

Bob Hairstyles and the Changing Idea of Femininity in Thai Society during the 1920s¹

Chonlatorn Jiamjaimuangkaew*1, Bhawan Ruangsilp*2

*1 Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, Email: Chonlatornjiamtoranat@gmail.com

*2 Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, Email: Bhawan.R@chula.ac.th

Abstract

A hairstyle can serve as a medium for expressing specific identities or meanings and as a site of contesting ideas. Analysis of the Thai print media of the 1920s shows that hairstyles, especially the bob haircuts which were newly adopted from the West, became a controversial topic in Thai society as much as a popular fashion among Thai women. As this study finds, the public debate on bob hairstyles and the attempts to define or redefine femininity in Thai society during this period were based on three main lines of argument: impact of modernity, national progress, and social values. These processes also reveal the growing of a new kind of self-awareness among Thai women, against the backdrop of the shifting gender relations and the construction of Thainess and Otherness.

Keywords: Femininity – Hairstyles – Gender Relations – Modernity – Thailand

1. Introduction

“Oh hair, women’s hair	At their liking, can be changed to any style
But it should look good on the face	Don’t just follow the other’s choice
Their beauty may look awkward on you	Don’t just change without consulting
What decent people praise as beautiful	Do follow, it won’t embarrass you” ²

The above text is part of the poem that won first prize in the fifth poetry contest organized by the *Satri Thai* Newspaper in 1927. The newspaper, whose name means “Thai woman/women”, was as expected tailored for women, edited by a female editor, with the motto “issued for the enlightenment of all women”.³ That the main theme of its fifth poetry contest was “Oh, Hair” highlighted the importance that Thai society at that time placed on women’s appearance and behavior, precisely their choices of hairstyle and how they presented them. The author of the poem, Mae Phoeng Suan Mali apparently attempted to educate women to be

¹ This article was supported by the Graduate Research Grant, National Research Council of Thailand, number N41A660705.

² Mae Phoeng Suan Mali, “Results Announcement of the Fifth Poetry Contest (ตัดสินประกวดกวีครั้งที่ 5),” *Satri Thai* (สตรีไทย), 2, no. 2, March 14, 1927, 18.

“ผมขอผมสตรี	เมื่อเห็นดิเปลี่ยนอย่างไรได้ทุกท่า
แต่ควรรู้ให้มันรับกับหน้าตา	อย่าลืมนึกว่าเขาเปลี่ยนควรเวียนตาม
งามของเขาเรามาแก้แค้นเคอะ	อย่าช่างเถอะเมื่อจะเปลี่ยนควรเวียนตาม
สุภาพชนท่านนิยมชมว่างาม	ก็เปลี่ยนตามเถิดคงไม่อายเขาเออ”

The particularity of the Thai year count during the 1920s should be explained here. King Vajiravudh replaced the old Thai calendar with the Buddhist Era (BE) and set the start of the year on 1 April, which began in BE 2455 or CE 1912. This means, for example, BE 2455 started on 1 April 1912 and ended on 31 March 1913. This year count remained until Prime Minister Phibunsongkram moved the start of the year to 1 January in CE 1941. Therefore, the results announcement of the fifth poetry contest was published on 14 March BE 2469 or CE 1927.

³ Chalaem Chirasuk, “Announcement (เฉลยสาร),” *Satri Thai* 1, no. 1, March 1, 1926, 7.

modest and mindful in making choice of hairstyle. Moreover, women should not change their hairstyles without consulting “decent people”, which, to read it in a broader context, reflects the expectation that women should live their lives according to the norms of society. This suggests that hairstyles of women were not exclusively their own choices, but also an issue of the involving society.

Although hair is biologically a natural part of the human body, it is rarely completely exempted from social and cultural regulations. So explains Royce Mahawatte:

“Hair is a site of meaning and a place of conflict. It intersects with our biological identity, and hence what we consider to be “natural”. At the same time, and perhaps more importantly, hair has to conform to cultural standards. Arguably, the most common way that we understand social hair is in terms of how it is cut, styled.”⁴

Taking Mahawatte’s “social hair” as its conceptual framework, this article defines “hairstyles” as hair that can be altered in form, and its meaning can be interpreted and re-interpreted according to the social and cultural norms of each historical context they were in. Hair should be understood as “a metaphor for both the self and the effect of social norms”.⁵ A hairstyle can serve as a medium for expressing specific identities or meanings and as a locus of contesting ideas.

Analysis of the Thai print media from the 1920s shows that hairstyles, especially the bob haircuts which were newly adopted from the West, became a controversial topic in Thai society as much as a popular fashion among Thai women. The debates that these hairstyles generated in Thai society during that period did not merely express differing opinions regarding the physical appearance of Thai women, but they were also crucially part of the process of defining or redefining Thai femininity. To examine the changing ideas of Thai femininity during this period, the authors of this article adapt the concept of masculinity by R. W. Connell to apply on femininity. Connell describes masculinity as “a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture.”⁶ In this article, hairstyles are treated as an expression of Thai women’s new identities and a site where Thai femininity was discussed and contested by both women and men, and between the defenders of the traditional and the supporters of the modern.

This article aims to study the relationship between women’s hairstyles, specifically bob haircuts, and the definition of femininity in Thai society during the 1920s, the decades during which Thailand, or Siam as it was called at that time, was undergoing the process of modernization and the creation of a modern nation-state. This study is primarily based on an historical analysis of the writings and images appearing in the Thai newspapers from the said period, especially *Satri Thai*.⁷ Unfortunately, the analysis is partly limited by the fact that little is known about the authors, to whom this study refers, especially when some conceal their true identities under pseudonyms. The study finds that the public debate on bob hairstyles (in this specific context including bob, shingle and Eton crop styles) and the attempts to define femininity were based on three main lines of argument: impact of modernity, national progress,

⁴ Royce Mahawatte, “Self and Society Part II: Fashioning Social Hair,” in *A Cultural History of Hair in the Modern Age*, ed. Geraldine Biddle-Perry (Bloomsbury, 2019), 41-56, here 43.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ R.W. Connell, *Masculinities*, 2nd ed. (University of California Press, 2005), 71.

