

Report on a Symposium: *Weaving Royal Traditions Through Time: Textiles and Dress at the Thai Court and Beyond*

Paul Bromberg

The first international multi-disciplinary symposium arranged by the Queen Sirikit Museum of Textiles (QSMT) was held over 6-9 November 2013 at the Dusit Thani Hotel in Bangkok under the title *Weaving Royal Traditions Through Time: Textiles and Dress at the Thai Court and Beyond*. The symposium was the third such event in Bangkok focusing on textiles in recent memory, following those organised by the James H. W. Thompson Foundation in 1999 and 2005 respectively. It was also a landmark event for the QSMT's young, but highly enthusiastic, staff to engage with colleagues in the world of textile academia, and to ensure that participants found the symposium a relevant and interesting experience. Given the breadth of material covered in the symposium, this report will focus on Southeast Asian aspects.

Located within the grounds of the Grand Palace, the QSMT opened in May 2012, and has since become a major visitor attraction. The museum collects, displays, and preserves textiles from Southeast, East, and South Asia, focusing on the textile heritage of Thailand and the couture wardrobe of Her Majesty Queen Sirikit. The symposium, attended by some two hundred visitors from Thailand and around the world, offered a unique opportunity to see behind the scenes at the Grand Palace and the QSMT.

The first day of the symposium was devoted to visits to four outstanding private collections of regional textiles not accessible to the general public. The logistics of ferrying such a large number of people around Bangkok were far from easy, given the ongoing political protests that closed some major roads, but were quite successfully handled, as attendees were divided into four groups, with each tour bus enjoying a police escort to help navigate the Bangkok traffic. On display at the Dusit Thani was the collection of Dr. Michael Martin, a retired Dean of the Faculty of Arts at The University of Hong Kong, who began collecting textiles primarily from mainland and island Southeast Asia some twenty years ago. The Tilleke & Gibbins corporate collection, maintained at their office premises, includes more than two thousand mainland Southeast Asian textiles. Well-known local textile expert, collector and dealer, Udom Riantrakool, displayed his private collection of South and Southeast Asian textiles in a traditional wooden Thai

house at the Ruen Urai restaurant located just off Surawong Road. A selection of mainly northern Thai and Lao textiles from the personal collection of Siam Society president Bilaibhan Sampatisiri, as well as pieces from the Siam Society's own holdings, were displayed in the main Siam Society auditorium where renowned historian Professor Vithi Phanichphant provided an introduction to textile history and usage in northern Thailand.

Back at the Dusit Thani, Suttirat Kaewaporn, Curator at the QSMT, briefly gave *A Tribute to Professor Smitthi Siribhadra*, the advisor on artistic affairs to Queen Sirikit who had been a driving force in the planning and creation of the QSMT prior to his untimely death in 2008. Chiang Mai-based textile author and scholar Patricia Cheesman then gave a fascinating talk, *A Legacy of Excellence: Tai Textiles of Mainland Southeast Asia*. Cheesman explained that textiles were an art form dominated by women that for centuries had been the main method of documenting Tai cosmological beliefs and community identity. She expertly discussed the background of the patterns used by various Tai communities. Although today it is often believed that lavish designs appeared only on ceremonial textiles, Cheesman argued that household textiles were also once decorated with exceptional care, especially blankets made for baby wraps. In traditional Tai societies, dress-codes expressed community identity, not ethnicity. Different ethnic groups living in the same community wore the same clothes while the same ethnic group living in other communities might wear completely different clothing. Consequently, the major role geography and history have played in the development of Tai textiles has not been previously recognised. Finally, she noted that these textiles are now from a bygone era and thus treasured for their excellence.

The second day was devoted to a morning tour of the QSMT, which included visits to the small, but well equipped, library and education studio, as well as the conservation laboratory, registration and storage facilities and all four galleries. Although the museum is compact, considerable thought and effort has clearly been expended on each well-displayed and clearly captioned exhibit.

