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Shan royal ladies’ roles in life narratives

Jiraporn Achariyaprasit

Abstract

This article analyzes the roles of Shan royal ladies in private and public spheres in three life narratives: *Twilight over Burma: My Life as a Princess* by Inge Sargent (1994); *The White Umbrella* by Patricia Elliott (1999); and *My Vanished World: The True Story of Shan Princess* by Nel Adams (2000). Shan royal ladies were actively involved in both private and public spheres. They were creative in catering. They had opportunities to become family leaders, and to help compromise conflicts. Moreover, they took part in political issues. The public and private spheres were related, as private matters or roles in the household could influence political outcomes. In addition, these roles reflected Shan royal ladies’ identities as dynamic and influenced by social class, patriarchy, and changing social and political contexts.

Introduction

The life narratives, composed by contemporary woman writers, used in this study portray social and historical aspects of Shan royal ladies in Burma. *My Vanished World: The True Story of a Shan Princess*, narrated by Sao Noan Oo, daughter of Saopha Lawksawk, describes her own life experience in Shan before moving to settle in England. *Twilight over Burma: My Life as a Shan Princess* is the story of a western woman who married the leader of Hsipaw, Sao Kya Seng. *The White Umbrella* is a biography of Sao Hearn Hkam of Yawngewe.

The purpose of this article is to study the roles of Shan royal ladies in their private and public spheres, as revealed in these three life narratives. Usually, people have the tendency to separate the roles of women in private and public spheres, or overemphasize one
of them. This study finds that these two roles are inseparable. Private matters or roles in the household can affect political issues. Private roles become important in politics, and the meanings of household activities are redefined. Women’s roles are shaped by social class and sociocultural context. Sometimes women need to alternate their roles in accordance with current circumstances for the survival of families and societies. This article studies Shan royal women’s roles in the household and in social politics against the background of the British protectorate. This article focuses on four main issues: role expansion from the household to the public sphere; marriage; family leadership; and political involvement.

Expansion from the household to the public sphere

This section will describe Shan royal ladies’ household roles that also affected politics and society. These roles were: catering and socializing; harmonizing political conflicts through activities in the domestic sphere; and roles that bridged the household and public spheres such as mothering and childcare.

Catering and socializing

Catering was a task that Shan royal ladies had to learn. Knowledge was passed on from mothers. Socializing here means meeting people within the family, or people from different places. When the Shan came under the British protectorate, catering and socializing acquired political meanings. Roles in catering and socializing became more important under the British. The Shan upper class increasingly adopted a western lifestyle, for example, going to Christian schools, converting to Christianity, learning how to speak, read, and write English, and becoming familiar with a western style of catering and socializing. They learned from missionaries and from the wives of English nobles stationed in the Shan area. Knowing how to cater and to socialize became a necessity for Shan royal ladies. In The White Umbrella, Sao Hearn Hkam is told by her older brother to quit school and get married. Her brother believes that a lady needs only to know how to live in a society, and to be a housewife, including the ability to tell her servants to arrange the dinner table in western
The prince argued that the girls knew enough to get along in society. They could do housework and tell the kitchen boys how to prepare an English dinner table. (Elliott, 1999:71)

The knowledge of catering and socializing becomes an essential qualification in the choice of a wife. “The prince married her for such a task. She projected an air of modernity.” (Sargent, 1994: 74) Shan royal ladies had to learn these skills. In My Vanished World, Sao Ven Kiao learns western-style catering, including western-style cooking, and dinner table etiquette, and becomes a good host who can prepare dinner, entertain, and take care of official guests and visitors.