⁷ For a study of Thai newspapers for women of the 1910s and 1920s see Ubonwan Pitipattanakosit and Uaiphon Phanit, “100 Years of Thai Women’s Magazines, 1888-1988 (100 ปีของนิตยสารสตรีไทย พ.ศ. 2431-2531),” Research Report, Faculty of Communication Arts, Chulalongkorn University, 1989, Chapter 2: “Evolution of Thai Women’s Magazines in 100 Years (วิวัฒนาการของนิตยสารสตรีไทยในรอบ 100 ปี),” 18-19.

and social values. They also reveal the growing of a new kind of self-awareness among Thai women, against the backdrop of the shifting gender relations and the construction of Thainess and Otherness.

2. Siam's transition to modernity and its effects on Thai women

Under pressure of the encroachment of Western imperialism into Southeast Asia in the middle of the nineteenth century, King Chulalongkorn (or Rama V, ruled 1868-1910) decided to introduce reforms and modernization to his kingdom. The main goal of the reforms was to create Siam as a “modernized” and “civilized” nation state which would be recognized not as inferior in the eye of the West.

In the 1870s, after returning from his visits to European colonies in the region like Singapore and Java, the king made the first step in implementing the reforms in his close circle, which focused on the protocols and practices of the royal court.⁸ In the following decades, the reforms, formally inaugurated in 1892, were extended to the administration, particularly the establishment of the modern Thai bureaucracy.⁹ The reform-oriented policies, especially in the field of education, also resulted in substantial social changes.

The introduction of modern education during the reign of King Chulalongkorn was “profoundly important” to the modernization of Thai society. New schools and curriculum on the Western model significantly contributed to the formation of a “new generation of modern men” that was going to play new and important roles in the public life of the modernizing Thai nation in the reign of King Vajiravudh (or Rama VI, ruled 1910-1925).¹⁰ Besides the new schooling, the idea of how to be a good “citizen” was indoctrinated in Thai people to support Siam's modernizing and civilizing attempts. Eventually, education formal and informal fostered a common mentality among the new generationers that Siamese society was progressing towards modernity.¹¹

During this period, the new media was introduced: print media and films. The new educational system, which purportedly prepared a labor force to serve the reformed bureaucracy of Siam, also fed the surplus of labor to the media business. Journalism emerged as a new popular profession for some of the new generation.¹² The press predominantly served as a public forum for the exchange of news and the discussion of various social issues ranging from important matters in politics and governance, concerns over society and cultural identity, and consumerism and relations between the sexes.¹³

The great majority of the films shown in Siam during the decades before World War I (1914-1918) came from Europe. They had a “powerful influence on the types of fashion and hairstyles adopted by contemporary Siamese youth”. In that process, they also promoted

⁸ His Royal Highness Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, *Memoirs* (ความทรงจำ) (Charoentham, 1949), 384-385.

⁹ For an overview of the reform introduced by King Chulalongkorn see David K. Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History* (2nd ed., Yale University Press, 2003), 184-197; and Thamrongsak Petchlertanan, “Government Reform during the Reign of King Rama V,” *RSU International Journal of College of Government*, 4, no. 1 (January-June 2017), <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3043356>.

¹⁰ David K. Wyatt, “Education and the Modernization of Thai Society,” in idem, *Studies in Thai History* (Silkworm Books, 1994), 223-248, here 223.

¹¹ Nakarin Mektrairat, *The 1932 Siamese Revolution* (การปฏิวัติสยาม พ.ศ. 2475) (Social Science and Humanities Textbook Project Foundation, 1992), 17-18.

¹² *Ibid.*, 97-105.

¹³ Scot Barmé. *Woman, Man, Bangkok: Love, Sex, and Popular Culture in Thailand* (2nd ed., Silkworm Books, 2006), 2.

modern, Western-style commodities and behaviors among the Thai urban consumers.¹⁴

This new generation which arose as a result of the reforms consisted not only of men but also women from the upper and urban middle classes, who had access to modern education. These women were receptive to the novel, Western-oriented lifestyle introduced by the Siamese elite. Women's participation and support were needed for the modern nation-state building. They were the indispensable consumers of both print media and films. As this article will show, Thai women found in the new print media a place to express their thoughts and voice their concerns over their own and public issues.

The transition to modernity, social changes, and the rise of consumerism in Siam evidently brought about the transformation of Thai women's outer appearance, including how they managed or were expected to manage their hair, which is the focus of the present study. Kings Chulalongkorn and Vajiravudh were the first to encourage the court women to wear their hair long, or longer than the traditional short style.¹⁵ By refashioning their image according to the Western model of bodily practices, the royal modernizing elite as individuals and a social group was convincing themselves that they were being modern.¹⁶ This explanation can be applied to the urban middle-class Thai mentioned in this article as well.



Figure 1:

(A) “Phom Pik” (หมูปีก) was a traditional hairstyle common for Thai women of all social classes from the early Bangkok period to the Fifth Reign.

Karl Döhring, *Siam: Land and People: Siam: Land und Volk* (แผ่นดินและผู้คนชาวสยาม), trans. Chusri Meewongkhut (Chulalongkorn University, 2012), 54.

(B) The new “Phom Yao Pra Ba” (หมวยวาระบำ) and (C) “Phom Tad” (หมอตัด) resulted from a compromise between the traditional and modern hairstyles during the transition from the end

¹⁴ Ibid., 48-50.

