ANTHONY REID

Commerce and Gender in Southeast Asia

This selection is from a modern historian's study of Southeast Asia between 1450 and 1680. The cultures of Southeast Asia (modern Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Vietnam) were influenced by, but traditionally quite different from, neighboring India and China. In addition to Indian and Chinese influences, these traditional cultures withstood periodic waves of Buddhist, Christian, and Muslim missionaries and merchants, all of which influenced and shaped them to some extent. What was the traditional role of women in Southeast Asia? How did foreign cultures affect women's lives? Why was Vietnam's culture different from the cultures of other Southeast Asian countries?

Thinking Historically

Clearly, Asian societies, past and present, are not all alike. One striking comparison that we can make between this and the two previous selections is the difference between gender relations in China and Southeast Asia during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. How were the lives of women in Southeast Asia different from the lives of women in China? Was Southeast Asian society still a patriarchy?

Reid's discussion of Southeast Asian sexuality also elicits comparative questions. How, according to Reid, was Southeast Asian society the opposite of contemporaneous European society? Is modern American sexuality closer to that of seventeenth-century Europe or Southeast Asia?

Sexual Relations

Relations between the sexes represented one aspect of the social system in which a distinctive Southeast Asian pattern was especially evident. Even the gradual strengthening of the influence of Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, and Confucianism in their respective spheres over the last four centuries has by no means eliminated a common pattern of rela-
tively high female autonomy and economic importance. In the sixteenth
and seventeenth centuries the region probably represented one extreme
of human experience on these issues. It would be wrong to say that
women were equal to men — indeed, there were very few areas in
which they competed directly. Women had different functions from
men, but these included transplanting and harvesting rice, weaving, and
marketing. Their reproductive role gave them magical and ritual pow-
ers which it was difficult for men to match. These factors may explain
why the value of daughters was never questioned in Southeast Asia as it
was in China, India, and the Middle East; on the contrary, [it was be-
lieved that] “the more daughters a man has, the richer he is.”

Throughout Southeast Asia wealth passed from the male to the fe-
male side in marriage — the reverse of European dowry. Vietnam in
modern times has been the exception to this pattern as to many others,
because of the progressive imposition of the sternly patriarchal Confuc-
cian system beginning in the fifteenth century. Yet in southern Vietnam
as late as the seventeenth century men continued what must have been
an older Southeast Asian pattern, giving bride-wealth at marriage and
even residing with the families of their brides.

To some early Christian missionaries the practice of paying bride-
wealth was disapproved as a form of buying a wife. Although the termi-
nology of the market was occasionally used in this as in other transac-
tions, the practice of bride-wealth in fact demonstrated the high
economic value of women and contributed to their autonomy. In contrast
to the other major area of bride-price, Africa, where the wealth went to
the bride’s father and was eventually inherited through the male line,
Southeast Asian women benefited directly from the system. Tomé Pires
put it strongly for the Malays he knew [in 1515]: “The man must give the
woman ten tabii1 and six mas2 of gold as dowry which must always be ac-
tually in her power.” In other cases bride-wealth was paid to the bride’s
parents, who transferred some property to their daughter.

In sharp contrast to the Chinese pattern, the married couple more
frequently resided in the wife’s than in the husband’s village. In Thai-
land, Burma, and Malaya that was the rule. Southeast Asian legal codes
differed markedly from their supposed Indian or Chinese (in Vietnam)
models in their common insistence that property be held jointly by the
married couple and administered together. In inheritance all children
had an equal claim regardless of sex, though favoured children or those
caring for the aged might obtain a larger share. Islamic law, which re-
quired that sons receive double the inheritance of daughters, was never

1Equivalent to 580 grams of silver. [Ed.]
2Small gold coin. [Ed.]
effectively implemented. The stern Chinese legal principle that wives
had no say in the disposal of family property found its way into some
nineteenth-century Vietnamese law codes, but never into Vietnamese
practice.

The relative autonomy enjoyed by women extended to sexual rela-
tions. Southeast Asian literature of the period leaves us in little doubt
that women took a very active part in courtship and lovemaking, and
demanded as much as they gave by way of sexual and emotional grati-
fication. The literature describes the physical attractiveness of male her-
roses and their appeal to women as enthusiastically as it does the re-
verse. One of the themes of classical Malay and Javanese literature is
the physical attraction of such heroes as Panji and Hang Tuah: “If
Hang Tuah passed, married women tore themselves from the embraces
of their husbands so that they could go out and see him . . .”

