



A group of women at about the time of the first Bangkok Postal Directory await the arrival of King Rama V to present their offerings of fruit.

ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES OF WOMEN IN BANGKOK, 1883

CONSTANCE M. WILSON

NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

The *Sarabanchi*, the first Postal Directory for Bangkok, was published by the Post and Telegraph Department in 1883. Volumes two and three of the Directory provide information on the economic activities of women in urban Bangkok in that year. This information is entirely statistical. It is also information that is very difficult to cross reference with other sources, especially since surnames were not yet in use. The women who are listed in the Directory can be identified through their titles. The 1880s registrar did not ask if people were male or female; he was, instead, very careful to record their titles, many of which are sex-linked. The data set contains ten titles or terms of address which can clearly be identified as female, and hence, can be used for analytical purposes. These are: Amdaeng, the most common; Mae, mother; Khun Mae, a more formal term for mother; Ya and Yai, grandmother; Khun Ying and Than Phu Ying, for high status non-royal women; and such titles as Mom Ying, Mom Chao Ying, and Chao Chom Manda for royal women.

The computerized data set for urban Bangkok contains 17,857 cards, of which 16,739 refer to people who were heads of households, managers of shops, etc. Of this group 2,998, or 18 percent, were women (see Table 1).

Table 1: Female Heads of Households in Bangkok, 1883

Title	Number
Amdaeng (Miss, Mrs.)	2,917
Mae, Khun Mae (mother)	14
Ya, Yai (grandmother)	8
Khun Ying, Than Phu Ying (a woman of high status)	15
Mom Ying, Mom Chao Ying (junior royalty)	41
Chao Chom Manda (royal mother)	3
Total	<u>2,998</u>

Table 2 presents an ethnic breakdown of these women.

Table 2: Bangkok Women by Ethnic Group

Title	Thai	Chinese	Malay	Khaek	Khmer	Lao	Mon	Viet.	Other
Amdaeng	2,628	220	14	27	1	9	1	14	3
Mae, Khun Mae	12	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Ya, Yai	8	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Khun Ying T. P. Ying	14	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mom Ying M.C. Ying	40	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
C.C. Manda	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	<u>2,705</u>	<u>223</u>	<u>14</u>	<u>28</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>9</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>14</u>	<u>3</u>

An examination of the computer printouts reveals that there is a link between social status and employment. Nearly all of the women who are listed as having an occupation are referred to as Amdaeng. Few of the remaining woman had an occupation. Let us then turn to the economic activities of Amdaeng. As Table 3 shows, Amdaeng held a wide variety of positions in the economy.

See The Journal of the Siam Society, Vol. 77, Part 2, 1989, p. 49 ff., for Dr. Wilson's related article, "Bangkok in 1883: An Economic and Social Profile." - Ed.

Table 3: Amdaeng: Occupation

Type of Employment	Number	Percent
Royal Palace (alms, cooks, dancers, guards, wardrobe, retired)	12	
Front Palace (caretakers, artisans, cooks)	8	
Krom (Mahatthai, Kalahom, Other)	16	
Officials (clerks, cooks)	<u>18</u>	
Subtotal	54	2
Professionals (doctors, mid-wives, herbal doctors, masseuses, actresses, musicians, teachers, accountants)	25	1
Manufacturing (weaving, clothing, gold and silver work, pottery, noodles, cakes, kitchenware, lime, opium)	216	7
Employees (sewing, clothing, servants)	41	1
Agriculture and Animal Husbandry (growing rice, flowers, betel; market gardening; raising pigs, fowls)	176	6
Marketing (selling groceries, rice, fish, fruit, noodles, khanom, vegetables, timber, ramie, tobacco, liquor, oil, medicine, opium, cloth, Buddha images, miscellaneous)	566	19
Commerce, Business (Gambling dens, pawn shops, brothels)	19	1
Miscellaneous (Christians, Christian religious teachers, servants of foreigners, other)	29	1
Not given	1,791	62
Total	<u>2,917</u>	<u>100</u>

Table 4 breaks down the number of Amdaeng into the two largest ethnic groups, Thai and Chinese. Thai women were present in all categories of activity, while Chinese women were to be found primarily in marketing.

Table 4: Amdaeng Thai and Chinese by Occupation

Type of Employment	Thai	Chinese
Royal Palace	11	0
Front Palace	8	0
Krom	15	1
Officials	15	1
Professionals	17	4
Manufacturing	204	6
Employees	31	5
Agriculture and Animal Husbandry	163	10
Marketing	467	78
Commerce, Business	16	3
Miscellaneous	23	4
Not given	<u>1,658</u>	<u>108</u>
Total	<u>2,628</u>	<u>220</u>

In addition to listing female heads of households and shops, the *Sarabanchi* also provides information on property owned by women. The register reads as if the questioner asked whether or not the building was rented, and, if rented, who owned it, but the questioner apparently did not write down anything if the building was owner-occupied. If we can make the assumption that the absence of comments on rental or other arrangements means that the building was owner-occupied, then 2,341 of our women, or 78 percent, apparently owned the building they live in. We can also pull out of the data set the titles and personal names of people cited as the owners of rented buildings. If we take this list of owners, we can compute the number of buildings owned by women in Bangkok. The results of this computation are given in Table 5.

Table 5: Buildings in Bangkok Owned and Rented by Women

Title	Number
Amdaeng	1,015
Mae	88
Ya, Yai	5
Khun Ying	8
Mom Ying	8
Chao Chom Manda	<u>21</u>
Total	<u>1,145</u>
All rentals	5,340
Percent owned by women, 21%	

Most of the buildings owned and rented by women were rented to Chinese and to other foreigners. As is shown in Table 6, relatively few Thai lived in rental housing.