¹⁵ Chonlatorn Jiamjaimaungkaew, “Hairstyles and Femininity in Thai Society, mid 1910s – mid 1940s (ทรงผมกับความเป็นหญิงในสังคมไทย ทศวรรษ 2460 - ทศวรรษ 2480)” (Master’s thesis, Chulalongkorn University, Academic Year 2023), Chapter 2: “Phom Pik, Phom Tad, Phom Muai Hairstyles: Femininity in transition from tradition to modernity,” 24-60. Chonlatorn’s study shows that the monarchs tried to convince the women in their closest circle to wear long, Western-styled hair, as both were keen to modernize Thai women’s appearances according to the Western model. In King Vajiravudh’s view, Thai women were regarded as a mark of civilization of Siam. Women’s adoption of Western hairstyles was encouraged also because it served as an indicator of themselves and their families, especially husbands being modern and civilized.

¹⁶ Maurizio Peleggi, *Lords of Things: The Fashioning of the Siamese Monarchy’s Modern Image* (University of Hawaii Press, 2002), 3.

of the Fifth Reign to the Sixth Reign. National Archives, Fine Arts Department of Thailand, *The Evolution of Clothing in the Rattanakosin Era* (วิวัฒนาการการแต่งกายสมัยกรุงรัตนโกสินทร์) (Amarin Printing, 1982), 62, 63.

(D) “Phom Yao Klao Muai” (ผมยาวเกล้ามวย) or Western-style long hair shaped like a bun was adopted by Thai women during the Sixth Reign with the king’s encouragement. National Archives, Fine Arts Department of Thailand, *The Evolution of Clothing in the Rattanakosin Era* (วิวัฒนาการการแต่งกายสมัยกรุงรัตนโกสินทร์) (Amarin Printing, 1982), 81.

In short, Thai society during the 1920s, which is the focus of this study, was characterized by a noticeably different social atmosphere, experiencing the rise of a new generation of men and women with new attitudes and modern lifestyles, the flourishing of new media, and the growing influence of consumerism.

3. The Modern Girl phenomenon and the global rise of bob hairstyles

Since the First World War, the emergence of the “Modern Girl” has been observed by historians as a socio-cultural phenomenon which originated in the West and reached out globally in no time. This new type of woman represents a break with the traditional notion of femininity in societies around the world. In different regions, Modern Girls had different labeling and locally specific features.¹⁷ In one study, they were associated with fashionable attire, romantic aspiration, and resistance to traditional roles of mothers, wives and daughters.¹⁸ In another, Modern Girls were often characterized with “cropped hair, short skirts, and an active lifestyle.”¹⁹ They engaged in such activities traditionally reserved for men, like sports, smoking, driving and especially working outside the home. Their looks, lifestyle and worldview were disseminated through modern media, especially print advertising and films. This new form of femininity sparked social debates and attracted both defense and criticism.

Alice Beard’s study shows the connection between the Modern Girls and their adoption of bobbed hair which suited their daily life activities better:

“Easy, fuss free styles had been taken up enthusiastically by women campaigning for political equality and, after 1914, by those contributing to war-work as nurses, in factories, and the land army.”²⁰

The bob hairstyles would often be recognized as an indicator of modern women, who enjoyed greater social freedom and had public presence, professional life, and financial independence. Beyond representing the new, more active lifestyle adopted by women, the bob haircut acquired political significance as a symbol of women’s stance for independence and move into the

¹⁷ For the studies of Modern Girls in Japan and China see Barbara Sato, *The New Japanese Woman: Modernity, Media, and Women in Interwar Japan* (Duke University Press, 2003); Madeleine Y. Dong, “Who Is Afraid of the Chinese Modern Girl?,” in *The Modern Girl around the World*, eds. Alys Eve Weinbaum, et al. (Duke University Press, 2008), 194-219.

¹⁸ Alys Eve Weinbaum, et al., “The Modern Girl as Heuristic Device: Collaboration, Connective Comparison, Multidirectional Citation,” in *The Modern Girl around the World*, eds. eadem (Duke University Press, 2008), 1.

¹⁹ Su Lin Lewis, “Cosmopolitanism and the Modern Girl: A Cross-Cultural Discourse in 1930s Penang,” *Modern Asian Studies* 43, no. 6 (2009): 1385-1419, here 1386, <https://doi.org/10.1086/720277>.

²⁰ Alice Beard, “Fashion and Adornment,” in *A Cultural History of Hair in the Modern Age*, ed. Geraldine Biddle-Perry (Bloomsbury, 2019), 57-73, here 59.

traditionally male arenas.²¹

Bob hairstyles continued to be a symbol of Modern Girl well after the end of World War I and even gained greater popularity around the world. While the image of Modern Girls and their dressing and hair styles seemed to hold a transnational appeal, it also caused discomfort in many places, as suggested by Alice Beard:

“... the decision to adopt such a fashionable image was depicted as an autonomous act of modern consumerism. This image of modern, active femininity *as both shocking and desirable* was spread through moving and still images, on the silver screen and in the pages of magazines ...”²²

The discomfort left evidence of discussions and criticisms regarding the questions of decency and possible impact of the changing femininity. Bobbed hair was found to serve as a negative metonymy for being a Modern Girl, as mentioned in contemporary Western print media by phrases such as “[Bobbed hair is] a result of the war and falling morals” and “Shocked husband shoots himself when his wife bobs her hair.”²³

A more in-depth discussion is needed to determine the characteristics of Thai Modern Girls and how they were qualified for the concept. To tackle that task requires an analysis of relevant sources and factors far beyond the scope of the present article. In appearances at least, Modern Girl and her bob haircut seemed to enter the Thai context by the 1920s,²⁴ when they became the points of contention among the authors and columnists in Thai print media.