That afternoon, Piyavara Teekara Natenoi, Head Officer of the QSMT, welcomed symposium attendees before Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn officially opened the symposium and gave a touching thirty-minute talk about her mother's love of traditional Thai textiles and her desire to resurrect the art of weaving to provide a livelihood for Thai villagers while sustaining their cultural heritage.

Her Royal Highness then attended the keynote address given by John Guy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art on *Southeast Asian Court Regalia: Siamese Court Dress in a Regional Context*. Guy discussed the changes in ceremonial and civil dress from the mid-19th to the early 20th century, pointing out that court photography allowed for a record of these changes but, even more importantly, allowed the court to project a certain image to different audiences. By donning



Figure 1 (top). HRH Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn with the symposium speakers and panel chairs
Figure 2 (above). Piyavara Teekara Natenoi, Head Officer of the QSMT, welcoming symposium attendees
Figure 3 (below). A specially designed display case at the QSMT
(All photos courtesy of the Queen Sirikit Museum of Textiles)





Figure 4 (above). Professor Vithi Phanichphant with visitors in the Siam Society auditorium
Figure 5 (below). Udom Riantrakool (at right) showing his private collection of Asian textiles





Figure 6 (top). Wipawee Tiyawes introducing the Tilleke & Gibbins corporate collection
 Figure 7 (above) Examples of sumptuous brocades made in Nakhon Si Thammarat province for Khon costumes displayed by QSMT staff to the symposium audience.
 Figure 8 (below). The Q&A panel session co-chaired by Kullawit Laosuksri and Dr. Joanna Marschner, with panellists Piyavara Teekara Natenoi, Couturier Tirapan Wannarat, Michael Pick and Bernard Chandran.





Figure 9 (above). Dressing of a lead male Khon performer

Figure 10 (below). The superb Khon performance at the Dusit Thani Hotel was the finale of the symposium



Western dress, Thai royalty demonstrated its modernisation efforts to the outside world while still appearing in Thai traditional court dress along with many gold accoutrements for the domestic audience. He then compared the critical role played by dress in the image of regional royal courts, including the Court at Mandalay and the Sultanates of Indonesia. Discussing the importance of trade to all of these kingdoms, Guy concluded that the monarchies of the region dealt with the challenges of modernisation partly through their dress and through the important textile trade.

Distinguished local textile expert Paothong Tongchua provided a fascinating presentation on *Chinese Silks: Importation and Usage at the Thai Court* in which he explained that the Thai royal court had imported mainly Chinese silks in the late 18th and early 19th centuries for use in the lining of royal costumes and accoutrements, before the development of the Thai domestic silk industry. A highly entertaining Q&A session chaired by Jane Puranananda of the James H.W. Thompson Foundation brought this long day to a late conclusion.

The third day of the conference was busy with many interesting presentations, several of which reported groundbreaking research. Several presentations in the morning sessions over-ran their allotted time slots, meaning that some of the later presentations had to be shortened.

The first hour of the day was a very entertaining session entitled *King Rama V's Travels, Textile Purchases and Collections*, chaired by ML Pattaratorn Chirapravati of California State University. Contributors examined where and when the king purchased his clothes and footwear, and how his dress style evolved during his long reign. Melissa Leventon, Senior Consultant, and Alisa Saisavetvaree, Curator of the QSMT, jointly presented *Western Fashion at the Court of King Rama V: Sources and Suppliers in Asia and Europe* in which they discussed the king's overseas shopping trips and the establishment of stores in Bangkok by foreign tailors and outfitters in response to demand from the royal family and members of the royal court. Dale Carolyn Gluckman, Senior Consultant, and Sarttarat Muddin, Curator of the QSMT, then presented *A Royal Fascination Revealed: King Rama V's Visits to Java and His Batik Collection*, which unveiled new information about this remarkable and little known collection of over 300 pieces, acquired during the king's three visits to Java in 1871, 1896 and 1901, that will be the subject of a major exhibition at the museum in 2016.

