

# 4

## A civilized woman: M.L. Boonlua Debhayasuwan<sup>1</sup>

Long-time admirers of Susan Fulop Kepner's translations and introductions to modern Thai literature waited a decade and a half for *A civilized woman: M.L. Boonlua Debhayasuwan and the Thai twentieth century*.<sup>2</sup> Most of us have read and used Dr Kepner's translations of Botan's *Letters from Thailand*, Kampon Boontawee's *A child of the northeast*, and the anthology about women in *The lioness in bloom*.<sup>3</sup> These books, together with several others, helped to introduce modern Thai prose fiction to non-Thai readers and to students in Western universities.<sup>4</sup> We had heard of,

---

1 An earlier version of this essay appeared in *New mandala* on 22 November 2013, accessed 3 March 2017, [www.newmandala.org/book-review/review-of-a-civilized-woman-tlc-nmrev-lxiv/](http://www.newmandala.org/book-review/review-of-a-civilized-woman-tlc-nmrev-lxiv/).

2 Susan Fulop Kepner, *A civilized woman: M.L. Boonlua Debhayasuwan and the Thai twentieth century* (Chiangmai: Silkworm Books, 2013). An alternative spelling of Boonlua's name is M.L. Bunlua Thepphayasuwan, a transliterated spelling that appears in some databases.

3 Susan Fulop Kepner, trans., *Letters from Thailand* (Bangkok: Editions Duang Kamol, 1982); Susan Fulop Kepner, trans., *A child of the northeast* (Bangkok: Editions Duang Kamol, 1994); Susan Fulop Kepner, ed. and trans., *The lioness in bloom: Modern Thai fiction about women* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996).

4 There are not many Thai prose fiction works (short stories and novels) available in English, but there are some notable examples: Prajuab Thirabutana, *Little things* (Sydney: Wm. Collins Ltd, 1971); Lao Khamhowm [Khamsing Srinawki], *The politician and other stories* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1973); Tulachandra [pseud.], trans., *Kukrit Pramoj's four reigns* (Bangkok: Editions Duang Kamol, 1981); Gehan Wijeyewardene, trans., *Khammaan Khonkhai's The teacher of Mad Dog Swamp* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1982); Benedict R. O'G. Anderson and Ruchira Mendiones, eds and trans., *In the mirror: Literature and politics in Siam in the American era* (Bangkok: Editions Duang Kamol, 1985); David Smyth, trans., *K. Surangkhanang's The prostitute* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1994); David Smyth, trans., *Siburapha's Behind the picture and other stories* (Chiangmai: Silkworm Books, 2000). There is also a collection of translations of novels done by Marcel Barang, *The 20 best novels of Thailand* (Bangkok: Thai Modern Classics, 1994).

if not read, her 1998 dissertation written under the guidance of Herbert Phillips at Berkeley, and we wondered when we would have the chance to read a book version of that dissertation.<sup>5</sup> The wait is now over, and Kepner has not disappointed us.

Dr Kepner's book is a biography of one of Thailand's best-known teachers of literary criticism, a pioneer who wrote university texts, and an accomplished novelist. As a novelist, her works were often judged as wanting when compared to her more famous sister Dok Mai Sot, the pen name of M.L. Buppha.<sup>6</sup> *A civilized woman* chronicles Boonlua's early upbringing as the youngest of 32 children of a senior aristocrat and minor noble; her education in Catholic convent schools in Bangkok and Penang; her university education at Chulalongkorn University and the University of Minnesota; her career as a teacher, educator and civil servant; her bouts of illness; her late marriage; her life after retirement; and her career as a writer and novelist.<sup>7</sup> My comments here on Dr Kepner's book will focus on three topics. First, I will discuss the fading world of the Thai nobility after 1932, and especially how elite upper-class *phu di* women, exemplified by Boonlua, adjusted to political changes. Second, I will highlight Boonlua's difficult time working in and dealing with the Thai bureaucracy. Finally, I will examine Boonlua's views about use and abuse of Thai literature.

## The biography

To start, it is rare that scholarly biographies are written about modern Thai personalities in the English language. There have been books on Thai monarchs and political leaders, but none on academics or professors. Dr Kepner is the first to write a serious biography of a modern literary scholar. I must confess that I did not think readily of Boonlua as a famous national figure, or a major author of modern fiction. Most of us knew her as the author of textbooks on Thai literary criticism. Her texts on how to read modern literature in a systematic and analytical way are still used

---

5 The choice of Phillips as dissertation adviser was logical, because he had written about modern Thai literature and had interviewed M.L. Boonlua. See Herbert P. Phillips, *Modern Thai literature with an ethnographic interpretation* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1987).