Beard’s explanation that bob hairstyles were introduced through modern media is likely to be applicable in the Thai case as well. They appeared in advertisements, caricatures, newspaper columns and journal articles. In his article titled “Women’s Hair in the Present Period,” Chawi Suchittanon described the popular hairstyles in both Western and Thai societies at that time as:

“The other three hairstyles—bobbed hair, shingle hair, and Eton crop hair—are creating great excitement among women on both mentioned continents [Europe and America]. It can be said that these styles are considered the epitome of beauty, luxury, and fashion. *Lacking one of these three hairstyles might almost make a person seem less human.* Among these styles, only bob cut is popular in our Siam, which our Thai women regard as exceptionally beautiful and are changing their styles from long hair to bobbed hair. The other two newer styles, shingle and Eton crop, have been introduced only by names and through photographs. Those who have seen them, me included, might call them the most daring of hairstyles.”²⁵

Similarly to the experiences in other countries and cultures, bob hairstyles found both supporters and opponents in Siam. The controversy over bobbed hair centered primarily around

²¹ Su Lin Lewis, “Cosmopolitanism and the Modern Girl,” 1387.

²² Beard, “Fashion and Adornment,” 59.

²³ Quotes from Carolyn van Wycks, “To Bob or Not to Bob Hair – The Major Dilemma Facing Women in 1924,” *Photoplay*, April 1924, 32, mentioned in Beard, “Fashion and Adornment,” 59.

²⁴ Natanaree Posrithong, “The Siamese “Modern Girl” and Women’s Consumer Culture, 1925–35,” *Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 34, no. 1 (2019): 110–148, <https://doi.org/10.1355/sj34-1d>.

²⁵ Chawi Suchittanon, “Women’s Hair in the Present Period (ผมของสตรีในสมัยปัจจุบัน),” *Sub Thai* (ศัพท์ไทย), 5/4, November 1925, 810-848, here 813.

Chawi gave a detailed description of the features of the three hairstyles. But his claim that shingle and Eaton crop styles were not worn by Thai women may not be accurate or valid for the later period.

its wearers and the concept of femininity in modern Thai society.

4. Bob hairstyles and the redefinition of Thai femininity

“Oh hair, modern hair Shingle, Eton crop, bob so popular Complete with knowledge and ability Perfect manners, speaking, thinking	Thai women know well about hairstyles Enhancing their beautiful feature Being all smart and modern So suave and adorable” ²⁶
---	--

The above text is part of another verse submitted to the fifth poetry contest held by *Satri Thai* in 1927. The poem revealed a new standard of Thai women who were expected to possess a sense of fashion, intellect and proper bearing all at once. Bob hairstyles were presented as a feature of these “smart and modern” Thai women. Numerous writings, photographs and images further demonstrate that bobbed hair became popular during this period, especially among the women from the upper and urban middle classes who received modern education.



Figure 2: Mom Chao Roengchitharaeng Abhakara, daughter of HRH Prince Abhakara Kiartivongse, Prince of Chumphon, taken in 1929. Cover page, Royal Cremation Memorial Book for Mom Chao Roengchitharaeng Abhakara, 24 November 1993.

Based on analysis of the historical evidence, the relevance of bob hairstyles in Thai society during the 1920s can be categorized into three main aspects: the association of bobbed hair with the idea of national progress, its connection with Thai women's new lifestyle, and its relationship with the growing sense of bodily integrity among Thai women.

4.1 Bobbed hair and the idea of national progress

“Women, oh Thai women Worthy of origin in glorifying nation and religion Good bearing and great knowledge	A mark of civilization elevating Siam Exalting the homeland of the heroic race As smart as men in all aspects
---	---

²⁶ So. Athan Ro. Fo., “Results Announcement of the Fifth Poetry Contest,” *Satri Thai*, 2, no. 2, March 14, 1927, 18.

“ผมเอชผมสมัยใหม่ ซึ่งเกิดอีตันครีอบบ็อบนิยาม อีกความรู้วิชาความสามารถ งามพร้อมกิริยาจางใจ	สตรีไทยเป็รื่องเรื่องไว้ผม ดูจาคุมสมลักษณะพัทคร้อไฟ ยิ่งเป็รื่องปราชญ์พร้อมสรรพพันสมัย ละมุนละไมน่ารักหนักหนาเอช”
--	--

With women’s continuous support Siam would not become inferior”²⁷

The above-mentioned poem was composed by Srisupharoek and submitted to *Satri Thai*’s First Poetry Contest of 1926 on the topic “Thai Women”. It reflects the author’s opinion on the qualities that Thai women should have, which went beyond the traditional roles of women within the family. According to the poem, Thai women with “good bearing and great knowledge” could be as worthy as men and their support was as essential for the progress of the nation.

As mentioned earlier, bob hairstyles were incorporated into the features of the “smart and modern” Thai women. The association of women’s appearance, in this case their hairstyles, with the question of the national progress reveals itself in a column written by Dek Wanglang and published in *Satri Thai* in the following year:

“There is something interesting about these bob haircuts. Some men like to oppose and satirize them. That is not appropriate, is it? I think. Because these haircuts are neither embarrassing in the eye of foreigners, nor do they appear to be unnecessarily extravagant, nor obstruct the development of the nation in any way. They cannot hinder progress (which those men highly regard). I would like to know why they [the men] consider [the bob haircuts] an eyesore. To reject things modern would not occur in developed nations.”²⁸

The fact that Srisupharoek’s poem and Dek Wanglang’s writing were selected for publishing in the newspaper suggests that their opinions must have been agreeable to many others at that time. However, it should be noted that a few men also showed their support for women in their attempt to modernize their looks. Saengsiri was one of them.