The next session, entitled *Imported Textiles for the Court*, was jointly chaired by Dr. Zhao Feng of the China National Silk Museum and Jane Puranananda. In her captivating talk on *Possible Sources of Royal Imagery on Thai Court Textiles: Architectural Medallion Patterns at Two Early 12th Century Sites*, Gillian Green of Sydney University discussed some "enigmatic, small scale, bas relief medallion panels" at Angkor Wat, scattered apparently at random on walls of the first three enclosures of the temple, possibly depicting textile designs from the 11th to 12th

centuries that might ultimately be the source for royal imagery on Thai court textiles from the Ayutthaya period through the reign of King Rama V.

Prapassorn Posrithong, Assistant Director of the Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre, then gave a particularly compelling, though lengthy, presentation on *Saudagiri: Indian Trade Textiles for the Thai Market, ca. 1850-1950* based on her empirical research in India and Thailand where a large number of Indian textiles can still be found in museums and private collections. She briefly explored the several centuries of trade between India and Thailand before specifically looking at the period 1850-1950. She examined the various uses of Indian textiles in Thailand: by the royal court as salary to courtiers; by ordinary people as a barter product for rice; by monks to wrap religious manuscripts used in temples. Even the style of the Thai *phaa nung* (hip wrapper) is similar to the Indian *sari* and the *chong kraben* (a silk hip wrapper draped and wrapped to form trousers) is based on the *dhoti*, while Thai court uniform also evolved from Indian models. Drawing on official statistics, she then described the large size of the textile trade between the two countries, with over two million textiles being imported from India in 1887-8 for a population of less than 500,000. She finally examined the business empire of one Indian trading family operating in Bangkok that ordered textiles from India until business declined after the Second World War as a result of the government-enforced change in fashion from traditional to Western dress. This session concluded with a condensed discussion of *Cambodian Textiles for the Court of King Rama V* by Weeradhamma Tragoonngenthai and Dr. Anucha Thirakanont, Consultants to the QMST.

The morning concluded with a session on *Other Courts, Other Worlds: The Textile Heritage of Mainland Southeast Asia*, chaired by Professor Vithi Phanichphant of the University of Phayao. The first presentation, by Dr. Yuzuruha Oyama of the Tokyo National Museum, described *The Popularity of Sarasa for the Thai Market in Japan During the 17th and 18th Centuries*, investigating the Indian chintz (*sarasa*) made for Siam and exported from Ayutthaya to Japan. For many years, the Japanese mistakenly believed that this textile was made in Siam. The second, and unfortunately greatly rushed, presentation entitled *Unintended Consequences: Thai Influence on Burmese Kon-baung Dynasty (1752-1885) Royal Costume* by well-known author Sylvia Fraser-Lu examined the close, but hitherto little known, influence by Thailand on Burmese royal costume. Although relations between these two neighbours were often adversarial, Fraser-Lu noted that the sack of Ayutthaya by the Burmese had the unintended consequence of increasing Thai cultural influence. Examples include the contributions made by Thai master weavers and embroiderers among the prisoners-of-war who were seconded to the palace tailoring department at Ava where they were set to work alongside Indian, Burmese and Shan artisans on ceremonial robes for the Burmese king and his court. The final, alas also abbreviated, presentation on *Court Dress, Tribute and*

Sumptuary Law in the 19th Century by Dr. Susan Conway of the School of Oriental and African Studies examined the tribute system of relations that existed between regional courts and China, and the dress codes required for officials during lavish tribute ceremonies.

The afternoon session chaired by Julia Brennan, a QSMT Senior Consultant, and Dr. Patcharawee Tunprawatt of SEAMEO-SPAFA, focused on *Preserving Royal Collections*. Three of the five presentations focused on Asian subjects. Brennan and her staff provided a fascinating insight into how she had stabilised and then painstakingly restored a royal robe in her presentation *History and Manufacture of Thai Official Rank Robes "Sua Krui": A Case Study of Admiral du Plessis de Richelieu's 19th-Century Robe*. Miki Komatsu of the Heritage Conservation Centre of Singapore provided a technical conservation report on *Wedding Joys and Woes: Conservation of a Peranakan Trousseau and Wedding Chamber*. Tshering Uden Penjor of the Textile Museum, Bhutan, spoke on *Preserving the Wangchuk Dynasty's Royal Textiles: Treatments, Display Parameters, and Anoxic Storage*. At the conclusion of this long day, symposium participants were treated to a highly enjoyable reception and private tour of the Jim Thompson House and a special exhibition of contemporary textiles curated by fibre artist Yoshiko Wada of the World Shibori Network.

