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The Royal Court's Role in Patronizing Thai Textiles

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Abstract

This research explores the Thai royal court's role in supporting traditional Thai textiles, tracing their evolution from folk art to a blend of traditional and modern aesthetics that has gained global recognition. The researcher gathered data from primary sources such as royal records and historical journals, social media interviews, and secondary sources like magazine articles and interviews with relevant informants. The information was analyzed using historical methods and presented descriptively. Findings show that royal patronage began with Her Majesty Queen Sirikit, the Queen Mother, who, during a six-month diplomatic tour to the U.S. and Europe, realized Thailand lacked a national costume. This led to the creation of eight official Thai national costumes, which have since become iconic and are still in use today.

Keywords: Thai Costume, Thai Silk, Fashion, Queen Sirikit, Soft Power.

Introduction

In 1957, Thailand had more contact with Western countries, which resulted in changes in all aspects. The culture was adopted through dramas, music, and magazines. This resulted in changes in many aspects, one of which was in terms of clothing (Utama, 2016). Thai people started to dress and wear Western clothes, which reduced the importance of Thai fabrics. This was because the arrival of Western countries resulted in the establishment of factories in the industrial sector and the beginning of the use of fabrics produced from factories instead of hand-woven fabrics (Sinchai, 2002). Her Majesty Queen Sirikit, the Queen Mother, saw the value of the unique beauty of local Thai woven fabrics that were being reduced in importance. Therefore, she initiated the restoration. At that time, Her Majesty Queen Sirikit, the Queen Mother, traveled abroad with His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej the Great. At that time, Thailand was not well-known. She therefore saw the importance of spreading culture, which was most clearly seen in clothing. (Khwanruen Magazine, 2017) which is the starting point of this article by starting from studying from the Thai silk dress of Her Majesty Queen Sirikit, the Queen Mother, when she had to travel to America and Europe in 1960, which led to the creation of the Thai royal dress, both in 8 patterns and published for use until today (Tikhara, 2024) including the royal dress for work, short evening dress, long evening dress, as well as the crown, shoes and travel bags made from Thai fabric, which is considered a turning point in Thai society in terms of society, economy and politics. It also resulted in various groups of people turning to be more

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interested in Thai fabric (Vouge Magazine, 2025), and it has expanded to include famous people, the government or people in the fashion industry, (Bualek, 1986) etc. It is considered a continuation of art to become a cultural heritage of the nation and laying an important foundation for further development of Thai fabric to reach the international level.

Objective

This study aims to examine the significant role of the Thai royal court in the patronage and promotion of traditional Thai textiles, tracing their evolution from localized folk art to contemporary expressions of cultural identity that are recognized on the global stage

Research Methodology

In this study, the researcher used primary sources such as royal records and past journals such as Sakul Thai, Lalana, Satri Sarn, etc., interviews in the form of mass media, and secondary sources such as magazine articles and data obtained from interviews with informants with issues related to the research topic. The data was then a historical approach and presented in an analytical description.

Research Framework

The researcher uses the concepts of Culture History and Creative Economy towards Thai fabrics through the approach of discourse analysis, dressing styles that have influence and are important variables in changing the style of Thai fabric fashion, which has a base of power relations with people in Thai society, affecting the change in the style of dressing with Thai fabrics, how and why is it like that.

Literature Review

Thesis and writings on Thai textiles

Emeritus Professor Chuthawipat (2012). *Textile: Reflection of Thai Traditions*. Research Project of Dhurakij Pundit University, Bangkok: It was stated that the production process of woven fabric with important patterns used in weaving in Thailand, covering the northern, central, northeastern and southern regions, is to be used in designing clothing, accessories, preserving and using in daily life today.

Chanpla (2011) *Development of Thai Song Dam Woven Fabric Products to Add Value Following the Creative Economy Concept*. Bangkok: It was stated that weaving is a handicraft that has been around since ancient times. Each community has its own unique patterns and patterns of fabric. The patterns and patterns of fabric tell stories and events that have passed through a long time, as well as the unique identity and culture of belief in the community. Therefore, in order to preserve and continue Thai weaving, there is an idea to produce it as a product in order to pass it on and also an increase in value for local resources.

Wansaen (1994) conducted research on Madmee silk weaving, concluding that rural people still lack knowledge, skills, and have negative attitudes towards silk weaving as a profession. This is because weaving is a household industry that has been passed down from ancestors, which is limited to relatives or interested persons only. Weaving is a complicated matter because it requires meticulousness and takes a lot of time, which is not interesting to the younger generation. Villagers therefore turn to other occupations instead. In addition, there is the problem of poverty and lack of capital for production or weaving, which has resulted in the number of weavers decreasing at present.