“I, for one, am an old-fashioned person, and I didn’t even have a higher education. I only studied enough to be able to read and write. But by nature, I really like equal treatment, and new practices. When I see women who dress fashionably and fitting their shapes, I feel pleased that our beloved Siam is becoming free from the contempt and disdain of foreigners.”²⁹

4.2 Bobbed hair and modern lifestyle

Bobbed hair was not only a visualization of being fashionable, but its origin also related to the need for convenience. Not only fashionability but also comfortability was an integral part of the modern lifestyle. Alice Beard suggests that a very important motivation for

²⁷ Srisupharoek, “Results Announcement of the First Poetry Contest (ตัดสินประกวดกวีครั้งที่ 1),” *Satri Thai*, 1, no. 31, September 27, 1926, 29.

“สตรีเอชสตรีไทย	ศิวิลซ์เป็นศรีสุขสยาม
สมก้านเกิดเกิดชาติศาสน์นาม	เชิดนิคมควรรัฐวีระพันธุ์
งามจรดกิริยาริษาเฟื่อง	ปัญญาเปรียบเทียมชายทุกสิ่งสรรพ
พิศตรีหมั่นบำรุงผุงชัน	สยามจันท์ฤจคือย่น้อยหน้าเอช”

²⁸ Dek Wanglang, “Pinching and Scratching (ทั้งหยิกทั้งข่วน),” *Satri Thai* 2, no. 12, May 30, 1927, 7.

This author used female personal pronoun for the first person. Her pseudonym may suggest that she had studied at Kula Satri Wanglang, a girls’ school established in Bangkok by the American Presbyterian missionaries in 1874. Later Wattana Withayalai school, it was the first boarding school in Thailand and had the first kindergarten.

²⁹ Saengsiri, “Letter (จดหมาย),” *Satri Thai*, 2, no. 4, March 28, 1927, 7.

women after the First World War to have their hair bobbed was because “short hair complemented women’s progressively more active lifestyles”.³⁰ This explanation can be well applied to the Thai case. The advantages of the haircuts were emphasized in a 1926 article in *Satri Thai*. Its author wrote: “short hair is easy to care for and takes less time to style than the long one.”³¹ In a column reporting world news published in the same newspaper and the same year, the reporter referred to the statement of a certain British doctor in support of bob haircuts:

“Bob and Shingle are truly a blessing. So stated Dr. G. Francis Taylor, head of Walthamstow Hospital. ... The reasons are that these hairstyles are easy to keep clean, convenient in various ways, and beneficial for the brain. Long hair, being heavy and prone to heat retention, could potentially cause brain damage or worse.”³²

Although bob haircuts were praised for being a practical solution for modern lifestyles, it is needless to say that other factors, especially clothing also played an important part in setting terms of daily life.



Figure 3: Cover, *Satri Thai*, 1, no. 10, May 3, 1926.

In portraying two women with different hair and dressing styles who were engaging in a modern activity—sport, the above cartoon (figure 3) reflects a problem that Thai women faced. The woman on the left wore a blouse with short sleeves and a skirt-like Thai lower attire, and bob haircut. The other on the right wore a sleeveless blouse and a loincloth (more traditional Thai lower attire) and had her probably long hair in a bun. The former represented hair and dressing style that was newer than that of the latter. However, both women seem to have difficulties in moving their bodies comfortably and efficiently. The caption on the top of the cartoon seems to be appropriately put: “Which is the right way to dress?”. The underlying message of this cartoon probably reveals the challenges facing Thai women at that time of how they should cope with the changing lifestyles. One of the questions was how they should wear their cloth and their hair.

³⁰ Beard, “Fashion and Adornment,” 59.

³¹ Seegert, “Sri Krung, Shouldn’t Know Better in Women’s Affairs (ศรีกรุงอย่าผู้รู้ในนำของสตรีนักเลย),” *Satri Thai*, 1, no. 21, July 19, 1926, 5.

³² Asa, “World News (ข่าวรอบโลก),” *Satri Thai*, 1, no. 24, August 9, 1926, 31.

4.3 Bobbed hair and sense of bodily integrity

During the 1920s, Thai society was gripped by various social issues, including the questions about the rights of women. The discussions did not yet focus on political rights, especially the voting right of women, but paid more attention to other aspects, such as their legal right to inheritance. Again, *Satri Thai* was one of the best sites to observe this development. The 1926 article titled "The Heartbreak of Thai Women" by Phuean Satri Thai (Friends of Thai Women) addresses the issue of the unfair law on marital property and assets division.³³ Another article, titled "Men and Women," discusses women's potential and advocates their right to education and employment.³⁴

The issue of the legal right of women over their own bodies may have not yet officially entered the public debate by that time. However, it seems that Thai women already began to express the growing sense of bodily integrity in the print media. Part of those who sprang to bobbed hair's defense laid claim that it was in women's power to determine their own haircut, and their lifestyle.

“Oh hair, shingle hair	How beautiful and pleasing for women
Why do men reproach it?	Why is it troubling, men?
Claiming to be a patriot	While ruefully insulting your mother's kind?
Pretending to be a good man, demeaning women as buffalos?	
Shameless, beware goring buffalo horns.” ³⁵	

Also submitted to the fifth poetry contest organized by *Satri Thai* in 1927, this poem is not simply in praise of bob hairstyles but also documents a small war between the sexes. Its author, Lueang Renu fiercely attacked, or counter-attacked, the men who criticized women's choice of hairstyle because they (the men) believed in their "false" sense of superiority. Several articles published in the same newspaper further contain the views which expose women's growing awareness of autonomy over their appearance. For example, the article "Sri Krung, Shouldn't Know Better in Women's Affairs" authored by Seegert asserts that women alone had the right to decide on how they looked, and men should by no means think they knew better.³⁶

³³ Phuean Satri Thai, "The Heartbreak of Thai Women (ความซ้ำซอกของสตรีไทย)," *Satri Thai*, 1, no. 1, March 1, 1926, 10.