Whenever Mother happened to be in Taunggyi, Mrs. Cameron had invited her over, and had taught her English cookery, etiquette and table manners. Mother was a keen student and had soon learnt the art of cooking and serving English food. She became an excellent entertainer, hosting state banquets and dinner parties for English officials and other foreign visitors. (Adams, 2000: 31–2)

A Saopha’s wife had to meet with many official guests and visitors, and therefore she needed catering and socializing skills. Thus, when there were important visitors or important meetings, Shan royal ladies had to manage any relevant matters. For example, the two meetings for drafting the Panglong Agreement were important because the agreement would determine whether each ethnic group would join with Burma or remain separate. Moreover, almost all ethnic leaders attended. Sao Hearn Hkam has to plan her work delicately and scrupulously by considering the ethnic origins of each individual so that she can properly prepare the food.

The big meeting convened in March, 1946. Sao attended as kitchen boss.... It was hard work feeding the men. The Kachins and their cousins, the Chins, came down from the north. The Tai Saophas were all there, too, including the ones who’d had their lands transferred to Thailand during the occupation. An American Baptist missionary, Reverend Harold Young, represented the Lahu and the Wa. (Elliott, 1999: 156)

When Sao Shwe Thaike becomes the president and Sao Hearn
Hkam becomes the first lady, her role in catering is increasingly more important. When Sao Hearn Hkam moves to the president’s house, she needs to have a meeting room of her own in order to plan the dining for the leaders. “Sao had an office on the second floor, where she planned dinners and other events” (Elliott, 1999: 198). During that time, there are many guests and visitors, and Sao Hearn Hkam efficiently performs her duty on catering. She considers kinds of food according to the race and origin of each leader. As a result, the food is well prepared. In addition, her knowledge of western-style cookery can reduce problems. “To avoid confusion over Burmese customs, the table was set English-style and the menu was western: soup, salad, a meat dish and dessert.” (Elliott, 1999: 179) Her decision demonstrates that Sao Hearn Hkam has employed her knowledge and experience in order to adapt to current circumstances.

Besides catering, the ability to socialize is also important. In the Panglong meeting, Sao Hearn Hkam needs not only to perform catering work, but to socialize with the wives of the leaders.

Her free time was spent with other wives of the leaders. In the evening the women gathered under the stars to talk, laugh, and eat together. (Elliott, 1999: 163)

Thus, the meaning of socializing has changed and also the roles of Shan royal ladies. Before the British protectorate, Shan royal ladies socialized among relatives to tighten their relationships. After the advent of the protectorate, their socialization became more political as they had to socialize with the wives of the leaders in order to show their civilized nature, or to make good relationships with the English.

Shan royal ladies played a part in projecting an image of civilization, and making strong bonds with people who could be of benefit for them in the future. Their catering work and socializing with foreign guests and visitors was an expansion of their roles from the household to politics.

**Harmonizing political conflicts through household activities**

Women’s household activities or housework, such as catering or needlework, often seem tedious, unimportant, and irrelevant in
terms of political outcome. Nevertheless, according to these life narratives, such activities are deeply associated with politics. Compromising disputes and building friendship among cities and countries is often seen as men's work. But in fact, women play an important role in resolving conflicts with their own methods. Women's strategies are creative and delicate, and they can harmonize conflicts as shown in *My Vanished World*. Sao Ven Kiao is trying to build good relations between her husband and Sao Huck, her husband's cousin, who are in conflict. She invites Sao Huck's wife and daughter to her house to teach them knitting and other crafts.

My mother had done her best to bring Father and Sao Huck closer. She had often invited his wife and daughter to our house and had taught this wife many methods of knitting and other crafts. (Adams, 2000: 74)

This hospitality might not be able to resolve the conflict completely, but built good relations to some extent. Other women's activities that seem to be private, such as paying extreme attention to dress, and admiring beauty such as flowers, also have a public aspect. For instance, when English government officials and their wives come as visitors, Sao Ven Kiao carefully selects clothes and accessories that represent the social status of her children and herself. Besides, she gives beautiful flowers, which she grows by herself, to the officials' wives to welcome them. "Lady Cockraine seemed pleased and expressed surprise to receive such beautiful flowers." (Adams, 2000: 27) Flowers, which are a symbol of friendship and sincerity, are cleverly used to create a memorable impression and good image of the city. This example reflects women's creativity and ingenuity in applying household activities for developing relationships in a women's way.

