

Abstract

Thai Society in the Central Plains prior to 1905 A.D. was consisted of two main social classes : the nai (including members of the royalty, and noblemen), and the phrai (including petty officials, commonners and slaves). According to the law, the nai class had the right to extract labour and goods from their phrai. Monks and foreigner were, however, exempted from this nai-phrai relationship.

"Chang" were artisans, or craftsmen of various kinds. In Thai Society of this period, chang had no formal, independent organization. Instead, they formed an integral part of other social institutions. This dissertation proposes that there were 4 major forms of social organization to which chang belonged : (1) chang of the royal household, who were officials attached to various royal departments; (2) chang of the aristocratic and nobility class; (3) monastic chang, including monks and laymen who performed service for religious functions; and (4) chang of the folk tradition, who usually formed communities of artisans producing goods for sale.

Although chang were affiliated to formal official departments, their life, internal relationship and social mobility were conditioned by such networks of personal relations as family, kinship, and patron-client relations.

In Thai feudal society, works of art and craftsmanship served as objects signifying prestige, power, and merit of the owners. Such objects were crucial in the competition for power among members of the upper class. Consequently, there was a high

demand among this class for the service of artists and craftsmen of good reputation. However, growth of commercial activities began to set a new system of relationship. Chang began to be employed in return for cash to other forms of payment.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, contacts with the west had led to major economic, social and cultural changes, as a result of which there were major transformations in the function and social organization of art and crafts. Formal art and crafts education institutions were set up. Distinction between "art" and "craft" began to emerge. The dissolution of the nai-phrai system finally brought the old relationship to an end, though many of the traditional ways have been preserved in the monastic institutions where one can still have glimpses of the bygone era.