Writings Related to the History of Thai Fashion

Boonyasathit (2010) *The Queen of Siam in the Reigns of King Rama IV to King Rama VI and the Trend of Western Culture*. Bangkok mentioned about fashion that the costumes of the royal ladies in the palace were changed to a new style in order to let other countries see that Thailand has progressed and has a civilization following the Western style. The change was made by bringing the Western style of dress to blend with the original Thai style.

Vilaithong (2016) *Dressing for Thai Middle-Class Women: "Designers" and Beauty Culture in the "Development" Era*. Sara (2017) It said that in the early stages of the development of the industrial capitalist economy in Thailand since the 2500s, designers or clothing designers consisted of owners and teachers of dressmaking schools. They spread the concept of fashion, clothing and dressing through modern forms, marketing and mass communication. Their work reflects the influence of world-class fashion and mentions the evolution of work in various fields such as tailoring and commercial hairdressing that has grown greatly from the development of the capitalist economy. It is disseminated through various media by people with knowledge in various fields of beauty to create careers for women in society. Villa's work portrays middle-class women as a group that likes to dress up and do their hair, as leaders in modern fashion but still maintains Thai beauty.

Thanaprasitphatthana (1999) *Women's Dress and Weaving Crafts in the Rattanakosin Period*. This research focuses on studying and analyzing the dress of Thai women in Rattanakosin society that has changed according to the era. Such changes are the result of changes in society, economy, and politics, including society's expectations of the role of women. The changes in women's dress that are of interest to leaders in each period and have tried to persuade them to be in a desirable direction.

Research Results

The Role of Thai Silk in the Past

Fabric is one of the four factors of human life, besides food, shelter and medicine. In agricultural society, fabric is woven for family use by passing on the weaving method to female members, which is considered a form of wisdom that is passed on as a cultural heritage. Thai weaving has been around since ancient times. From the past to the present, humans have developed weaving patterns, dyeing techniques and pattern designs, which are unique to each region. The patterns on the fabric are the result of the wisdom of the weavers and the natural environment. Thai fabric patterns are patterns that start from things found in nature and geometric patterns and are then combined. Most patterns are usually patterns that have been passed down from ancestors (Chuthawipat, 2012). After 2500, Thailand has accepted Western culture in every aspect. The government has given importance to international investment. Many textile factories have emerged (Sinchai, 2011). This type of industry has been designated as an important industry for national development, which has led many investors to do business in the country. This has resulted in changes in the lifestyle of Thai people, especially in terms of dressing, which has turned to focus on ready-made clothes rather than hand-woven fabrics (Torsuwan, 2010). There has been a trend of dressing in imitation of the west through movie stars, imported singers and magazines from abroad, which were different from the past and began to have more unique characteristics, both in terms of sewing methods, styles, and materials used in sewing, causing Thai woven fabrics to lose importance.

Thai Fabrics After the Royal Court Came into Play

Since Thailand opened the country As a result, Thailand has to develop and adapt in many aspects. There is an adaptation according to the traditions of the Western world This has since evolved into an international custom. One of them is that women are stepping out to play a role in the public sphere. (Sibodee Nopprasert and Ratchatpong Malitong, [17]) is that the Queen plays a role outside the palace. Her ascension to the throne includes celebrating His Majesty in accordance with international customs. During the reign of King RAMA 5, it was considered the starting point for the development of the country in many aspects. Especially about the style and dress code of the elite women of Siam. As the noble women in the royal court began to play a role, the duty of the association was to welcome the guests of the city. Later, there was also the opportunity to accompany him to foreign countries. The dress code of Siamese women has been The influence of Western fashion is very strong. (Nopprasert, 2020)