Harmonizing conflicts and resolving disputes by women's method come in many forms. In *The White Umbrella*, during important meetings or discussions, Sao Hearn Hkam has to learn how to deflect intense situations with ripostes and jokes.

The tension never completely dissipated, even after weeks and months of living with the Japanese. Sao learned to deflect serious conversation with quick retorts and jokes. (Elliott, 1999: 127)
The women's roles in harmonizing conflicts and resolving disputes reflects the importance of women in the background of society and politics.

*Expanding roles from domestic sphere to public sphere*

In the society of the time, social work was considered to be men's work, and it was difficult for women to initiate activities. Social activities created by women were considered less important or of less political and economical value. Women were supposed to remain within the domestic sphere. Their roles in society were controlled, blocked, limited. Nevertheless, in *Twilight over Burma*, Sao Thusandi acts as a midwife with a vital role in the care and hygiene of mother and child. Normally, taking care of children, or of women during pregnancy, were domestic matters. However, Sao Thusandi uses her experience and knowledge to help other women for public benefit.

Her roles in society expand after she is selected to be the president of the Mother and Child Association. She takes several initiatives to promote well-being and hygiene with the aim of reducing the death rate of infants during pregnancy and after birth. She is very serious about her work. She goes to many villages in Hsipaw to collect data concerning women's life in the villages. She soon discovers that women and children have very difficult lives. She finds there are many causes of death among children such as nutrition deficiency and sickness. After examining the data, she starts to develop public heath programs for women by modernizing pregnancy care clinics in the villages. She calls these clinics the "Hsipaw Maternity and Child Welfare Society." She arranges many activities such as courses for maternal heath before and after giving birth, vaccination, vitamins for children, check-ups for mothers and their children, advising baby feeding with milk powder as supplementary food after the babies no longer need to be breastfed. Other activities include hiring midwives, and organizing seminars in various locations in Hsipaw in order to provide knowledge concerning mother and child hygiene. All her activities meet with a good responses. To support the association, she raises funding from the Saopha, merchants, and rice-mill owners. Other sources of income are showing movies, organizing soccer tournaments, and
Her association is successful in providing services to mothers and children. The mothers welcome her involvement, and carefully follow the doctors’ and nurses’ directions. As a result of this acceptance, more maternity and childcare clinics are built. Children receive vaccination and milk powder. Mothers and infants who come to the clinics have better health. The infant mortality rate is thus reduced.

Word of the visit to Viengkau spread like wildfire and many other villages had soon invited Thusandi and the society to visit them. There was result: Within six months, deliveries at the maternity home doubled, the clinic was always busy, hundreds of children received vaccination, and thousands of pounds of milk powder were handed out. Women and children who used the services of the Hsipaw Maternity and Child Welfare Society stayed healthier than they had been before, and infant mortality decreased significantly. (Sargent, 1994: 89–90)

The success of the association is due not only to the cooperation of everybody in the association but also to the women in the villages. Most members in the association are women and the target group is also women. Hence, it is easy for them to become sisters and develop fellowship. The village women do not want Sao Thusandi’s group to leave the village. Younger mothers are pleased about what they receive. “They promised to come to the society’s little clinic to consult with the nurses and replenish their supply of vitamins and milk powder.” (1994: 89)

One factor in the success of the program is Sao Thusandi’s high social status and high regard among people. In addition, she is hard working. The case of Sao Thusandi not only shows women capabilities, but also reflects the extension of women’s roles from domestic to public work.

Shan royal ladies and marriage

The marriage of Shan royal ladies is an important ceremony carried out according to old tradition. Usually, the marriage is between a prince and princess, and the ceremony is celebrated magnificently. However, there is little historical information about
the marriage of Shan royal ladies. Records state only that there were marriage ceremonies, or that the Saopha of a city offered his daughter to the Saopha of another city. There are no descriptions of how the couple feel about the marriage. These life narratives provide additional details, both about the ceremony, and about the feelings of the Shan royal ladies involved.