6 Dok Mai Sot is best remembered for her 1929 novel, *Sattru khong jao lon* [*Her enemy*].

7 For an insightful comment on the book see Chris Baker's review in *Bangkok post*, 4 November 2013.

in universities.<sup>8</sup> To many of us, Boonlua's novels were not so successful as those of her better-known sister M.L. Buppha, whose pen name was 'Dok Mai Sot'.

Boonlua admitted that, at first, she did not want to write novels because her elder sister was already famous, and she did not want to be known as the 'other sister' who also wrote. This sentiment, tinged with some resentment, may explain why Boonlua chose a different career path as an educator and literary critic. In the end, she even became well-known as an expert on Dok Mai Sot. Boonlua refrained from writing novels until late into her career, when she was close to retirement from government service in 1970, and her sister had passed away.<sup>9</sup> But this biography is not just about literature or Boonlua's contribution to how Thai literature is taught. It is also about how a woman from the ruling class adjusted to life after the fall of absolute monarchy.

*A civilized woman* relies quite a bit on Boonlua's autobiography, *Successes and failures*, published to mark her 60th birthday in 1971.<sup>10</sup> According to Sulak Sivaraksa, this autobiography is considered one of the best Thai autobiographies because it does not focus just on the achievements of the writer, but it also highlighted her failures and disappointments. Boonlua's autobiography was reprinted and presented as a gift to those attending her cremation in 1984. This volume was accompanied by a sister volume *Bun bamphen* [*Religious observations for Boon*—playing on 'Boon', which refers to Boonlua and *bun* as Buddhist merit—in which her friends, husband and students wrote eulogies to celebrate her life.<sup>11</sup> Dr Kepner used these two editions as the backbone for her book. Cremation volumes tend to be hagiographic accounts of the deceased, but, in Boonlua's case, the frank assessments of her own successes and failures in the autobiography leached into the eulogies of the second volume where the theme of successes and failures (and disappointments) were again addressed.

8 See M.L. Bunlua Thepphayasuwan, *Nae naeo thang bunlua wicha wannakadi* [*How to study literature*] (Bangkok: Budit Kan Phim, 1975); *Waen wannakam* [*Insights into literature*] (Bangkok: Samnak Phim Aan Thai, 1986); *Hua liao khong wannakhadi thai* [*Turning points in Thai literature*] (Bangkok: Thai Watthana Phanich, 1973).

9 Dok Mai Sot died in 1963. See her brief biography in Pratheep Muannil, *100 nakpraphan thai* [*100 Thai authors*] (Bangkok: Chomromdek Publishing House, 1999), 150–2. Boonlua's first novel *Saphai maem* was published in 1962, and her other novels were published after her sister's death.

10 M.L. Bunlua Thepphayasuwan, *Khwan samret lae khwan lom laeo* [*Successes and failures*] (Bangkok: Social Science Association of Thailand, 1971).

11 *Anusorn ngan phraratchathan phloengsop mom luang bunlua thepphayasuwan na wat makutkasatriyaram* [*Cremation volume on the occasion of the royally sponsored cremation of M.L. Bunlua Thepphayasuwan*], 7 June 1984.

Boonlua's autobiography, *Successes and failures*, told a very personal story, but it lacked specific details, helpful markers and historical context. Her friends, family and those who were familiar with Thai history and culture might know what and about whom Boonlua was writing but, to outsiders, the autobiography could be puzzling and unclear. Dr Kepner's intervention provided much needed details—names, substance and context—to the autobiography by connecting Boonlua's life (1911–1982) to Thai history and including explanations about Thai behaviour and culture when necessary. In fact, *A civilized woman* tells us more about Boonlua than her own autobiography.

Because Boonlua's autobiography was written when she turned 60 in 1971, it predated the appearance of her better-known novels, especially *The land of women*, published in 1972.<sup>12</sup> She had already published several novels, such as *Western daughter-in-law* in 1962 and *Thutiyawiset* (the name of a royal decoration conferred to wives of prominent officials) in 1968, but most of her writing was not as successful as her sister's.<sup>13</sup> It should be noted here that in her autobiography Boonlua did not say much about her publications except to note that editors had changed the titles of her manuscripts without asking her permission. Similar to other remarks she made in the autobiography, she mentioned these episodes without telling us how she felt. Besides embellishing Boonlua's autobiography with references to historical events, Dr Kepner's book also extends Boonlua's autobiography by another decade to include a chapter on Boonlua's major novels, and another chapter on her engagement with Thailand's second culture war of the early 1970s, when radical university students and young literary critics questioned the relevance of classical Thai literature.

