Japan and the development of Thai women's needlework skills in the reign of King Rama V

Dollaya Tiantong

Follow this and additional works at: https://digital.car.chula.ac.th/arv

Part of the Asian Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
DOI: 10.58837/CHULA.ARV.29.1.2
Available at: https://digital.car.chula.ac.th/arv/vol29/iss1/3

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Chulalongkorn Journal Online (CUJO) at Chula Digital Collections. It has been accepted for inclusion in Asian Review by an authorized editor of Chula Digital Collections. For more information, please contact ChulaDC@car.chula.ac.th.
Japan and the development of Thai women’s needlework skills in the reign of King Rama V

Dollaya Tiantong

ABSTRACT—In the reign of King Chulalongkorn (King Rama V), Japan was seen as a country which contributed to the development of traditional needlework and weaving for Thai women in several ways. In addition to being the source of knowledge for Thai women who studied further in the country, Japan also sent experts to Thailand to teach Thai women. These contributions helped Thai women develop expertise in traditional needlework and weaving that enhanced Thai women’s status in that period.

Keywords: Japan, Thai women, needlework skills, King Rama V, Queen Sri Bajarindra

Background

Needlework has been characterized as one of the arts and crafts of Thai women since ancient times. Intended for finishing and beautiful decoration, it is most likely a process involving textile weaving and the application of readymade fabrics. It comes in several forms and levels and is used on such occasions as royal ceremonies, official ceremonies and for home decoration (Chandavij 2010, 5-10). At all times, needlework has been a valuable skill for Thai women of all classes to learn and practice from childhood because it has been perceived as a norm for women to be good housewives in addition to possessing the skills of cooking, artificial flower making and other domestic work.

During the early Rattanakosin Era, needlework represented a core value in Thai society and every woman was obliged to learn hand embroidery in order to master the skill, especially if they were part of the royal court (Meepolkij 2008, 14). They were exhaustively trained in order to acquire higher skills than female commoners.
Consequently, the needlework of the inner royal court of Siam was outstanding in its neat, splendid and remarkable patterns, as can be seen in the Buddhist monks’ robes and the sewing on the fans of the various Buddhist ranks. Embroidery can be classified into the two following types: 1) silk embroidery which uses colorful yarn; and 2) thread embroidery, meaning the decoration of clothes with metallic materials. These precious metallic materials come in different forms such as threads of metal stretched into a sheet and curled into a circle like a spring. There are different types of thread, for example: shiny, bleached and sparse; strips (metal stretched into a flat line like the material woven for basketwork); sequins (metal cut to the desired length and hammered until it is a flat round shape or cone shape or star shape); and golden silk (metal stretched into a short line and spun with silk or yarn). It was popular to decorate fabrics with other materials such as gems, glass, mirrors or colored silks to enhance their beauty, elegance and value rendering them costly and expensive to be used by only the nobility and royalty. The embroidery was also extensively used in royal articles for kings and members of the royal family in items such as royal costumes, royal shoulder wraps, royal panties and cones for royal use. It is generally accepted that needlework skill training was not only for use in daily life but also for building a solid foundation for women who wished to work in the royal court.

In the reign of Phra Bat Somdet Phra Phutthaloetla Naphalai (King Rama II), the major handicrafts and needlework of Thai women included silk embroidery with a hoop, which was considered to be a very neat art form with plenty of beautiful detail. Silk thread, threads and sequins were carefully embroidered in the design as required. For the most part, this technique was used for the royal court in items such as royal costumes, royal articles or Khon costumes which represented the distinctive character of the handicrafts and accurately reflect the uniqueness and value of Thai art and culture. These works by Thai women in the royal court resulted in the establishment of the Hoop Sewing and Embroidery Department with Princess Chongkolnee in charge.

In the reign of Phra Bat Somdet Phra Chomklao Chao Yu Hua (King Rama IV) (1851-1868), Thai society became open to modern ideas brought by foreigners and through the relationship with Western countries. The needlework of female Thai masters, particularly the
“Tiger Embroidery” of Thanphuying Plian Passakornwong, wife of Chao Phraya Passakornwong (Porn/Chumporn Bunnag), became domestically and internationally famous. More significantly, this masterpiece, which was granted an award by His Majesty King Rama IV, was entered into a contest in the U.S.A., and won the first prize of several hundred dollars. A number of female commoners were also given the opportunity to be trained in Western sewing techniques at a Missionary School. In 1865, Mrs. S. G. McFarland founded the “Industrial School” in Phetchaburi Province to provide handicraft skills training for girls and this later became a school that taught dress-making using sewing machines. As a result, female students were able to make their own dresses. Occasionally, the missionaries sold these products and gave the money to the students (Tanaprasitpatana 1992, 77).