The life narratives open up the women's perspective, particularly the contradiction between their desire to be free women and the obligations of traditional marriage. In *The White Umbrella*, Sao Hearn Hkam’s objects when her brother, who is her guardian, tries to force her to end her education in order to get married. She is sixteen years old at the time. She tries to negotiate with her brother:

Sao, on the other hand, couldn’t accept the sudden turn of events. Back home, she pleaded with her brother to at least let her stay in school long enough to write the seventh standard exam. (Elliott, 1999: 71)

Sao Hearn Hkam makes another condition that she will not marry any man who is under her brother’s authority or control. Her condition is stated orally and in writing. She challenges both tradition and seniority—the conventions that royal ladies had to obey without any objection. She does not totally reject the marriage, but she negotiates for a delay. Ultimately, at the age of twenty, she marries Sao Shwe Thaike, the Saopha of Yawnghwe. He is an important man, and this marriage reinforces good relations among relatives, and therefore is politically important. Women are used in the pursuit of power and profit. The marriage takes away her identity, happiness, and freedom.

It was over. She was married. Head lowered, she followed her husband outside into the dull, humid glare. (Elliott, 1999: 83)

This marriage makes Sao Hearn Hkam think back to her mother, Nang Hkam Zeng, who also was married for political reason. She was a village chief’s daughter, selected to marry the Saopha of Hsenwi in order to establish good relations. On the day of the marriage, she was only five or six years old. The marriage was like a booking, a reservation, and only ten years later was she called to the palace. Sao Hearn Hkam does not want to end up like her
mother: “She often thought about her mother. After all, her whole life had been spent trying to avoid her mother’s fate—a minor wife in a remote feudal palace.” (Elliott, 1999: 85)

She strongly disagrees with the forced marriage, but she cannot escape this unfortunate destiny. When she goes to the city where Sao Shwe Thaikè rules, she cannot help thinking of her mother and her miserable life. “She was being swallowed up, just like her mother.” (Elliott, 1999: 85) Tradition constricted her opportunities. The way she compares her life with her mother’s shows not only her relationship to her mother but also how women were emotionally abused at that time.

Sao Hearn Hkam was the perfect choice for this marriage because of her family’s status, ancestors, education, and her capabilities, such as taking care of guests. Such royal marriages were political. The marriages of common women might not be the same.

**Shan royal ladies in the roles of family leaders**

In the political changes of 1962, the Saophas disappeared. Their wives had to manage their families and principalities. In *Twilight over Burma*, Sao Thusandi has to look after many activities in the palace after Sao Kya Seng disappears. She has become the leader with absolute power, and has to monitor every matter in the palace where there are many courtiers. She also needs to take care of her children, and to address the people’s problems. As her burdens increase,

> She realized that the responsibility to make plans for the future rested upon her shoulders. The burden of making decisions was a lonely one; even the close relationship she had shared with her husband had not prepared her for this. (Sargent, 1994: 170–1)

Nevertheless, she is able to handle problems very well, to assume responsibility and make difficult decisions. Before she decides to move to Rangoon in order to trace her missing husband, she has already taken care of the allowances for courtiers, relatives, and schools. Additionally, she also takes care of the harvest.

> ...she had left everything under her control in Hsipaw in best order. Household, staff, and dependent relatives were provided...
for, the school had enough funds to continue operations, and the citrus harvest was completed. (Elliott, 1994: 180)

Likewise in *My Vanished World*, before her family leaves the city due to World War Two, Sao Ven Kiao takes care of courtiers and others who seek positions teaching housework to women, and other works to men.