³⁴ "Men and Women (บุรุษกับสตรี)," *Satri Thai*, 1, no. 5, March 29, 1926, 7–8.

³⁵ Lueang Renu, "Results Announcement of the Fifth Poetry Contest," *Satri Thai*, 2, no. 2, March 14, 1927, 18.

“ผมเออผมซิงเกิล	ซ่งพิศเพลินนี้กระไรถูกใจหญิง
แต่เหตุใจนชายจึงมาว่าค้อนคิง	ไซ่หนักสิ่งใดหรือหือผู้ชาย
นี้หรืออ้างวางตนคนรักชาติ	แต่ปรามาสเพสมรคนน่าใจหาย
หรือยกตนปนคนดีหญิงนี้ควาย	นำไม่อายุควายมีเขาวัดเอาเอย”

³⁶ Seegert, "Sri Krung, Shouldn't Know Better in Women's Affairs," *Satri Thai*, 1, no. 21, July 19, 1926, 5.



Figure 4: Cover, *Satri Thai*, 1, no. 4, March 22, 1926.

Moreover, satirical cartoons published in *Satri Thai* often depict women's mounting sense of autonomy over their bodies and lives. For instance, in a cartoon from 1926 (figure 4), a woman in defending her honor slapped a flirting male official across the face, when he inappropriately suggested that she should get married. She replied bluntly that she was here for civil registration and not to find a husband. It should be noted that the woman was wearing bobbed hair and modern Thai dressing style.

5. Bob hairstyles and the resistance to changing Thai femininity

As the modernization process progressed and affected the lives of a great number of the people in Siam in many ways, part of Thai society began to question the influence of the Western values and practices. At the same time, distinct efforts were made to define Thainess in this new context. Therefore, bob hairstyles, which were associated with being modernized and Westernized, and sometimes characterized as opposing Thai cultural values, became a focal point of criticism. Interestingly, the critics, who expressed their disapproval in modern print media, were usually none other than modernized urban middle-class men. The negative views of bob hairstyles and the women who wore them can be explained by their association with the undesirable influence of Western culture and the treatment of them as an expression of the decline of sexual morality.

5.1 Bobbed hair and the ‘undesirable’ consequence of Westernization

“Oh, hair, women’s hair	In the greatest country of Siam
Competitively dressing up and showing off	To keep up with the nation’s progress
Nowadays Eton crop, Bob, Shingle	Sported around proudly
Ditching the Thai style, adopting the Western one	How sad, the way Thai women wear their hair now” ³⁷

³⁷ So. Karin But, “Results Announcement of the Fifth Poetry Contest,” *Satri Thai*, 2, no. 2, March 14, 1927, 18.

“ผมเอยมสตรี	ในบุรีกรุงไกรไทยสยาม
ขันกันแต่งแข่งกัน โก้ไชร้กันงาม	หมุนเวียนตามยุคสมัยไทยเจริญ
สมัยนี้อีตันครีบบมือบชิงเกิด	เก้กันเพลินเดินกันคั้งที่กันขริง
ทิ้งแบบไทยใช้แบบฝรั่งนั้งตั้ง	อนิจจังสตรีไทยไว้ผมเอย”

The provided text is part of another verse submitted to the already mentioned poetry contest titled “Oh Hair”. On the one hand, it provides a glimpse of the process of cultural transition from the traditional Thai to the Western, exemplified by the replacement of Thai traditional hairstyles with Western hairstyles like “Eton crop, Bob, Shingle”. On the other hand, the act of “dressing up” and “showing off” of these women was viewed negatively as an unnecessary competition by the poet, So. Karin But who, nevertheless, recognized that this happened in the context of the ongoing modernizing process of Siam. Such perceived shift in behavior and attitudes among the Thai women, which was influenced by the changing societal conditions, often sparked a public debate between those who embraced the change and those who disapproved it.

The critical tone of the above-mentioned verse might stem from the re-evaluation of Westernization which emerged in a sector of Thai society. In several of his writings, King Vajiravudh, who had promoted Western practices and values in many ways himself, criticized the craze for Westerners and things Western that was prevalent in Thai society in the 1900s.³⁸ In his 1915 novel *Khvam mai phayabat*, the “first” novel written in the Thai language, Khru Liam (Luang Wilat Pariwat) expressed his concerns over Siamese modernity and condemned the Bangkok social elite for their departure from traditional values and their excessive Westernization. The novel, unpopular in its own time, was a warning against the negative influences of modernity, especially on Thai women.³⁹ The efforts to glorify or protect Thainess was often paired with the resistance to Western influence. A similar perspective became pronounced in some sources analyzed in this article. However, it should be emphasized that it was not an outright rejection but rather a selection of Western practices and values.

When new, Western hairstyles, in this case bob, were adopted, they understandably became a source of contention in Thai print media. Evaluating from So. Karin But’s above-mentioned poem and the following quotations from contemporary sources, it can be said that bob hairstyles were selected as an undesirable Western element by some Thais.

“The students of Saipanya School [girls’ school in Bangkok established in 1912] wear white cloth hats and shingle hair. So, some call them female sailors, or *Maem Kapi* (แม่มกะปิ). On the contrary, when *Phu di* (ผู้ดี) put on their hats with bows to the front and incomplete set of buttons, why does no one pay attention to it?”⁴⁰

In this context, the derogatory Thai slang *Maem Kapi*, or sometimes *Farang Kapi*, was applied to describe individuals who were perceived as inappropriately or deficiently emulating Western styles. The author Pa Chuen tried to underline the double standards applied to these two cases, schoolgirls and gentlefolk. How could it be that wearing bobbed hair was more wrongful than wearing hats, another Western practice, in a wrong way?