As usual, Chou Ta-kuan [in the 1200s] had a colorful way of de-
scribing the expectations the Cambodian women of his day had of their
men. “If the husband is called away for more than ten days, the wife is
apt to say, ‘I am not a spirit; how am I supposed to sleep alone?’” The
idea of the ever faithful wife left behind during her husband’s travels
was upheld in the pages of Indian-derived epics, but not in everyday
life. At Javanese marriages, according to [Stamford] Raffles [in 1815],
the groom was solemnly warned, “If you should happen to be absent
from her for the space of seven months on shore, or one year at sea,
without giving her any subsistence . . . your marriage shall be dissolved,
if your wife desires it, without any further form or process.” Viet-
namese law as promulgated in the fifteenth century (once again diver-
ging sharply from Chinese practice) set a similar period of five months’
absence, or twelve months if the marriage had produced children.

The most graphic demonstration of the strong position women en-
joyed in sexual matters was the painful surgery men endured on their
penis to increase the erotic pleasure of women. Once again, this is a
phenomenon whose dispersion throughout Southeast Asia is very strik-
ing, though it appears to be absent in other parts of the world. Al-
though it is the Indian Kama Sutra which makes the earliest reference
to such surgery, this probably refers to Southeast Asian practice. A
careful recent survey of the ethnographic evidence suggests that the
phenomenon may best be understood as a symptom of the power and
autonomy enjoyed by Southeast Asian women . . .

The most draconian surgery was the insertion of a metal pin, com-
plemented by a variety of wheels, spurs, or studs, in the central and
southern Philippines and parts of Borneo. Pigafetta [in 1524] was the
first of the astonished Europeans to describe the practice:

| The males, large and small, have the penis pierced from one side to the |
| other near the head with a gold or tin bolt as large as a goose quill. In |
both ends of the same bolt some have what resembles a spur, with points upon the ends; others are like the head of a cart nail. I very often asked many, both old and young, to see their penis, because I could not credit it. In the middle of the bolt is a hole, through which they urinate. . . . They say their women wish it so, and that if they did otherwise they would not have communication with them. When the men wish to have communication with their women, the latter themselves take the penis not in the regular way and commence very gently to introduce it, with the spur on top first, and then the other part. When it is inside it takes its regular position; and thus the penis always stays inside until it gets soft, for otherwise they could not pull it out.

The same phenomenon is described by many others, in different Visayan islands and in Mindanao, who agree that its purpose was always explained as enhancing sexual pleasure, especially for the women. Some peoples of northwest Borneo, notably the Iban and the Kayan, continued this practice until modern times, and their oral tradition attributes its origins to a legendary woman who found sexual intercourse without such an aid less satisfying than masturbation.

The same result was obtained in other parts of Southeast Asia by the less painful but probably more delicate operation of inserting small balls or bells under the loose skin of the penis. The earliest report is from the Chinese Muslim Ma Huan [in 1433]. He reported that in Siam,

when a man has attained his twentieth year, they take the skin which surrounds the membrum virile, and with a fine knife . . . they open it up and insert a dozen tin beads inside the skin; they close it up and protect it with medicinal herbs . . . The beads look like a cluster of grapes . . . If it is the king . . . or a great chief or a wealthy man, they use gold to make hollow beads, inside which a grain of sand is placed. . . . They make a tinkling sound, and this is regarded as beautiful.

Numerous European writers note the same phenomenon in Pegu during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and Tomé Pires described it as a special feature of the Pegu men among all the varied traders visiting Melaka. “The Pegu lords wear as many as nine gold ones, with beautiful treble, contralto and tenor tones, the size of the Alvares plums in our country; and those who are too poor . . . have them in lead.” Pires adds, perhaps with tongue in cheek, “Our Malay women rejoice greatly when the Pegu men come to their country, and they are very fond of them. The reason for this must be their sweet harmony.” The primary purpose seems again the pleasure of the female. When the Dutch admiral Jacob van Neck asked in some astonishment what purpose was served by the sweet-sounding little golden bells the wealthy Thais of Patani carried in their penises, they replied that “the women obtain inexpressible pleasure from it.” . . .
That the majority Muslim population of Indonesia and Malaysia had divorce rates in excess of 50 percent as late as the 1960s is sometimes attributed to the influence of Islam in sanctioning easy divorce for men. Much more important, however, was the pan-Southeast-Asian pattern of female autonomy, which meant that divorce did not markedly reduce a woman’s livelihood, status, or network of kin support. In noting the acceptance the Javanese gave to women of twenty-two or twenty-three living with their fourth or fifth husband, [G. W.] Earl attributed this attitude entirely to the freedom and economic independence enjoyed by women.

Christian Europe was until the eighteenth century a very “chaste” society in comparative terms, with an exceptionally late average age of marriage (in the twenties), with high proportions never marrying and with a low rate of extramarital conceptions by later standards. (In England this rate rose from only 12 percent of births in 1680 to 50 percent by 1800). Southeast Asia was in many respects the complete antithesis of that chaste pattern, and it seemed to European observers of the time that its inhabitants were preoccupied with sex. The Portuguese liked to say that the Malays were “fond of music and given to love,” while Javanese, like Burmese, Thais, and Filipinos, were characterized as “very lascivously given, both men and women.” What this meant was that premarital sexual relations were regarded indulgently, and virginity at marriage was not expected of either party. If pregnancy resulted from these pre-marital activities, the couple were expected to marry, and failing that, resort might be had to abortion or (at least in the Philippines) to infanticide.