After dealing with us, Mother’s next concern was the welfare of other people. She was worried about a group of boys and girls from nearby villages, who were living with us, at their parents’ request. This was to enable them to learn needlework, knitting and other domestic crafts, in the girls’ case and office skills of the boys and to broaden their experience generally by living in a town. They had been with us for sometime and repaid our parents by doing odd jobs around the estate. (Adams, 2000: 83)

Before these women could become leaders, their husbands had to disappear in some fashion, but they proved able to adapt to the situation.

**Political status and roles in politics**

Historically, Shan royal ladies had little role in politics up to the end of the British protectorate. Independence and democracy provided opportunities for women to participate in politics, to go beyond the private sphere. A new role of Shan royal ladies was to be a politician, widening the social meaning of women. However, only women who were born in families with significant positions in society could seize this opportunity.

One of the Shan royal ladies who plays an important role in politics is Sao Hearn Hkam in *The White Umbrella*. She is selected to be a member of the house of representative of Hsenwi, her hometown. She decides to run for election because she is displeased with the government’s unfair grant of budgets to the Shan. People in Hsenwi trust her and choose her to be their representative without needing an election. Sao Hearn Hkam is a reputable woman and people respect her because of her progressive vision, her bravery, and her willingness to do anything that will benefit the Shan people. Besides, she is the first lady. She often debates and expresses her thoughts in meetings. She enthusiastically tries to
learn many tasks such as budgeting, drafting the constitution, and developing plans for the Shan. Her enthusiasm can be seen from her works such as developing and improving roads, and building railroads. "The road from Rangoon was surfaced all the way, and the train now reached its terminus there." (Elliott, 1999: 262)

By working as a politician, Sao Hearn Hkam shows that women roles have changed. Sao Hearn Hkam is no longer a kitchen boss, as during the drafting of Panglong Agreement, but becomes a member of the house of representatives. The changing role of Sao Hearn Hkam reflects the capability to adapt to new roles according to changing circumstances.

It was here that the men of Shan State took their places along rows of wooded bench-desks to debate their future. Sao took a seat among them, no longer just a kitchen boss in a borrowed sari. (Elliott, 1999: 262)

Allowing women to participate in politics is the same as allowing women to step into men’s sphere. As stated by the writer:

Sao’s activism didn’t come easily. Seated among tight packed rows of parliamentarians, she was acutely aware that she had entered a man’s world. There were only a handful of other women members, all Freedom League supporters. (Elliott, 1999: 264)

Although women are allowed to participate in politics, they still are not accepted by men. In debates, not many men accept Sao Hearn Hkam’s ideas. "She learned it wasn’t fitting for a man to agree openly with a woman even if she was an MP.” (Elliott, 1999: 265) Women’s participation is still limited by patriarchy. Even though the government has ostensibly become a democracy honoring equal rights, women are still not widely accepted.

Women ideas are not taken seriously in the meetings or in any political activities, yet women still try to create their space. They try to learn political processes so that they may become more effective in meetings. They don’t give up. Sao Hearn Hkam exemplifies women’ resolve to fight against difficulties. Although Sao Hearn Hkam’s ideas are not accepted in meetings where men are in charge, she is never downhearted and does not need any praise. "They treated her politely but never as an equal. She didn’t care. If
they agreed with her in private, that was good enough. She didn’t
deem public praise.” (Elliott, 1999: 265) She keeps her silence, but
either never gives up her efforts to create political space for women.

Conclusion

The roles of Shan royal ladies in these three life narratives show
that their private sphere and public sphere cannot be separated
because of their class and social context. Private matters, like
marriage and catering, become political matters. Roles in public
health or social welfare grow out of household roles.

The identity of a person is constructed from social values and
social perspectives. Roles and actions of a person cannot be
separated from social conditions. Shan royal ladies’ actions were
bound up with their city’s benefit, class, status, social dynamics,
and patriarchy. Shan royal ladies attempted to escape these bonds,
though not so effectively. They had responsibilities and could
perform their duties effectively in both private and public spheres.
These three life narratives clearly reveal women’s capabilities that
cannot be overlooked.

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