Both Boonlua's autobiography and Dr Kepner's book begin with Boonlua's early life, especially her interactions with the two major male figures—her father and Prince Narit—both of whom helped shape her adult character. Her father was Mom Ratchawong Lan Kunchon, the keeper of the king's elephants and manager of the royal dance troupe. The Kunchon family traced their lineage to the Second Reign. Although all descendants of kings are related, in status-conscious Thai society, even the nobles have rank distinctions that, to the outside world, may appear confusing and

12 M.L. Bunlua Thepphayasuwan, *Suratnari* [*The land of women*] (Bangkok: Phrae Phittaya, 1972).

13 M.L. Bunlua Thepphayasuwan, *Saphai maem* [*Western daughter-in-law*] (Bangkok: Phrae Phittaya, 1962); *Thutiyawiset* (Bangkok: Phrae Phittaya, 1968).

even byzantine. The rank order of Thai royalty is a descending one by generation. That is, by the third generation, the great-grandchild of a king holding the title Mom Ratchawong would no longer be considered a prince or princess. Boonlua, with the title Mom Luang, is the last to claim a title, but she is not considered royalty.

Boonlua's pride in her birthright included the fact that, not only was her father a Mom Ratachawong, he also held the royally conferred rank of Jaophraya, the top rank for the nobility (*khunnang*). In many places in the biography, it is clear that Boonlua's identity as the daughter of a Jaophraya was very important to her. To Boonlua, class and upbringing (*oprom*) determined who could be considered a cultured, upper-class person (*phu di*). Other people were common, uncouth folks referred to in Thai as *phrai*. At one point, an acquaintance retorted that Boonlua was always sickly because she was *phu di*, but the *phrai* were robust and did not get sick easily. Boonlua always complained of having *lom phit*, the common term for hives. But, after consulting medical doctors, Dr Kepner writes that Boonlua actually suffered from shingles.

Boonlua credited her father and another high-ranking prince for encouraging her, even as a child, not to take anything at face value and that she should not be afraid to question or to speak her mind. She wrote in her autobiography that her character was influenced by her close association with men. For example, Boonlua said that her father and his friend, a prince she called *Somdet*, encouraged her to be outspoken, analytical and iconoclastic whenever possible. When she asked her father what he thought about the story of Moses parting the Red Sea that she had learned from convent sisters, her father asked her to think about what kind of god would kill innocent people. Boonlua, in later life, would practice what her father taught her by not being afraid to speak up and to look at all questions from many angles.

Interestingly, Boonlua never named the high-ranking prince who was her early mentor. As a matter of fact, Boonlua seemed reluctant to name names and mentions very few people by name in her autobiography. This is a conundrum. Given how prideful she was about her rank, one would think that she would be dropping names, as most Thai elite who wrote autobiographies tended to do. But those who were close to her knew the identity of that high-ranking prince who lived nearby. In Dr Kepner's book, we learn that the prince referred to loosely as *Somdet* was in fact Prince Narisara Nuvatiwongse, known as Prince Narit. His title of *Somdet*

Jaofa conferred on him the rank of a son of a king born of a royal mother. However, when Prince Narit was born, his rank was only Phraongjao (a grade lower than Jaofa) but his half-brother, King Chulalongkorn, elevated him to that higher rank. Prince Narit was known as a man of letters and a progressive thinker. The complexity of noble ranks and conferral of special titles can easily lead to misidentification.<sup>14</sup>

Although officially no longer considered a princess, Boonlua was proud of her heritage and continued to consider herself a member of the nobility. In her autobiography, she said that her older siblings were told by her father to call him *Somdet sadet pho* or 'royal father', and the younger ones to call him *sadet puu* or 'royal grandfather', allowing this group of Mom Luang, who were four ranks below Prince Narit, to remember and to imagine themselves still connected to the ruling House of Chakkri. Another interesting fact about Boonlua's male-centric world was her own explanation of why her father, who bedded most of the female dancers in his charge, never designated a major wife. She believed that it was her father's way of maintaining equality among all of his children and to prevent the children of the major wife having higher status than the children of other wives. In a sense, this thinking was different from what was traditional practice. Even in the royal court, children of the king by a queen held a higher rank than children born of non-royal mothers.