The fourth day programme began with a very lively session titled *Dressing Royalty in the Modern World*, chaired by Dr. Joanna Marschner of Kensington Palace and Kullawit Laosuksri, Editor-in-Chief of *Vogue* Thailand, that concentrated on the importance of formal and daily dress for serving monarchs, with focus on Queen Sirikit, Queen Elizabeth II, the former Sultanah of Brunei and various Queens of Malaysia. The first of three presentations was given by Piyavara Teekara Natenoj who, in her talk *Her Majesty Queen Sirikit and Pierre Balmain*, explained that in the early 1960s, Pierre Balmain, who had previously made only Western clothes for Queen Sirikit, also began to create highly acclaimed dresses for Her Majesty in a re-interpreted historic style that used traditional-style Thai brocades commissioned and supplied by Her Majesty. Balmain thus brought to Thai national dress his deep expertise in Western dressmaking. This was followed by an excellent presentation by Independent Scholar Michael Pick titled *HM Queen Elizabeth II: Refashioning a Royal Style* that explored the evolution of Queen Elizabeth's dress style throughout her lengthy reign. Of particular amusement was Pick's description of the competition between Norman Hartnell, the favourite couturier of the Queen Mother, and Hardy Amies, the favoured designer of Queen Elizabeth. Lastly, a loud and effervescent presentation by Malaysian designer Bernard Chandran entitled *From Rock Concerts to Royal Thrones: Designing for the Royal Families of Malaysia and Brunei*, sandwiched between two highly entertaining fashion videos, certainly brought the audience to attention. The morning session ended with a stimulating Q&A panel session co-chaired by Kullawit Laosuksri and Dr. Joanna Marschner, with panellists

Piyavara Teekara Natenoi, Couturier Tirapan Wannarat, Michael Pick and Bernard Chandran.

The last formal event of the symposium was a lecture on the History of *Khon Performance and its Modern Revival* by Dr. Anucha Thirakanont followed by a rare chance to view a demonstration of dressing Khon performers, a process that usually takes four hours for a lead performer, and a superb, twenty-minute performance of Khon, the traditional royal court dance-drama. Dr. Anucha explained that along with shadow puppetry, Khon was originally performed during the cremation ceremony, but almost became an extinct art form, although it has been revived several times in the past and is now protected by the Fine Arts Department. He said that many people used to think that Khon was “boring” and it was very rare for a full-scale performance to take place. The present revival of this art began in 2007, at the direction of Queen Sirikit, with a focus on Khon costumes. Research was undertaken in pictorial archives, identifying the proper colours from mural paintings. The team under Dr. Anucha and Weeradhamma Tragoonngoenthai then had to adapt the costumes to take account of the growth in Thai body size in recent years. They decided to use only domestically produced materials, and had to revive the production of a special silk in Nakhon Si Thammarat. Examples of these sumptuous brocades were displayed by QSMT staff to the audience, to great applause. Dr. Anucha explained that a Khon performance now requires fifty performers on stage, fifty people working behind the stage and another five hundred support staff behind the scenes. Yet, the annual Khon shows are completely sold out, so the revival of this long lost art form can be said to have been truly successful.

To end this gala four-day event in appropriate style, symposium participants enjoyed a superb farewell dinner on the riverside terrace at the Mandarin Oriental Hotel hosted in absentia by Her Majesty Queen Sirikit. The somewhat hectic pace of this conference left some participants feeling that too much had been packed into the four days. However, the symposium can certainly be judged a success if the main criteria are that the participants enjoyed themselves and felt that the conference topics were stimulating. This reporter certainly felt that way on both counts.