The role of Japan in the development

The reign of Phra Bat Somdet Phra Chulachomklao Chao Yu Hua or King Chulalongkorn (King Rama V) (1868-1910) marked a turning point in Thai society when the country entered into a period of full-scale national reform in the areas of administration, the economy, legislation, foreign affairs, society and culture. The reforms aimed to move the country towards modernity in tandem with other civilized countries and to cope with the massive changes in the international climate and, specifically, the expansion of Western countries’ power. The needlework skills of Thai women at the royal court were subsequently affected by the move towards progress and Japan began to play a key role in Thailand’s needlework development in the following aspects.

Japan as a source of knowledge

Japan was a source of knowledge about high-level sewing skills for Thai women studying in the country and, after graduation, these Thai women contributed the knowledge they had acquired in Japan to the female Thai school.

In 1897, of four female courtiers under Her Majesty Queen Sri Bajarindra the Queen Mother (a title conferred on Her Majesty Queen Saovabha Phongsri in the reign of King Rama V between
1897-1910; His Majesty King Rama VI bestowed upon her the title of “Her Majesty Queen Sri Bajarindra the Queen Mother” which was announced on November 24, 1910) who went to Japan, one was Miss Khachorn (later to become Thanphuying Khachorn Pharostracha), wife of Phraya Pharostracha, the second principal of Chulalongkorn University and formerly the Headmaster of Vajiravudh College). The other three females were Miss Sombhit, Miss Nual and Miss Lee. In addition, four courtiers under King Rama VI (then Crown Prince Vajiravudh of Siam, born to Her Majesty King Rama V and Her Majesty Queen Sri Bajarindra the Queen Mother), joined the study trip. This is considered to be the first time that eight Thai students studied abroad in Japan. Under the care of Mr Tokishi Masao (subsequently the Japanese Ambassador to Thailand), they learned about weaving and silk production (Commemoration Cremation Book 1987, 78).

Thanphuying Khachorn Pharostracha and Miss Sombhit learned about hand embroidery and Japanese painting (hand embroidery refers to handicrafts using a hoop to make the fabric taut, which is convenient for needlework. The hoop is available in various shapes such as round, square and oval, and in different sizes.) The study of hand embroidery in Japan also required skill in drawing since drawing is the root of all branches of handicraft. The study of hand embroidery and drawings in Japan lasted four years and the female students returned to Thailand in 1908. After this, Thanphuying Khachorn Pharostracha taught at Rajini School and handed on the knowledge of hand embroidery and drawing to many generations of female students. Later, some of Rajini School's female teachers including Khunying Charun Phadungwitthayasom (Rien Palangkun), Khunying Wittaya (Ong Thephasadin), Kru Thanom, Kru Bhit and Kru Nin were given the opportunity to learn more about needlework in Japan (Viravaidya 1971, 91). Their knowledge made Rajini School excellent and unique in terms of high-level arts and crafts, in particular hand embroidery with hoops, and also in academic subjects. They also taught drawing, the making of artificial flowers (garlands) and dried flowers, and other skills in conjunction with major academic subjects like reading and writing in Thai and English, geography and science. Ever since then, Rajini School has been renowned throughout Thailand.

It can truthfully be said that the study trip of Thanphuying Khachorn to learn handicrafts and needlework in Japan introduced
knowledge that was transferred to students at Rajini School and this also contributed to the progress of the art of needlework among Thai women. Not only were they the first Thai women to be given the opportunity to study needlework in Japan, a country that possessed advanced handicraft techniques but, afterwards, the resulting knowledge was more extensively disseminated to other Thai women. This transfer of knowledge was accomplished continuously and systematically through the establishment of schools for Thai women and the arrangement of study courses that covered a comprehensive body of knowledge from textbooks and various artisans.

Japan sent graduate women to teach needlework

Following the establishment of Rajini School in 1904, three Japanese women, Miss Yasui Tetsu, Miss Nakajima Toshi and Miss Kawano Kiyo, were employed to teach Thai students in the School’s first three years (1904-1906). Miss Yasui Tetsu served as principal and teacher of drawing, hand embroidery and other handicrafts such as fresh and dry flower making and arranging (Commemoration Cremation Book 1987, 78). She also taught academic subjects including English, calculation and science. There were 105 students at the time. The reason for the presence of Miss Yasui Tetsu and the other two Japanese females at Rajini School was an inquiry submitted to Mr Inagaki Manjiro, the Ambassador of Japan to Thailand. When he was Japan’s Minister of Education he had been asked to send exclusively female education advisors to Thailand so he had encouraged Miss Yasui Tetsu, a graduate from England whose aim was to be a teacher, to take the job. (Initially Miss Yasui Tetsu hesitated but later agreed to come to Thailand in 1904.)