Under absolute rule, the monarch had to rely on his children and close relatives to conduct the affairs of state. In such a system, it is not surprising that Rama I sired 42 offspring, Rama II 73, Rama III had 51, Rama IV, despite his advanced age when he became king, had 84 children, and Rama V sired 97 children. Although not all of the royal offspring survived to adulthood, of those who did, many became important players who helped guide Thailand towards *siwilai*, making Thailand a civilised nation.<sup>15</sup> The system of polygyny and the practice of having many children

---

14 For example, Prince Wan Waithayakorn is identified in Kepner's biography as the son of King Chulalongkorn. In fact, Prince Wan held a bureaucratic title similar to his father and the two could easily be mistaken for each other. Prince Wan's father, Krommameun Narathip Praphanphong, was Chulalongkorn's half-brother. His son, Prince Wan, born as Mom Jao, was later elevated to Phraong Jao and conferred the title of Krommanuen Narathip Phong Praphan. He is known as the creator of many modern Thai neologisms and as a prince who was friendly with the leaders of the People's Party that overthrew absolute monarchy. He served as ambassador to the USA and was president of the UN General Assembly and Minister of Foreign Affairs.

15 For a discussion of *siwilai*, see Thongchai Winichakul, 'The quest for *siwilai*: A geographical discourse of civilizational thinking in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Siam', *Journal of Asian studies*, 59(3) (August 2000): 528–54.

also extended beyond the king to include other princes down the line. In Boonlua's case, her father had 40-odd wives and 32 children, Boonlua being the youngest, born when her father was 59 years old.

This system of rule, which relied on royal relatives, began to unravel after Rama VI (r. 1910–25), and those who followed him adopted the European *siwilai* practice of monogamy. Rama VI had a daughter just before he died; Rama VII had no children, nor did Rama VIII. The number of high princes and princesses declined precipitously during the lifetime of Boonlua, who was born soon after Rama VI became king. The world of the nobles dominating national administration would end in 1932, when military officers and progressive civilians seized power from the king and his relatives. At that time, the number of princes, princesses, Mom Ratchawong and Mom Luang was quite considerable. But the end of absolute monarchy created a dilemma for the backlog of royal personalities up and down the hierarchy about their place in the new order. They would need to find ways to contribute to the new Thailand.

Chris Baker writes:

The Thai aristocracy faced a crisis after 1932. They lost privileges and they lost purpose. Many of them spiralled downwards, clinging to past privilege and flirting with reactionary politics while gradually selling off their remaining property. A few embraced change with only a modicum of grudge, building on the cultural capital they had inherited from the old order to become prominent educators and artists.<sup>16</sup>

Although I am in total agreement with this astute observation, I should add that this adjustment was much harder for women of the *phu di* class, whose role was no longer just as mothers and wives who took care of aristocratic and noble men. In the new order they had to find meaningful jobs.

## Loss of privilege and the plight of upper-class women

Both Boonlua and her more famous sister Buppha did not marry until late into their 40s. Marriage for women of the *phu di* class was not easy when they were required to marry men of the same or preferably higher

---

<sup>16</sup> *Bangkok post*, 4 November 2013.

status. As elite social circles shrank in size, upper-class women had few choices for spouses. This may perhaps explain why both sisters married late, and to men who, prior to 1932, would have been considered below their station. Democratic sentiments helped elevate former *phrai*, or commoners, to higher status, thus allowing Buppha and Boonlua to marry. Sukit Nimmanhemmin, who married Buppha, and Chom Debhayasuwan, who married Boonlua, were, in fact, upper class by the 1960s. The former eventually became an ambassador, and the latter was a medical doctor, but it took many years before they would be acceptable to the families of the old *phu di* elite. The plight of ageing upper-class women was the subject of Kulap Saipradit's famous novel *Khang lang phap* [*Behind the painting*].<sup>17</sup> In Kulap's novel, the heroine, Mom Ratchawong Kirati, a fading beauty who held the same rank as Boonlua's father, decided that it was best to maintain her upper-class position by marrying Jaokhun, a form of address reserved for a person of the Phraya and Jaophraya rank. Jaokhun was an older man, but his rank, the same rank as Boonlua's father, made him a suitable husband. Kirati eventually fell in love with a young university student when she and her husband took a business trip to Japan. The story was about tragic love and the sad plight of privileged women from the old regime. Staying home as an unmarried aristocratic woman was no longer an option in modernising Thailand.

Although Boonlua never said that the 1932 event gave her an opportunity to enter Chulalongkorn University, Dr Kepner connected the two events to allow us to consider the benefits or the side effects of the overthrow of absolute monarchy. Boonlua was one of the first women allowed to enrol in Chulalongkorn University. Her degrees from the Faculty of Arts and the Faculty of Education led to careers in teaching English and Thai literature, and working for the Ministry of Education as head of the Education Inspection unit. Partly because writing as a profession was already the vocation of her sister, Boonlua chose to become a teacher instead. A teacher or professor in those days meant that one was also a member of the civil service.