The emphasis on dress code has been carried out continuously. Until the time Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej the Great and Her Majesty Queen Sirikit the Queen Mother traveled abroad in 1960 (Kwanreon Magazine 6, 2017). It was the first and longest trip to Europe and America, lasting 6 months (Khwanruen Magazine, 2017) to build good relations with foreign countries, at that time Thailand did not have a national costume. Her Majesty Queen Sirikit the Queen Mother invited many knowledgeable people to give advice on the dressing of female royals in the past and found that there was no clear design for the dress. Therefore, Her Majesty ordered Professor Phraya Anuman Rajadhon and his daughter, Ajarn Somsri Sukumlanan, who were then the head teachers of the fabric and dress department at the Bangkok Technical College, to research and use as information for designing, and Khunying Urai was the tailor. (Khwanruen Magazine, 2017) This led to the royal Thai dress as a model and has been disseminated for use up until the present (Piyawara Tikhara, 2024). There are 8 styles in total: Thai Ruean Ton dress, Thai Chitralada dress, Thai Amarin dress, Thai Boromphiman dress, Thai Dusit dress, Thai Chakri dress, Thai Sivalai dress, and Thai Chakraphat dress (Bamrunghai, 1968). This is considered the starting point of supporting Thai fabric, resulting in the introduction of Thai fabric to cut in international styles. During the early period of her travels abroad, Her Majesty preferred to wear dresses tailored from plain-colored silk and tailored in international styles first. Since Thailand was not well-known at that time, the dissemination of Thai arts and culture should be done gradually. It was found that our country still lacked a national costume. Thanpuying Charungjit Tikhara, Royal Secretary to Her Majesty the Queen Mother, said that Her Majesty said that one implication of the emergence of the royal Thai dress came from the introduction of dressing culture or methods of wearing dresses on international occasions. Thailand does not yet have a set of clothes for this type of event. In other countries, there will be a set of clothes for day time, night time, outdoor, indoor, or even for royal ceremonies. Therefore, we should find a set that shows Thai identity but is in accordance with the rules of conduct for formal events with men who already have formal clothes at that time. In addition to adapting Western clothing to Thai customs and culture, Her Majesty also adapted the customs of welcoming foreign guests to Thailand. This is considered the origin of the 8 royal Thai costumes: Thai Ruean Ton, Thai Chitralada, Thai Amarin, Thai Boromphiman, Thai Dusit, Thai Chakri, Thai Sivalai, Thai Chakraphat, and Thai Prayut. Each set has a different style for different uses that have been used up until the present.



Figure 1.

Queen Sirikit and Her Royal Highness Princess Chulabhorn Krom Phra Srisavangavadhana are wearing Thailand Traditional Costumes to welcome guests from abroad in 1977

Source: Queen Sirikit Museum of Textiles

From the support of Thai fabric by Her Majesty Queen Sirikit, the Queen Mother, it resulted in the establishment of the Support Foundation for the Promotion of the Arts and Crafts in 1976 (Support Foundation for the Promotion of the Arts and Crafts, 2024), to be an organization to support and promote the weaving communities throughout the country, especially silk that is produced in the Northeast and the North. Thanpuying Supapada Kasemsan said that every time Her Majesty travels to visit the agricultural communities, weaving communities, and others, there will be a personal work table, a small Japanese table to sit on the floor, and people will come to talk and Her Majesty will give advice on many things, especially fabrics. For example, in Phutthaisong District (SACIT), Buriram Province, it is a district that sends a lot of Madmee silk fabrics. Even though Her Majesty travels to stay in Phu Phan, Sakon Nakhon Province, there will be villagers from Phutthaisong who will rent a car to present to Her Majesty at Phu Phan Palace. The first type of fabric that Her Majesty the Queen Mother is interested in is Madmee silk fabrics from the Northeast. Thanpuying Charungjit Tikhara said that Her Majesty had a royal command to take silk fabrics to be tailored into upper garments. Originally, Madmee silk fabrics were popularly worn as lower garments and as rags for farmers to wear when going to the fields. Her Majesty was the one who initiated the cutting of the fabric into tops and dresses, and he developed and created knowledge for the local people, including wearing it herself. As a result, the Madmee silk fabric has been popular until today. It was a public appearance that caused a great change for silk fabric.

Later, Her Majesty suggested that the villagers adjust the patterns and colors of the fabric to meet the market demand so that they can be tailored into modern clothing. She gave several suggestions: when you arrive at the village, do not just look at the beautiful things. When you see “rags” or “house cleaning cloths,” (Bumroongthai, 1968) do not overlook them because old fabrics that are no longer used often have ancient patterns and beauty that can be kept as