During her three-years teaching at Rajini School, Miss Yasui Tetsu imparted academic knowledge and needlework skills, particularly the art of Japanese embroidery, to Thai women. It was widely accepted that the Japanese art of embroidery focuses on simplicity and naturalness and that it is full of creativity and newly invented techniques. In the meantime, she also had to perform her administrative duties as Rajini School’s principal with dignity and patience regardless of the different cultures and norms. Her student, Mom Chao Ying Phichitchirapha Thewakun, was the first Thai woman to become the principal of Rajini School, the second, in 1907, after Miss Yasui Tetsu returned to Japan.
Figure 1. Pillowcases embroidered by Rajini Alumni
(Source: Rajini School)
Ever since this time Rajini School has concentrated on conserving and focusing on the inheritance of traditional handicrafts in needlework skills, especially embroidery, which is taught from primary to secondary level (Watcharaporn Sanongkhun, 4 April 2016). Examples of embroidery from many students across several batches have been highly acclaimed, for example, its tote bag embroidery for the Civil Service School, handkerchief embroidery and pillowcase embroidery (Rajini School 1988, 198).

**Influential factors in Japan’s role**

Although the development of Thai women’s needlework was contributed to by Japanese input, the truly influential factor was the royal initiative and vision of Her Majesty Queen Sri Bajarindra the Queen Mother who followed King Rama V’s ideas and policies which aimed to develop Thailand into a modern society on a par with civilized countries in all respects, together with the conservation of Thainess.

Regarded as the first Queen Regent in Thai history with great vision, long-preserved patience and wisdom, Her Majesty Queen Sri Bajarindra the Queen Mother performed several royal duties that were highly beneficial to Thai society. Whole heartedly committed to making Thai women as advanced and modern as those gentlemen and ladies in developed countries, Her Majesty the Queen Mother foresaw the importance of education for Thai women as the way to help them find appropriate occupations for living and contributing to the nation along with their relevant duties. Once Thai women had the chance to learn and sufficiently develop their minds, they would be similar to men in terms of supporting the nation. It is obvious that Her Majesty the Queen had wished to establish female schools since 1890 in addition to her interest and determination in creating a tradition of Thai handicrafts, especially needlework, which represented the precious cultural heritage of Thailand. The needlework, including other handicrafts produced from Her Majesty’s royal court, was highly distinctive.

So, Her Majesty the Queen Mother donated her own personal funds to establish Rajini School, located in the Pak Khlong Talat area, in 1904, and commanded the School to integrate handicraft subjects, especially hand embroidery with hoops, into the curriculum.

Her Majesty the Queen Mother saw the need for Thai women to
learn handicraft techniques from civilized countries, especially Japan, in order to improve their skills and develop their self-reliant occupations. Four courtiers who completed high-level study in needlework from Japan were selected to be teachers in Rajini School and this was followed by the employment of Japanese artisans to teach needlework at the School. Her Majesty the Queen Mother also intended to promote Rajini School to be a role model for other female schools with regard to Her Majesty’s initiatives:

To provide students knowledge in skills for their occupations; literacy for their ability to read and write Thai for moderate communication with others and primary English; manners and morals to be virtuous ladies. (Komachi 2010)

Her Majesty the Queen Mother selected Japan to be the country for learning the hand embroidery techniques and Japanese female artisans to teach needlework and other primary subjects in the school rather than Westerners even though Western influence had spread throughout Thai society and their advanced knowledge and English had been accepted. The reason for this was that some uncontrollable problems might occur if Western women were hired as teachers. Japanese teachers were considered more suitable because they had the knowledge and competence needed. Moreover, as Easterners, like Thais, they had similar customs and manners and this assuaged worries that female students might have Western manners (Boonyasathit 2009, 163). Furthermore, the Crown Prince of Siam, King Rama VI once made the suggestion “If there were some potential children, the Queen Mother may try sending them to study in Japan. They could come back and teach other Thais.” (Commemoration Cremation Book 1987, 67). Crown Prince Vajiravudh paid a visit to Japan for over four weekends on the way back to Thailand after his graduation in England in 1902. Given an audience by Emperor Meiji and Empress Haruko, the Crown Prince witnessed Japan’s multiple development in terms of its military, education, society and culture and paid a visit to various places, especially the Imperial University, Buddhist and Shinto temples. The Crown Prince was impressed by the advancement and uniqueness of Japanese handicrafts that still strongly embraced their own roots while applying Western technology. In addition, he appreci-
ated Japan’s social reforms that put it on a par with Western countries whilst still retaining manners that were proper to the Siamese eye.