In the mind of Boonlua and perhaps the elite women of her day, becoming a civil servant was an affront to their social class, a veritable demotion in status. Boonlua wrote in her autobiography:

---

17 Si Burapha [pseud.], *Khang lang phap* [*Behind the painting*] (Bangkok: Phadung Suksa, 1960). This novel was serialised in *Prachachat* newspaper from December 1937 to January 1938. It appeared in one published volume in 1938. I have been unable to find pertinent information on that edition.

The daughter of a government official was considered to have the same privileges and status as her father. As for the son, he had to start working to earn his own rank and privileges. *But as the daughter of a jao phraya, I had lowered my rank to work as a teacher.* If I had simply stayed at home, I would have kept the high rank that was mine by birth.<sup>18</sup>

This pride in her heritage may explain several things: her resentment of the new bureaucracy where officials failed to recognise her sacrifice and the noble way she went about doing a job that was beneath her station. It would also explain why she had few friends from her Chulalongkorn days. In fact, some classmates, who did not want to be identified in the book, said that she was quite stuck up and condescending. Boonlua would be furious if she was not addressed as Mom Luang during her Chula days.

In the end, she had to find work to help support her maternal grandmother, nieces and nephews. But her attitude about the place of women under the old regime and how underappreciated she was as a civil servant would cause her to be dismissed from several positions during her career. It was her pride as a Mom Luang, a daughter of a Jaophraya, and an educated woman with degrees from Chulalongkorn University and the University of Minnesota that made her struggle as a civil servant. She singled out her lack of success as a civil servant as one of her major failures.

## The Thai bureaucracy

Boonlua's autobiography and biography chronicled her disdain for the civil service. She lamented that the Thai system was idiosyncratic, mixing old values with new ones, something that she could not explain to foreigners. Boonlua appeared fixated on how she was unjustly classified as a third-grade civil servant while leading a group of teachers who were a grade above her in one instance, and how her position as a first-grade civil servant disqualified her for a job that was a special grade classification. As someone whose life was predicated on social status, civil service ranks could be degrading. She lamented that the ability to perform a job was secondary to the rank one held or the degree one had. Status was still valued more highly than meritocratic achievement.

---

18 Kepner, *A civilized woman*, 207 (emphasis added).

As Mom Luang, daughter of an aristocrat, and a *phu di*, Boonlua could be outspoken and confrontational, a troublesome combination in an organisation that frowned upon such behaviour. She attributed her actions to her upbringing as a precocious child encouraged by her father and *Somdet* to speak her mind and to be critical. Boonlua also blamed her training in dance drama (*lakhon*), her mother's *métier*, for speaking out. She said that, as an artist, she would get carried away by her role. As a teacher, head of the education inspection unit, professor, dean, etc. she could not help but speak her mind if it would benefit those under her charge, even if it meant causing discomfort for her superiors. In fact, she appeared to be in her element when representing Thailand at international conferences where her English-speaking abilities and forwardness were valued qualities. She was an articulate and eloquent speaker in English. Boonlua seemed to get along better with international colleagues than with Thai ones.

In her cremation volume where, traditionally, no one speaks ill of the dead, her former boss, close relative and former Minister of Education Mom Luang Pin Malakul, praised her for her contributions to Thai education, but he also pointed out how unfit she was as a bureaucrat. He said that the reason Boonlua had to change jobs often was because she was a lady with 'high cultural values' (*mi watthanatham sung*). I think that Pin was referring to Boonlua's *phu di* upbringing, her high standards of integrity and her penchant for speaking out. Her struggle with and disdain for the Thai bureaucracy ended when she resigned a year before mandatory retirement age. The following year, when she turned 60, she wrote down her struggles and failures as a civil servant in her autobiography, *Successes and failures*.

Pin's remark about 'high cultural values' is perhaps a better description of Boonlua, and it refines the label referring to her as a civilised (*siwilai*) woman. The discourse on *siwilai* began during the reign of Rama IV, it flourished during the fifth and sixth reigns, and it culminated in Phibun's ultra-nationalism of the 1930s and early 1940s. How to make Thailand *siwilai* was a strategy for the Thai to escape colonisation. It was based on the assumption that if the Thai appeared to the colonial powers to be civilised, then Thailand would not become a target of the white man's civilising noblesse oblige.