Chawi Suchittanon, who opposed the adoption of bob hairstyles by Thai women, identified France as the origin of the haircuts:

³⁸ King Vajiravudh’s perspective can be observed in some of his writings, such as *Khlon tid lo* (โคลนติดล้อ) (1915), *Sakrawa na nao* (สักรวานาหนาว) (1919), *Khlong loka niti chamlaeng* (คลองโลกนิติจำแดง) (1920), *Hua chai chai num* (หัวใจชายหนุ่ม) (1921).

³⁹ Thak Chaloeontiarana, “Khru Liam’s *Khvam Mai Phayabat* (1915) and the Problematics of Thai Modernity,” *Southeast Asia Research* 17, no. 3 (2009): 457-488, <https://doi.org/10.5367/000000009789838477>.

⁴⁰ Pa Chuen, “Some Stories from School Fair (เกร็ดที่ขงงานโรงเรียน),” *Satri Thai*, 2, no. 4, March 28, 1927, 15.

“According to the history of bob hairstyles, the first to create them was a French hairstylist. ... French actresses, who are the most lavish kind of women, adopted bob haircuts. From then, any women who wanted to be spoiled by men like those actresses, would let their long hair bobbed. In my view, that is the main motivation that women wear bob.”⁴¹

He further asked, rhetorically: “Do you really want to follow the steps of those actresses, immodest women, vulgar women and the country which is only good on the surface?”⁴² Chawi’s disapproval of France as a legitimate source of learning how to be civilized was shared by some contemporary authors and columnists. Chalaem Chirasuk, the female editor of *Satri Thai* also rejected the idea that Thai women should adopt the fashion style of French women because “it is not yet the time that our Thai women earn their living with their looks like French women”.⁴³ Not everything Western was treated as synonymous with being civilized. Westernization could be perceived as undermining Thai tradition and morality.

5.2 Bobbed hair and the perceived deterioration of sexual morality



Figure 5: Cover, *Satri Thai*, 1, no. 23, August 2, 1926.

The cover of the *Satri Thai* newspaper in August 1926 (figure 5) depicts a man in government official uniform trying to uproot what looks like the heads of women with bobbed hair. The caption at the top of the image reads: “*Hed Ngam Mueang* (เห็นงามเมือง) – the more you pull out, the better they grow. How to get rid of them all?”. While *hed* (เห็น), meaning mushroom in Thai, was associated here with bobbed hair and being easy to grow, *ngam mueang* (งามเมือง) was derived from *ying ngam mueang* (หญิงงามเมือง), the Thai term for female prostitute. In this caricature, prostitution, which was seen as a problem for moral policing, was represented by women with bobbed hair. The undaunted smiley faces of the *hed ngam mueang* might suggest that the state’s efforts to eliminate prostitutes would be useless. The man in uniform might also represent not only the state, but also some men who acted as moral police.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Chawi Suchittanon, “Women’s Hair in the Present Period,” 817.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 837.

⁴³ Chalaem Chirasuk, “Women’s News Review (รีวิวน่าสตรี),” *Satri Thai*, 2, no. 2, March 14, 1927, 9.

⁴⁴ That some Thai male authors during this period acted as moral police and critics of various social

The association of women who wore bob hairstyles with being deliberately seductive can be found in several writings that appeared in Thai print media in the 1920s. Again, Chawi Suchittanon voiced his harsh criticism as follows:

“I can thus clearly identify the intentions of Thai women who have already adopted bobbed hairstyles, as well as those who plan to do so. Beyond the desire to appear beautiful, stylish, luxurious, and unique, and to display their well-shaped, bright-skinned napes to attract the public, and to keep up with the fashion of foreign women, they have no other intentions at all.”⁴⁵

In another article, titled “Who is the Troublemaker?”, its author Dek Burapha comments that:

“Wearing bob or shingle is another method of seduction. For young and old alike, when [the men] see her bright-skinned, soft-looking nape, they could immediately fall in love [with her]. In such a case, can it be concluded that women are the ones who seduce men? Can it be said that women are the source of gravitation which turns men into flirts?”⁴⁶

Such statements understandably provoked counterreactions from women and those on their side. In a letter published in the “*Chian Mak*” column of *Satri Thai*, its author shared a story of an unpleasant encounter with a man with an aggressive attitude towards women with bobbed hair from her first-hand experience:

“Today, the school was dismissed early because it was Saturday. I went home with a few classmates. Upon arriving Pak Khlong Talat [a place in Bangkok], we encountered an awkward-looking policeman. As we arrived, he began to behave grossly. [He spoke:] “Wow! Pupils wearing shingle, ... putting on airs ... like this, you will get pregnant in no time”. And many other things, which will disgust any decent person. Fortunately, none of us felt like getting into an altercation with him.”⁴⁷

According to this story, bobbing hair and getting pregnant during school years were perceived as indicative of declining sexual morality in women. The irony was that bobbed hair would eventually become a standard hairstyle for girls in state schools in Thailand.⁴⁸

issues may not only result from their patriarchal thinking but may also be part of how they fashioned themselves. In his study of the writings of King Vajiravudh and Sriburapha, Saharote Kittimahacharoen proposes that a number of Thai male intellectuals from the middle-class background in the 1920s and 1930s believed that they could establish themselves, regardless of their social class at birth, as “gentlemen” by proclaiming their adherence to moral principles. See Saharote Kittimahacharoen, ““Gentlemen” in the Literary Works of King Rama VI and Sriburapha (“สุภาพบุรุษ ” ในพระราชนิพนธ์ในพระบาทสมเด็จพระมงกุฎเกล้าเจ้าอยู่หัวกับวรรณกรรมศรีบูรพา)” (PhD diss., Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, 2008).

⁴⁵ Chawi Suchittanon, “Women's Hair in the Present Period,” 836.

