Abstract

During his reign of 42 years, King Chulalongkorn of Siam had altogether 153 wives. These wives, together with other ladies of the court, constituted a social group with the population of around 3,000 who lived behind the closed walls of the inner part of the palace ground. These women cultivated a culture peculiar to their own, yet an important part of Siamese social and political structure. The study concentrates on the royal wives, their social organization, way of life, and their place in the relationships among the ruling lineages. The life and family background of these royal wives particularly those from major lineages, indicate that through marriage bond with the king, high-born Siamese women helped to form a close alliance between their kinsmen and the monarch. The study details the family history of each lady and finds that royal wives of this category were supplied by (1) politically influential lineages whose male members were noblemen who held high-ranking offices; (2) royal lineages; (3) wealthy lineages of Chinese tax farmers; (4) lineages of local rulers of tributary states; and (5) families that had kinship connection with influential ladies of the court.

The study describes the types and ranks of royal wives, and the pattern of mobility. Particular attention is paid to the formation of informal groups whose members clustered around high-ranking ladies, often senior wives or close female relatives of the king. The clusters were active in admitting ladies of high birth into the royal court as well as promoting them to the rank of the king's wives. Relationships among wives were both cooperative and competitve. Senior and junior wives were bound by the patron-client obligations. Rivalry among wives of equal rank were often acted out in symbolic fashion. Wives of all ranks attempted to secure the king's favour by the means available to them. Their opportunities depended upon such factors as birth, family history, position of their male kinsmen, as well as their personal attributes.