The process of *siwilai* included the incorporation of Western, mostly defined by British, ways. Not only should Thailand appear modern materially, but its upper class and leaders should also master Western knowledge, customs and logic. Because Boonlua's family was related to the nobility and the male members were also high officials who embraced this strategy, she was ipso facto reared to become *siwilai*, receiving the benefits of a modern and Westernised education. She was also raised to be analytical and outspoken. I think that, in Boonlua's mind, she was a civilised woman by birth and upbringing. In Dr Kepner's biography, M.L. Pin's remarks were also cited. Interestingly, Dr Kepner translated *watthanatham sung* as civilised, and not 'of high culture'. We should note then that Dr Kepner's own term 'a civilized woman' to describe Boonlua conflates two Thai concepts: *siwilai* and *watthanatham sung*. The two terms are different, but together they describe the enigma that is Boonlua. She was brought up to be *siwilai*, but her high ideals and pride on being *phu di* holding on to high culture and standards (*watthanatham soong*) defined how she lived.

Although Dr Kepner skilfully narrates Boonlua's life as embedded in and interacting with significant episodes in Thai history, the biography is not a history text. For general readers, the book can provide a credible and accessible introduction to aspects of Thai history. My own enjoyment in reading this biography came from comparing it with Kukrit Pramoj's *Si phaendin* [*Four reigns*], a novel about political change in Thailand from Rama V to the death of Rama VIII.<sup>19</sup> Both Kukrit's novel and Boonlua's biography observed the unfolding of Thai history through the eyes of aristocratic women. Phloi in *Four reigns* was a romantic, and more of a passive observer of what was changing around her. She longed for the lifestyle of the fading *chaowang* (palace people), centred on the royal court and palace. Serialised in 1953, Kukrit's novel was a nostalgic look at the past that elicited warm feelings for the monarchy and disappointment at the loss of upper-class refinement and civility. The novel was not a general depiction of how all Thai people felt about kingship, the nobles and aristocrats, as Dr Kepner suggests.

The abdication of Rama VII in 1935, followed a decade later by the sudden death of Rama VIII in 1946, threatened the future and relevance of the monarchy in Thailand. Royalists like Kukrit carefully planned

---

19 Kukrit Pramoj, *Si phaendin* [*Four reigns*] (Bangkok: Samnak phim chaiyarit, 1953–54).

campaigns to revive the monarchy and to make it central once again in Thai life. The publication of *Four reigns* can be seen as part of that effort. But what I find interesting in Dr Kepner's biography of Boonlua, another version of *Four reigns*, is that, unlike Phloi, the passive heroine of Kukrit's novel, Boonlua was a real person who had also lived under four reigns (Rama VI to Rama IX). She was not a romantic, passive observer but actively participated in the historical events unfolding around her. More importantly, Dr Kepner's version of *Four reigns* chronicles the difficulties of what the old elite, in this case a woman, faced in coping with the catastrophic historical disruption of their lives and social status. *A civilized woman* is indeed more credible than Kukrit's novel because it is both raw as well as non-fiction (rather than real).

## The use and abuse of literature

I conclude this chapter with what I consider to be an original and significant contribution of Dr Kepner's *A civilized woman*. As someone interested in rehabilitating, excavating, and reinterpreting lesser-known or lost novels, I am intrigued by Dr Kepner's introduction of Boonlua's five major novels to us. I must admit that I am among those who have overlooked Boonlua's contribution as a novelist. I know and think of her as a respected educator and a pioneer who wrote widely accepted texts on how to teach and to study Thai literature. Before writing this essay, I took an inventory of the directories that list prominent Thai authors and their works that I have in my own library and discovered that none included Boonlua in their list of famous Thai authors. The one place I found her name mentioned was in *A suggested list of the best 100 books that Thai people should read*. Boonlua was cited for her article on literary criticism that she wrote in 1971 to honour the life of Prince Wan Waithayakorn on his 80th birthday.<sup>20</sup> Had she lived, she would have been pleased that in *A suggested list of the best 100 books*, she had achieved the same recognition as her sister Dok Mai Sot.