Table 6: Buildings Owned by Amdaeng: Ethnic Group of Renter

Ethnic Group	Number	%
Thai	160	14
Chinese	858	75
Malay	15	2.5
Khaek	14	
Farang	6	0.5
Unknown	<u>92</u>	<u>8</u>
Total	<u>1,145</u>	<u>100</u>

At this point the absence of surnames and any other additional identification of the owners becomes very frustrating. Obviously one person could have owned more than one building, but with only titles and personal names available, how can anyone be sure that a column of identical names refers to just one person and not to a larger number of people who happen to have the same personal name and title? It is obvious that most women with rental property owned more than one building, but just how many women with the same personal name are involved?

Consider some examples:

Amdaeng Em, 41 buildings on nine different streets (as there is no street map for 1883, back to back units cannot be easily identified)

Amdaeng Hun, 22 buildings on six different streets

Amdaeng Klip, 65 buildings on eight different streets, including 32 buildings on Thanon Sampheng

Amdaeng Pan, 26 buildings on five different streets

Amdaeng Puk, 47 buildings on eight different streets

One is strongly tempted to conclude that a cluster of buildings on the same street or in the same neighborhood, owned by a person with the same personal name, is owned by one person—but can one really be sure? Again, consider the case of Amdaeng Klip. The data for the heads of households give fourteen persons as Amdaeng Klip for urban Bangkok, none of whom live on Thanon Sampheng. Yet, Amdaeng Klip's one-syllable name is attached to 32 buildings on Thanon Sampheng; numbers 30, 92, 130, 132, 134, 138, 140, 144, 197, 198, 199, 201, 202, 227, 231, 232, 233, 259, 268, 270, 272, 274, 276, 295, 297, 389, 393, 492, 493, 494, 495, and 496. Can we conclude that we are dealing with only one woman? The building numbers appear in odd clusters, suggesting an uneven pattern of investment that is more likely to occur when several people are developing real estate rather than just one. Are there not limits to which this material can be pushed?

Other identifications may be stronger. None of the women discussed below are registered as heads of households; their names are not on that particular computer printout. They may not have been heads of households; they may not even have lived in urban Bangkok. Some of the stronger identifications of multiple property owners are these, all of higher status than Amdaeng: Mae Can Mia, five buildings on Thanon Charoen Krung Chan Nok Phranakhon; Khun Mae Hem, six buildings on Thanon Khlong Phadung Krung Krasem; Khun Mae Puk, seven buildings on Thanon Charoen Krung Chan Nok Phranakhon; Khun Mae Saeng, 25 buildings, also on Thanon Charoen Krung Chan Nok Phranakhon; and, finally, Chao Chom Manda Noi with 14 houses, nine of them rented to Malay dependents of the Dutch embassy.

All we can say here is that the ownership of rental houses and shops gave many women unique economic opportunities. Most of these buildings were rented to Chinese and to other foreigners. The development of rental property in Bangkok was closely linked to the commercial development of the city and to immigration and foreign residence.

There is additional evidence revealing linkages between women entrepreneurs and the immigrant Chinese community. The Chinese community supported several economic activities that created social problems for the city, activities such as the use of alcohol and opium, gambling, and visiting brothels. Chinese also controlled the pawn shops. The owners/managers of these businesses included a few women. Indeed, as Table 7 shows, those businesses not headed by a Chinese

could as easily have been headed by a Thai woman as by a Thai man.

Table 7: Amdaeng and Social Problems

	Total Shops	Under Chinese	Under Women	Thai Women	Chinese Women
Business					
Alcohol	548	504	26	24	2
Brothels	27	9	9	8	1
Gambling	129	118	5	3	2
Pawn Shops	167	166	1	1	0
Opium	275	270	3	3	0
[1]					

The *Sarabanchi...Ratsadon* remains an unusual record, the first attempt to register streets, building numbers, and heads of households and shops in Bangkok. Despite its inconsistencies and the absence of standardization, the *Sarabanchi*, nevertheless, does provide data on a select group of women in Bangkok in 1883. This sample has produced evidence that Bangkok women, who were mostly Thai, and, in a few cases, Chinese, were employed in a wide range of activities. The sample shows that Thai women could be found in all sectors of the economy, from the royal palace, to professional life, to the main centers of manufacturing, marketing, and commerce. It also reveals that women from other ethnic groups were largely restricted to manufacturing, marketing, or working for someone else.

In addition the sample provides evidence that women may have been substantial owners of property in Bangkok in 1883. Some 78 percent of the women in the sample may have owned the building they occupied. Another group of women, numbers unknown, held property which was rented or leased out. These arrangements represented 21 percent of all such arrangements covered in the sample. Most rentals were to foreigners, and, were, most likely, connected to the economic growth of Bangkok and to the immigration of large numbers of Chinese, Malays, Europeans, and other groups.

There is ample evidence in the materials provide by the *Sarabanchi* to support the conclusion that women were an important economic force, who were able to respond to, and to take advantage of the growing economic opportunities available in urban Bangkok in 1883.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Thailand. Krom Praisani Thoralek. *Sarabanchi Suan thi 1 Khu Tamnaeng Ratchakan Samrap Cao Phanakngan Krom Praisani Krungthep Mahanakhon Tangtae Camnuan Pi Mamae Benchasok Chulasakararat 1245*. Krungthep: Krom Praisani Thoralek, B. E. 2426 (1883).

[1] The first two columns are taken from Table 10 in "Bangkok in 1883: An Economic and Social Profile." *JSS*, Vol. 77, Part 2, 1989.