Female Roles

It is already clear that women had a relatively high degree of economic autonomy in premodern Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, it was taken for granted that the opposition of male and female characteristics was a fundamental part of the cosmic dualism. Perhaps for this very reason it was not thought necessary to create artificial markers of gender through dress, hairstyle, or speech patterns, none of which stressed the male-female distinction. A rash of recent studies on the anthropology of gender in Indonesia has uncovered a variety of expressions of the complementary opposition of male and female. Maleness is typically associated with white (semen), warmth, sky, form, control, and deliberate creativity; the female with red (blood), coolness, earth, substance, spontaneity, and natural creativity. The male feature is often seen (at least by males) as preferred, but both are necessary and the union of the two is a powerful ideal.

Such theoretical distinctions help explain the clear boundaries between male and female domains in the house, the fields, and the mar-
ketplace. Since everyday activities formed part of this cosmic dualism, especially when they affected plant and animal life, it was not a matter of indifference whether men or women performed them. Male work included all that pertained to metals and animals — ploughing, felling the jungle, hunting, metalworking, woodworking, and house building — as well as statecraft and formal (international) religion. The female domain included transplanting, harvesting, vegetable growing, food preparation, weaving, pottery making (in most areas), and marketing, as well as ancestor cults and mediation with the spirits.

At village level these dichotomies have not changed greatly in the last four centuries. The male domain has expanded enormously, however, through the greater role of statecraft and formal religion, and the ability of larger sections of the population to imitate aristocratic mores which portray women as dependent, decorous, and loyal. In the age of commerce, assumptions of male superiority already affected the courts and the urban elite, who listened to Indian epics of Rama and Sita, studied Chinese Confucian classics (in Vietnam), or were tutored by the theologians of Theravada Buddhism, Islam, or Christianity. In 1399, for example, the Thai queen of Sukhothai prayed that through her merit she might be "reborn as a male," thus moving up the Buddhist hierarchy.

That there was a discrepancy between courtly ideals and everyday reality there is no doubt. What requires examination is the extent to which women in that period were still able to extend their spheres of action into those larger events which are the normal subjects for historians. By examining successively trade, diplomacy, warfare, entertainment, literature, and statecraft we shall see that Southeast Asian women were playing an unusually influential role by comparison with later periods or with other parts of the world.

Since marketing was a female domain par excellence, this is the place to start. Even today Southeast Asian countries top the comparative statistics assembled by Ester Boserup for female participation in trade and marketing. Fifty-six percent of those so listed in Thailand were women, 51 percent in the Philippines, 47 percent in Burma, and 46 percent in Cambodia. Although Indonesia had a lower rate, 31 percent, this still contrasted sharply with other Muslim countries, particularly in the Middle East (1 to 5 percent). In Bangkok at the time of the 1947 census, three times as many Thai women as men were registered as owners or managers of businesses. A famous Minangkabau poem first written down in the 1820s exhorted mothers to teach their daughters "to judge the rise and fall of prices. "Southeast Asian women are still expected to show more commercially shrewd and thrifty attitudes than men, and male Chinese and European traders are apt to be deceived for having the mean spirit of a woman on such matters.

Although the casual visitor to Southeast Asia today might not be aware of the female trading role, which is now restricted to rural and
small-scale markets, this has not always been the case. Early European and Chinese traders were constantly surprised to find themselves dealing with women.

JOHN E. WILLS JR.

Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz

After the conquest of the Aztecs, the Spanish attempted to govern Mexico by converting the surviving Indians to Roman Catholicism and exploiting their labor. In addition, they encouraged fellow Spaniards to settle in the colony and imported African slaves, creating a mixed society of Europeans, Indians, and Africans. As in the rest of North America, the dividing line between slave and free was the most important social distinction. But unlike their English counterparts to the north, New Spain's colonists also distinguished between Peninsulares, colonists who were born in Spain, and Creoles, colonists who were born of Spanish parents in the Americas.

In the following selection a modern historian evokes the life of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1651–1695), a poet, artist, and nun who lived in Mexico City in “New Spain.” Sister Juana was a Creole woman and the author argues she was distinctly a product of Mexican Creole society. In what ways was she Spanish? In what ways was she Mexican? How do you think the life of a Creole woman, born and raised in the colony, would be different from that of a woman born in Spain?

Thinking Historically

In the previous selection, Anthony Reid suggested that Christianity, Islam, and Confucianism — three great patriarchal religious traditions — undermined the traditional autonomy of women in Southeast Asia. Do you think Christianity undermined the autonomy of native women in Mexico? Do you think Sor Juana found Christianity to be oppressive, neutral, or liberating? How was she able to use Christian culture to her advantage?