Prior to Boonlua's intervention, Thai literature taught in secondary schools and universities was divided into classical literature (*wannakhadi*) and contemporary literature (*wannakam*). 'Classical literature' enjoyed

20 Withayakorn Chiengkul, Thawip Woradilok and Chonthira Sattayawatthana, eds, *Saranukrom nenam nangsue di 100 lem thi khon thai khuan an* [*A suggested list of the best 100 books that Thai people should read*] (Bangkok: Samnagnan Kongthun Ssanapsanun Kanwijai, 1999), 640–50.

a higher status than ‘contemporary literature’. This rather elitist view became the subject of debate during the brief open democratic period from the 14 October 1973 event to the 6 October 1976 massacre of students at Thammasat University. Before she was asked to debate the utility of classical literature, Boonlua had tried for many years to close the divide between classical literature and modern prose fiction. She wrote texts advocating a unified curriculum that included oral texts, performance (especially drama or *lakhon*), classical texts and contemporary prose fiction.<sup>21</sup> She also tried to implement such a curriculum at her last official post as Dean of the Faculty of Arts at the new campus of the Fine Arts University in Nakhon Pathom. She failed in this endeavour.

Although trained in the classics from the time she was a young child, she also understood why the younger generation of students and scholars viewed classical Thai literature obliquely as something created by and for the ruling class. Unless one knew a lot about Hindu and Buddhist mythology and words derived from Sanskrit, one could never have full access to understanding classical literature. This fact automatically disqualifies the majority of all Thai readers, except those who have studied literature at university. It is interesting to note that towards the end of her life Boonlua devoted her energies to modern prose fiction: reading, criticising and writing novels. Unlike classical literature, which was animated by courtly life and ritual, specialised knowledge of religion, and the sonority of language, modern literature’s dynamism is derived from a spirit of immediacy and narrative realism. Prose fiction that appeared in Thailand at the turn of the 20th century was readily embraced as the modern form of entertainment that anyone literate in the Thai language could appreciate and enjoy. In Boonlua’s case, she wanted her novels to be more than mere entertainment.

‘The uses of fiction’, Chapter 8 in *A civilized woman*, gives us a window into Boonlua’s importance as a novelist. It should prompt literary scholars to pay closer attention to Boonlua’s novels. With a familiarity gained from using Boonlua’s novels in her class, Dr Kepner shared her thoughts about them in this fascinating chapter. Of the five novels, Dr Kepner focused her analysis on the two major ones, namely, *Thutiyawiset* (a royal decoration

---

21 The elevation of *wannakhadi* over *wannakam* was put in place by Prince Damrong Rajanubhab. Boonlua was originally trained to follow this tradition. She changed her mind, however, after she began teaching. See her articles in *Waen wannakam [Insights into literature]* (Bangkok: Samnak Phim An Thai, 1986). See also Kepner, *A civilized woman*, Chapter 10.

conferred on the wives of high ranking officials), and *The land of women*. *Thutiyawiset* was fashioned after the lives of Marshal Phibun and his wife Thanphuying La-iad. The novel begins in the 1920s and progresses to the coup of 1932 and beyond. Essentially it is about ambition, greed, how power corrupts and the important role that women played in post-1932 Thailand. This theme of ethical, strong and smart women appears often in Boonlua's novels. In a sense, it must reflect her own sentiments about her role in modern Thai society and the worth of women in all fields of endeavour, including leadership at the national level.

Boonlua's nascent feminist ideals may explain the writing of what I consider to be her best and most innovative novel, *The land of women*, published in 1972. It was finished soon after her retirement from the civil service. We should recall that Boonlua felt underappreciated and misunderstood by her superiors, perhaps because she was *phu di* and female. Interestingly, she selected the male voice to narrate her novel.

*The land of women* tells a story about the encounter of shipwrecked travellers with a country ruled by women. The inhabitants were Thai, as were two of the leading male characters whose ship sank in a storm. In the land of Surat, women were the rulers and heads of households. Women in Surat were in control because they were strong mentally, morally and even physically. Women in that country could have many male 'wives' and many children by them. For entertainment, they even had no qualms about going out at night to find men to have sex with. Unlike in Thailand where out-of-wedlock births are socially unacceptable (leading to abortions and deaths of both mother and foetus), in Surat, all children, including illegitimate ones, were loved.

When the novel appeared, readers found it difficult to understand and to appreciate. Readers did not find the novel entertaining and regarded the inversion of gender roles strange and unnatural. Boonlua also created new Thai Surat words that confused the Thai visitors in the novel, as well as her Thai readers. Moreover, the novel was not very entertaining because it constantly distracted and provoked readers to think about the larger social and political implications and purposes of the novel itself. For example, in Surat, some of the young men were sent to study abroad, the same practice instituted by King Chulalongkorn, but when they returned home with new ideas, the women leaders would ignore them. This is similar to

how the Thai kings ignored the advice of returning students from Europe that Thailand should make major political reforms if the monarchy was to survive.<sup>22</sup>

In the novel, the Thai visitors noticed that the marginalised Surat men were also agitating for equal rights. Men were held suspect because at one point in Surat history, the queen's male consort sold out the country to the British and, for several years, Surat was a colony of Great Britain. Although the inversion of gender roles that stood standing convention on its head was puzzling at first glance, upon critical examination, Boonlua's novel was clearly a commentary on Thai society dominated by men. Boonlua herself said that her novels were more like social documentaries or, in the case of *Suratnari*, a critique of contemporary Thai society.