Moreover, an additional factor which related to the role of Japan’s development was the close relationship between Thailand and Japan at that time following the Declaration of Amity and Commerce signed between the two countries in 1887, considered to be the opening of official relations between the two countries for the first time since Japan’s closed door policy. Due to political instability, no Japanese citizens had been allowed to enter or leave the country under the policy of the “locked country (sakoku)”. Also, the fall of Ayutthaya in 1767, had caused the relationship between Thailand and Japan to become limited. The Declaration of Amity and Commerce in 1887 resumed relations with official agreements in relationship establishment (exchanging diplomatic agents) and the promotion of trade and maritime matters (Vorapassu 2010, 15). Details were defined and legislated on the year after (1888) but it took ten years for Mr Inagaki Manjirō to go to Thailand as the first Ambassador at the Embassy of Japan to Thailand. Marshal Phraya Ritthirong-ronnachet was sent as the first Thai Ambassador to Japan in 1897.

The Declaration of Amity and Commerce between Thailand and Japan was signed during the reign of King Chulalongkorn (1868-1910) and the reign of Emperor Meiji (1867-1912). Facing the threat of Western expansionism, King Rama V and Emperor Meiji both led their countries through a period of modernization by applying advanced Western technology; developing their countries in all aspects and establishing foreign relations, especially with Asian countries, in order to survive. Considered the first Declaration that Japan had signed with an Asian country (Sumikawa 1999), it strengthened the relationship between Thailand and Japan, as can be clearly seen in Thailand’s official archives, for example, the letter to Emperor Meiji on the appointment of Phraya Passakornwong as royal representative and conferring royal decorations in December 1887; the letter to the Emperor on Prince Bhanurangsi Savangwongse’s visit to Japan in June 1890; the record of the Emperor and Empress of Japan’s gifts sent via diplomats in June 1897; the record by Japanese diplomats of the gift of white sesame shrimps and the royal blessings sent to His Majesty King Rama V on his return from Europe in December 1897; the record of His Majesty’s telegraph on sending birthday blessings
to Emperor Meiji; the record of Crown Prince Vajiravudh’s visit to Japan from January to February 1902; the record of the order to make three ribbons for the crowned white elephant from a Japanese store in August 1908; records on offering teak to build Nissenji (later renamed Nittaiji) Temple in Japan from February 1909 to January 1910; Prince Benbadhanabongse’s report on Mr Toyama concerning silk production during 1901-1903; Khun Worakarnkosol’s report on the inspection of schools in Japan from February to March 1887; Japan’s request for a portion of the Buddha’s relics and Bodhi trees between December 1899 and July 1900; the Japanese Mission to receive a portion of the Buddha’s relics in June 1900; the delivery of a Tripitaka to Japan between June and July 1900; information on museums in Japan until June 1899; notice of the employment of Messrs Toyama, Yokota, Nissim, Takano, Osaiya and Itsuka to be silk masters from March to July 1910; and so forth (Vorapassu 2010, 15).

**Conclusion**

From ancient times, competence in needlework was considered as a quality of ladies in all civilizations, especially in Thai society. Evolving over successive generations, needlework skills during the reign of King Rama V were developed particularly among royal courtiers because Thai society was in transition to modernization in parallel with civilized countries. Japan emerged to play a key role in providing knowledge to Thai women and transferring its competency to them directly, thanks to the initiative and great vision of Her Majesty Queen Sri Bajarindra the Queen Mother and the initiative of King Rama VI when His Majesty was Crown Prince. The close relationship between Thailand and Japan at that time because of the Declaration of Amity and Commerce signed between them in 1887 also substantially contributed to the advancement of Thai handicrafts.

Japan’s direct and indirect contribution to the development of Thai women’s needlework skills during the reign of King Rama V not only marked a significant stage in relations between Thailand and Japan but also reflected the status and role of Thai women in terms of modernity. It is obvious that, given the opportunity to study overseas, Thai women were open to new ideas received from world outside that shaped their view and widened their attitude. They also adapted themselves to
co-existing with people from different ethnicities, religions, languages and cultures and became more self-reliant. More to the point is the fact that Thai women performed their duties as “teachers” systematically and more extensively by transferring the knowledge they gained abroad to students in an educational institution. Subsequently, the number of Thai women who achieved needlework excellence multiplied and they became highly recognized at both the domestic and international level. Thai women developed themselves for the first time through the strong determination and initiative of Her Majesty Queen Sri Bajarrindra the Queen Mother who enhanced the role and status of Thai women to be equivalent to men and women in developed countries. In addition, Her Majesty the Queen Mother’s intention was to bequeath the precious handicrafts of Thai women to following generations and to support Thai women’s long-term self-sufficient occupations.

Note

This article is based on my PhD dissertation entitled “The Foundation of Supplementary Occupations and Related Techniques of Her Majesty Queen Sirikit and the Enhancement of Human Security in the Northeast Thailand during the 1970s-1980s,” under the Thai Studies Program, Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University. The dissertation was funded by the Royal Jubilee PhD Program of the Thailand Research Fund.

References


Commemoration Cremation Book of Thanphuying Khachorn Phrotracha.
Japan and the development of Thai women’s needlework skills