examples of weaving, you should talk to and ask about the villagers' livelihoods and while you are asking, take notes on their problems. You should also not judge villagers by their attire because most people tend to choose the best clothes when meeting people they are not familiar with. In addition to Madmee silk, Her Majesty also supports woven fabrics from other communities in the country because each community has its own unique beauty. In addition, weaving is a good way to tell the culture and history of that community. Thanpuying Charungjit said that most of the handicrafts she teaches are almost extinct, but Her Majesty Queen Sirikit the Queen Mother brought them back to revive. The most obvious example is silk. At that time, Jim Thompson made Thai silk by making only plain fabrics (Thompson, 2025), woven into plain colors and then printed with patterns, but the arts and crafts are different. Her Majesty supported local fabrics such as Mudmee silk, Lai Luk Kaew pattern silk, and Phraewa silk, which almost disappeared. In the past, only old people made and wore them, but young women wore jeans and went to work in factories and were not interested in weaving silk. Her Majesty promoted silk, saying that there were many types of silk: woven fabric, woven cloth, and woven cloth that was used to cover pillows or to make shirts and curtains. Many things could be made from it, depending on what we were going to cut from it. Her Majesty preserved it so that it would still exist, otherwise only old people would make it. Thai fabric is very beautiful, and it should be preserved.

From the increasing support for Thai fabric, the Support Foundation has expanded into the Thai Handicraft Institute (Public Organization) (SACIT) in 2003 (Queen Sirikit Museum of Textiles. 2022: Online) to oversee private and international organizations. This is a good expansion of the Thai fabric industry. Piyawara Tikhara said that promoting rural products will not only increase income for farmers and low-income earners, but also help preserve local handicrafts, which are the wisdom of Thais, and further develop the quality of craftsmanship. Today, Thai products are in demand on the world market. Therefore, the Thai Handicraft Institute was established to support this and create excellent handicrafts as a national cultural asset. The royal court's support of Thai fabric has a wide impact on society. In addition to helping to preserve Thai fabric, it also has many important implications. Her Majesty Queen Suthida Bajrasudhabimalalakshana Her Majesty always chooses to use Thai fabrics for tailoring her royal dresses to preserve Thai fabrics and continue the royal intentions of Her Majesty the Queen Mother. She is attentive to choosing shoes to match her royal dresses and is meticulous in choosing Thai fabrics that convey beautiful meanings according to the occasion.



Figure 2. Visiting The People in the Provinces

Source: Royal Arts and Crafts Institute

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From the royal support of Thai fabric, the fashion industry in Thailand has also grown (Thai Textile and Fashion outlook, 2016). Her Royal Highness Princess Sirivannavari Nariratana Rajakanya saw the importance of Thai fabric and initiated the project “Thai Fabric, Fun to Wear” in 2020 (Textile Industry Development Institute, 2022) to support weaving communities and local designers to have opportunities at the international level. In addition, there has been cooperation with the public and private sectors to develop the work of Thai designer brands to exhibit their work abroad, making Thai fabric more internationally recognized. There has been an emergence of influencers in Thailand who love wearing Thai fabric. There have been continuous Thai silk fashion shows at the Silk Festival every year (VOUGE Thailand 7, 2025), which has stimulated the emergence of a large number of new designers. There has been the production of works from Thai fabric, resulting in the weaving community and the Thai fabric industry expanding significantly. From the researcher's fieldwork, it was found that groups of Thai designers, designers, since 2007 onwards, have had the opportunity to exhibit their work abroad in large numbers, resulting in the growth of the Thai fabric community group as well, because the works exhibited are Thai fabrics in various local areas, which creates a lot of novelty for foreigners, including Vouge, a world-famous fashion magazine, which has collaborated with Vouge Thailand (VOUGE Thailand 8,2025) to design products from the brand using Thai fabric and sell them abroad. This is considered to be further spreading the reputation of Thai fabric. As a result, in 2021, there was the creation of a prototype community, the Donkoi Model (Komchadluek, 2025), which takes local wisdom and builds on it by supporting people in the community to be self-reliant with the philosophy of a sufficient economy by supporting people in the area to grow cotton, mulberry trees, and raise silkworms.

