Title: Something about “Four generations of entrepreneurial women”

The precise date of the origins of the Supatra Boat and Chao Phraya Express Boat Group is unknown but it was somewhere around 100 years ago. Boonpan, Supapan Pichaironarongsongkram’s Chiang Mai-born grandmother, started a ferry business hauling passengers back and forth across the Chao Phraya River. The boats were sampan size, paddled by standing rowers with one leg slung around an oar, similar to the manner of the present-day boatmen of Myanmar’s Inle Lake

In 1886, Boonpan had accompanied the famed Princess Dara Sami, daughter of the ruler of the northern Tai kingdom of Lanna, on the months-long journey downriver. Then 13, Dara Sami was betrothed to Siam’s King Chulalongkorn, who was strengthening allegiances to Bangkok. Boonpan eventually married a Siam court official and set up a household across from the royal city on the west bank of the Chao Phraya River, close to Siriraj Hospital. Their descendants lived and worked on the land for many decades. Today the Pichaironarongsongkrams run the Supatra River House Restaurant there.

At age 12, Boonpan’s youngest daughter, Supatra Singholaka, was entered into the service at the Royal Palace. It was 1923 and Siam’s penultimate absolute monarch, Vajiravudh was on the throne. Starting as a servant girl to the royal family, Supatra was promoted to become a “maid of honor” to two queens. She later fondly recalled days playing tennis, billiards and bridge, but her schooling must have been haphazard. Soon after Supatra returned home in 1930, her mother died, she inherited the ferry business, and King Prajahihok was overthrown in a bloodless coup. Supatra gradually replaced the sampans with small motor boats. When Thammasat, only Siam’s second university, opened its doors in 1935, she was able to pass the basic entrance exam with thousands of others. When she graduated in 1935, only four other women earned law degrees.

By the time Supatra was interviewed by the *Bangkok Post* in 1965, Supatra Motor Launch Co. employed 300 people and had operations building and repairing boats and piers. The ferry business dropped 40% overnight when the first of ten cross-river bridges opened in 1971, but she more than recovered profits by introducing the up-and-down river express boats shortly after.

A prominent advocate for the legal right of married women to own and buy property with unconventional views of the roles of upper-class Thai women, Supatra told the *Post* that she expected her two daughters to join the business after study overseas: “I succeeded in business and so can they.” Her younger daughter, Patravadi Mejudhon, instead became an actress of screen and theater. Supapan, her older daughter, majored in French at American University in Washington and briefly worked for the Tourist Organization of Thailand, but soon responded to the pull of duty.

“She did not choose this job,” says daughter Pim now, “but she said, ‘If you are given a responsibility, you have to do it well.’” Pim’s late father, Pao Pichaironarongsongkram, a Germany-trained architect, worked in Supatra’s operations as well.

Since her mother’s death in 1993, Supapan has diversified by tailoring boat services for tourists and opening restaurants and hotels, although it was daughter Pim who established a formal real estate company in 2015. Today boats are responsible for half the workforce of 600 and one-third of the group’s annual revenue of $30 million (1 billion baht). That proportions may shift up or down in the future, but “when you see the Supatra brand,” Supapan says, “you know it must be by the water.”

--Susan Cunningam