



**FOOD: THE INFLUENCE OF BUDHISM AND WESTERN CULTURE  
ON THE EATING TRADITIONS OF SIAM  
IN THE RATTANAKOSIN ERA**

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to study the process of identity formation of the Siamese elite during the reigns of king Rama IV to Rama V (1851-1910) through the practice of eating culture, especially table manners and the use of spoon and fork replacing the traditional table manner eating food with hands or *perb-kae*.

It is clear that traditional table manners in Thai society had their roots in the disciplinary-ascetic practice of the Buddhist monk, especially the monastery regulation concerning eating manners which required self composure at all times and places: e.g. not to eat too much, not to eat large mouthfuls, not to spill food while eating, not to eat greedily, not to eat hurriedly and noisily, etc. These Thai table manners were first observed, practice and taught among the elite and later became standardized behaviour to demarcate difference in terms of social class. The process of the formation of class identity thus emerged, emphasizing the idea of "*phu-dee*" (literal meaning "decent people") or the elite class as the basic tenets of class.

The coming of the fork and spoon into table manners as a social practice of the Siamese elite from the reign of Rama IV onward in effect transformed Thai table manners of eating with hands, which had previously been common practice in Thai society from the king to the ordinary people, to become the everyday-life practice of the lower-class or the common people only. At the same time, the spoon and fork became signs of a higher civility, according to the idea the "*new phu-dee*" which signified the idea of the 'modern' elite at that time (which did not necessary have the same meaning as the "English gentleman" in European culture). Table manners using spoon and fork among the Siamese elite during the king Chulalongkorn reign, especially among the group that had never spent time abroad in Western society, were often misunderstood, with confusion as to the function or utility of the utensils, while some people even still used their bare hands along with the Western utensils in the table dining.

However, the Western culture of festivity and dining or *kin-liang* brought the women of the elite class to the dining table. The sharing of the dining table between men and women at

dinner parties gradually became normal, which in effect changed the courting culture of the elite. At the dinner party the female members of the elite had the opportunity to socialize more broadly than in their formal circle, and they could access the news, knowledge, and construct networks of relationship with other social groups which had otherwise been previously impossible. Therefore, we could say that the Western culture of the dinner banquet had its hand in changing the courting environment and sexual relationships of the Siamese elite.

## DECLARATION

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I declare that this dissertation does not contain any materials which have been used for the work of any other degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge; this dissertation does not contain any materials previously published or written by another person unless indicated in the references.

The total word count of this dissertation, including footnotes, is 16,412.

Sign:

Date: 2<sup>nd</sup> January 2006

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## SUPERVISOR CERTIFICATION

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I, Chollada, certifies that I have read the final draft of the dissertation of Narisa Mortero and am satisfied that, on the basis of subject matter and technical presentation, the thesis is worthy of examination.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ 1<sup>st</sup> August 2006 \_\_\_\_\_