⁴⁶ Dek Burapha, “Who is the Troublemaker? Opinions of “Dek Burapha” (ใครเปนผู้ก่อ? ความเห็น “เด็ก บูรพา”),” *Satri Thai*, 2, no. 5, April 4, 1927, 7-8.

⁴⁷ Thanasri, “Chian Mak: Be Very Careful (เขียนหมาก พึงระวังให้จงหนัก),” *Satri Thai*, 2, no. 4, March 28, 1927, 10.

⁴⁸ The images from the 1930s onwards suggest that bobbed hair was common among Thai school girls. In 1972, the Ministry of Education issued a ministerial regulation prohibiting female school pupils to perm their hair or wear hair longer than their napes.

6. Conclusion

The adoption of bob hairstyles by Thai women was not merely an emulation of Western cultural trends, but also a manifestation of Thai society's embrace of the modern world. The public debate surrounding the bob haircuts between the supporters and the opponents in the 1920s print media reveals the preoccupation of Thai intellectuals with issues like the impact of modernization and Westernization, morality, Thai identity and national progress.-

The main aspects of the changing Thai femininity, which can be ascertained from this study, include increasing empowered individuality and independent thinking. Thai women during this period did not only enthusiastically adopt bob hairstyles but several of them also vigorously participated in the debate on them. They fashioned their modernized self through the adoption of bobbed hair and exercised the new-found freedom of expression in defending their choice in the public sphere, sometimes together with their male supporters, against men. These phenomena reflected the changing mindset of Thai women, who were becoming more aware of their bodily integrity, embracing modern lifestyles, and participating actively in the development of modern Thai society and the creation of the modern Thai nation-state.

Primary Sources

Damrong Rajanubhab, His Royal Highness Prince. *Memoirs (ความทรงจำ)*. Charoentham, 1949.
Satri Thai (สตรีไทย): 1, no. 1 (March 1, 1926); 1, no. 5 (March 29, 1926); 1, no. 21 (July 19, 1926); 1, no. 24 (August 9, 1926); 1, no. 31 (September 27, 1926); 2, no. 2 (March 14, 1927); 2, no. 4 (March 28, 1927); 2, no. 5 (April 4, 1927); 2, no. 12 (May 30, 1927)
Sub Thai (ศัพท์ไทย) 5, no. 4 (November 1925)

References

- Barmé, Scot. *Woman, Man, Bangkok: Love, Sex, and Popular Culture in Thailand*. 2nd ed. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2006.
- Biddle-Perry, Geraldine, ed. *A Cultural History of Hair in the Modern Age*. Bloomsbury, 2019.
- Chaloemtiarana, Thak. "Khru Liam's *Khvam Mai Phayabat* (1915) and the Problematics of Thai Modernity." *Southeast Asia Research* 17, no. 3 (2009): 457-488. <https://doi.org/10.5367/000000009789838477>.
- Connell, R.W. *Masculinities*. 2nd ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.
- Döhring, Karl. *Siam: Land und Volk (แผ่นดินและผู้คนชาวสยาม)*, trans. Chusri Meewongukhot (Chulalongkorn University, 2012).
- Jiamjaimaungkaew, Chonlatorn. "Hairstyles and Femininity in Thai Society, mid 1910s – mid 1940s (ทรงผมกับความเป็นหญิงในสังคมไทย ทศวรรษ 2460 - ทศวรรษ 2480)." Master's thesis, Chulalongkorn University, Academic Year 2023.
- Kittimahacharoen, Saharote. "'Gentlemen' in the Writings of King Rama VI and the Literature of Sri Burapha ('สุภาพบุรุษ' ในพระราชนิพนธ์ในพระบาทสมเด็จพระมงกุฎเกล้าเจ้าอยู่หัวกับวรรณกรรมศรีบูรพา)." PhD diss., Chulalongkorn University, Academic Year 2008.
- Lewis, Su Lin. "Cosmopolitanism and the Modern Girl: A Cross-Cultural Discourse in 1930s Penang." *Modern Asian Studies* 43, no. 6 (2009): 1385–1419. <https://doi.org/10.1086/720277>.
- Mektrairat, Nakarin. *The 1932 Siamese Revolution (การปฏิวัติสยาม พ.ศ. 2475)*. Social Science and Humanities Textbook Project Foundation, 1992.
- National Archives, Fine Arts Department of Thailand, *The Evolution of Clothing in the Rattanakosin Era (วิวัฒนาการการแต่งกายสมัยกรุงรัตนโกสินทร์)* (Amarin Printing, 1982).
- Peleggi, Maurizio. *Lords of Things: The Fashioning of the Siamese Monarchy's Modern*

- Image*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002.
- Petchlertanan, Thamrongsak. "Government Reform during the Reign of King Rama V." *RSU International Journal of College of Government* 4, no. 1 (January-June 2017). <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3043356>.
- Pitipattanakosit, Ubonwan, and Uaiphon Phanit. "100 Years of Thai Women's Magazines, 1888-1988 (100 ปีของนิตยสารสตรีไทย พ.ศ. 2431-2531)." Research report, Faculty of Communication Arts, Chulalongkorn University, 1989.
- Posrithong, Natanaree. "The Siamese 'Modern Girl' and Women's Consumer Culture, 1925–35." *Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 34, no. 1 (2019): 110–148. <https://doi.org/10.1355/sj34-1d>.
- Sato, Barbara. *The New Japanese Woman: Modernity, Media, and Women in Interwar Japan*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.
- Weinbaum, Alys Eve, Lynn M. Thomas, Priti Ramamurthy, Uta G. Poiger, Madeleine Y. Dong, and Tani E. Barlow, eds. *The Modern Girl around the World*. Duke University Press, 2008.
- Wyatt, David K. *Thailand: A Short History*. 2nd ed. Yale: Yale University Press, 2003.
- Wyatt, David K. "Education and the Modernization of Thai Society." In idem, *Studies in Thai History*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1994.