century, bicycles and motorcars were also used. Both men and women were involved in peddling cloth, although generally men were likely to travel longer distances than women peddlers. In some cases such peddlers were self-employed, taking their own cloth or buying cloth to sell. Sometimes peddlers were given cloth on credit, repaying the owner once the cloth had been sold. In yet other cases, peddlers were hired by large cloth producers to market their cloth for them, or to transport their cloth to a wholesale buyer elsewhere.

In addition to mendicant cloth sellers, there were also more permanent market sellers, selling everything from homespun and commercially manufactured thread to woven cloth and ready-made clothing. By no means was all cloth sold locally produced. There were imported cottons and silks, the majority of British and Indian manufacture. Every traveller to Chiang Mai has

commented on the rows of shophouses full of English cotton goods (Satow Mss:1886:56; Bock [1884]: 229; Younghusband 1888:29) of oxen caravan traders transporting British piecegoods (McLeod Mss: 1836:61; Schomburgk FO69/21/1860; McCarthy 1900:113).⁹

A Note on Finer Textiles:

What I have discussed thus far is the variability in the production of the simplest and plainest of cloth. As one turns to discuss more complex fabrics, such as supplemental weft designs or cloth woven of silk, the degree of specialization increases. Complex weaves using more than one harness or complex colored designs were further restricted to specific clusters of villages.¹⁰ Even within the same village, only certain weavers knew how to make certain designs; some knew how to make elephants, others flowers, camels, palaces, birds, snakes, and the other favorite motifs. A serious student of weaving could try to convince various specialists to teach them their patterns, and only the very keen minds could remember a large variety of patterns. Complex weaves occurred in festival banners, facecloths and scarves worn on temple and festival days, and fancy bedding, primarily guest bedding, as well as skirts and skirt borders.

Complex weaves were done in both cotton and silk. The discussion thus far has focussed on cotton cloth production. Silk production remains to be considered. Oral histories reveal two centers of silk cultivation and silk weaving in the Chiang Mai Valley, namely Hot and San Khampaeng.¹¹ In addition to local silk, silk thread was imported. As Bock explains:

⁹I do not believe that the import of cloth goods was a recent phenomenon. As early as the 17th century, Thailand was importing foreign textiles. Using 17th century Dutch records, George Smith writes that about 15,000 pieces of Indian cloth were imported into Thailand through Ayuthaya annually. In addition to the port at Ayuthaya, northern Thailand also had access to ports in Burma.

¹⁰Thus it is a mistake to think that just because today in a given village one can find weavers doing certain designs that this design was originally more widespread and only "survives" in this village today; in the previous century this particular pattern was also restricted to that village and the tradition of specialization continues to this day. Thus rather than a broader tradition being lost, I would argue the tradition of specialization has been maintained.

¹¹Silk was also dyed and woven in Lampang, however apparently the silk was imported from China (Satow 1885-86:194). San Khampaeng today is still known as a silk weaving center and many tourists flock to the village every year, however silk production at Hot has completely died out.

The cocoons of the wild silkworm are collected, and employed in the manufacture of native silk fabrics. The quality is coarse, and the supply insufficient for the home demand, considerable quantities of silk being bought from the Yunnan traders in exchange for the Lao cotton, of which far more than enough for local consumption is grown. (Bock 1884: 324).

The wearing of silk was limited to members of the rural elite and urban aristocracy. The silk was used for men's *phaa toi*, women's skirts, women's shoulder scarfs, and some jackets and blouses. Much of the court weaving appears to have been done by royal slaves. Edwardes writes that the ruling lord had 300 slaves weaving cloth for him (FO69/62/1875). Hildebrand writes that among the ruling lord of Chiang Mai's chief sources of income was "the sale of wearing apparel, etc., made by his several hundred slaves." In addition to cotton cloth, it seems that slaves did most of the weaving of silk. As Hildebrand writes "There is a good deal of trade capable of being done also in silk garments and silk fancy work, at which the slaves and others are great adepts" (FO69/65/1875). Members of the aristocracy themselves also seem to have done some silk weaving. One contemporary accounts describes the wife of one of the ruling lords of Chiang Mai as "always busy making silken garments, while one of her slaves worked at the loom spinning silk thread" (Bock 1986[1884]:322; see also Younghusband 1888:58).¹²

In my talk thus far I have been trying to argue that the process of cloth production, both silk and cotton, was far more specialized than has commonly been thought. My research is a preliminary attempt to break through the mythology of a subsistence economy into the complexities of historical reality. I believe that demythologizing the political economy of the northern Thai kingdoms sheds new light on the meaning of cloth in everyday life. For me since viewing cloth goods from the perspective of their production, I now view the gifts of clothing which children offer their parents and respected old people at New Year's ceremonies in a new light. I also now view the robes given to the young monks and novices during merit-making ceremonies in a new light, realizing that in the past those robes were all handwoven, handsewn, and hand-dyed by their parents and relatives.

Many questions remain to be answered. I hope my talk has suggested some. However I also hope that my talk has contributed to a sense of the social significance of cloth, all cloth, not simply the beautiful silks of the elite, but the

¹²In addition to cloth woven within the court and by slaves, ruling lords received both raw cotton and finished cloth as tribute from free villagers throughout the region (Richardson Mss:37).

plain homespun cloth of the poorest villager. I believe that such an understanding of the difficulty of obtaining raw cotton, of spinning and of weaving, helps one to enter the cultural world of nineteenth century villagers and understand more deeply the importance of cloth and the meaning of many of their customs. Rich and poor did not dress alike. A world of difference existed between the humble cotton of the peasant and the golden silks of the aristocracy.

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