Her Royal Highness Princess Sirivannavari has granted fabric patterns to weaving communities nationwide for the first time. The first pattern is the Princess Sirivannavari’s Kho Mudmee fabric in 2021 to allow Thai weavers and handicraft workers to apply valuable patterns to create Thai fabrics and handicraft products, combined with the unique traditional patterns of each region across the country. This is to revive and pass on traditional wisdom while raising the standards and developing the potential of Thai handicrafts to advance in every dimension. In addition,

there was also the royal initiative of the 'Na Wa Model' project in 2022 (Lofficial Magazine, 2022) as a guideline to revive the wisdom, fabric patterns, and the history of the Arts and Crafts Project. It can be said that the government has projects and policies in various areas to support the Thai fabric industry. In addition, there have been practical training workshops and field visits by Thai fabric experts and designers in various fields to exchange ideas, listen to the needs of the community, and integrate knowledge to be used as a guideline to develop fabrics into contemporary and international products. Her Royal Highness Princess Sirivannavari. Therefore, Her Majesty has an idea to produce the first book, 'Thai Textiles Trend Book Spring/Summer' in 2022 (The Government Public Relations Department, 2025) to benefit students, teachers, entrepreneurs, artists, weavers, and those who want to be designers in all fields in all regions in order to preserve cultural heritage. This book is like a guide for designers in all fields that can be used to further develop their work in related fields. It includes content on types of fabrics, color selection, pattern design, as well as trends and future trends in the fashion industry so that entrepreneurs can apply all the information to Thai fabrics in the right direction. In addition, there will be a Thai silk fashion show, Silk Festival, in 2022, in line with the idea of Her Royal Highness Princess Sirivannavari Nariratana Rajakanya under the project "Fun to Wear Thai Fabric" to promote and stimulate the grassroots economy through valuable Thai wisdom in every fabric production process, from upstream, midstream, to downstream, taking into account the environment, In line with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), this is the first time in Thailand that an official Thai silk show will be held. This elevates Thai silk to another level and drives Thai silk towards modernity. It not only increases the number of designers' works but also expands and develops them for entrepreneurs and weavers nationwide. In the 2024 Silk Festival, the Federation of Thai Fashion Designers (FTFD) was established in 2024 to strengthen and unite Thai designers and to build on the cultural capital, wisdom of fabrics, and Thai handicrafts to remain with Thai society and be recognized internationally, creating careers and income back to the country's economy. From an interview with Polpat Asavaprapha, President of the Thai Fashion Designers Association and owner of the Asava brand, he said that Thailand has everything from upstream to downstream. If we are to drive the Thai textile industry and fashion business forward, we need to develop both the organization and the emergence of the Federation of Thai Fashion Designers (FTFD) (Ninnyhammer, 2025) could be a game changer that can truly turn the game around for the Thai fashion business and revive the Thai textile industry. The main duty is to be a central agency to coordinate with the government sector, the media, and retail entrepreneurs both Thai and foreign to increase their bargaining power, which will lead to the greatest benefit and development of the Thai fashion industry, as well as to be a central agency to create networks for entrepreneurs in the fashion industry, making the structure of the Thai fashion industry stronger. Previously, Thailand did not have a middleman to connect when foreign agencies came in, making coordination and contact difficult. However, it is believed that when the association is established, Thailand will have a pillar, a middleman to be a medium to jointly push the Thai fashion industry towards the best path, which will drive Thai clothing to the international market. It may not always be sold in department stores, but will change to presenting it on artists, celebrities, or idols. It can be seen that now many world-class brands have chosen Thais to be brand ambassadors. This is the reason why we need the Thai Designers Association, helping each other in terms of knowledge and business will definitely benefit the Thai fashion industry and the Thai economy.



Figure 3.

Lisa Blackpink wearing Thai dress from ASAVA brand in the music video LALISA in 2021

Source: ASAVA



Figure 4.

Vivien Westwood's latest collection ss25 at Paris Fashion Week used Thai fabrics for the runway.

Source: Vivien Westwood

Discussion

It can be said that the royal court is a very important factor in the growth of the Thai textile industry. The royal court's drive has a social impact and is an important variable that affects the change in the style of Thai textiles at the national level to an international style. The drive and support from the royal court, from Her Majesty Queen Sirikit, the Queen Mother, Her Majesty Queen Suthida Bajrasudhabimalalakshana, to Her Royal Highness Princess Sirivannavari Nariratana Rajakanya, has been wise in connecting the dimensions of economy, culture, community, education from the past to the present and the future, expressing creativity, and blending Thai identity to spread to the world, making it evident and accepted at the international level. The works that she designed are outstanding and have influenced the development guidelines in the fashion and textile industries of the country. She is a role model for the new generation in terms of creativity, in order to generate income back to the community, promoting and stimulating Thai textiles to be popular, creating knowledge and understanding in how to wear Thai clothing appropriately for the occasion, Thai identity and unity of Thai people, creating pride in the culture that has been passed down for a long time, indicating the bond between family, community and society. Wearing Thai clothing helps enhance the personality of Thai women, making them look elegant and Thai.

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