Boonlua is just as enigmatic as her novel *The land of women*. Although she accepted and, in fact, celebrated her status as a woman, albeit an outspoken one, she was unhappy with the male-dominated bureaucracy that she experienced. Remembering her father's unconventional interpretation of the Christian God, Moses, and the parting of the Red Sea, I am sure that *Suratnari* was inspired by those sensibilities. Surat women could have many men as wives, and keep all their children, but, in the final analysis, their lives were still different from male-dominated Thailand. We have seen how the kings and male nobles procreated hundreds of offspring to maintain their grip on power. But, for Surat women, this would not be possible because, during her fertile years, a single woman may have perhaps 20 children at most. And, unlike the real Thailand, female leaders who bore children risked their lives. Books that list the offspring of Thai kings tell of how many died before birth or soon after, but we know less about the survival rates of their mothers. Boonlua's own mother died when she was three.<sup>23</sup> In male-centric Thailand, fathers doted on their children who carry their blood line into the future, but Boonlua may have noticed that her own father failed to show his 40-odd wives the respect they were due.

---

22 See Tamara Loos, *Bones around my neck: The life and exile of a Prince Provocateur* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016), doi.org/10.7591/9781501706172. Prince Prisdang was Siam's first minister to Europe. His downfall came after he drafted a proposal to the king in 1885 outlining a program of reform that would have made Thailand a constitutional monarchy. Needless to say, he soon found himself exiled and punished.

23 Kalaya Kuetrakul's *Ratchakul Siam [Siam's royal families]* (Bangkok: Samnak Phim Gypsy, 2008), for example, lists the names of the offspring of Rama I to Rama V and their front palace princes, sometimes called deputy kings. The lists provide birth and death dates and the identity of the mothers, but only the names of the mothers are listed with no additional information.

Boonlua is not the first Thai author to use fantasy and feminist ideas to intrigue her readers. As discussed in Chapter 1, one of the earliest Thai novels is Khru Liam's *Sao song phan pi* [*The two-thousand-year-old maiden*], a translation of Rider Haggard's *She*, in which a country in Africa is ruled by a sorceress with magical powers.<sup>24</sup> One may also recall Luang Wichit's *Huang rak haew luk* [*Sea of love, chasm of death*], discussed in the previous chapter, whose main character is a woman who escaped prosecution for murder by leading a band of followers to Africa. In that adventure story, one of her entourage, also a woman, founded a country (queendom?) in Africa. The idea of fantasy and a place ruled by women were not new in Thai literature, but *Suratnari* is unusual in that the reversal of gender convention is almost total.

Boonlua's *siwilai* and her *watthanatham sung* may have led her to propose this audacious inversion of gender roles, but, in the end, her upper-class *phu di* upbringing prevented her from considering social egalitarianism as the ideal for Thai society. She admired Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, the military dictator from 1957 to 1963, who encouraged the young King Bhumibol to play a larger role in national affairs, enabling him to be regarded as the symbol of the Thai nation abroad, as well as at home. Sarit also extended the promotion of *siwilai* to include the concept of *phatthana* (development) as the next strategy for Thailand's progress and modernisation.<sup>25</sup> Perhaps Boonlua did not mind his dictatorship, which may have reminded her of how Thailand was ruled under absolute monarchy. Reflecting her support of development as a policy for national advancement, Boonlua argued in *Suratnari* that the common people should remain happy as long as there was food, running water, schools, electricity, roads and other amenities—benefits of *phatthana* proclaimed in banners, radio and television slogans during the Sarit era. In short, Boonlua's notion of Thai society was still a conservative and static one—the upper class should dominate state affairs while the common folks should remain docile and happy.

I am sure that even after reading Dr Kepner's excellent analysis of this novel, many of us would be eager to read, reread and reacquaint ourselves with Boonlua's novels. We should read *Suratnari* through a new lens

24 Nok Nori [pseud.], *Sao song phan pi* [*The two-thousand-year-old maiden*] (Bangkok: Dokya, 1990). Nok Nori was the pseudonym of Khru Liam. The translation was done in 1913, according to information in Rachel V. Harrison, *Disturbing conventions: Decentering Thai literary cultures* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014), 252. See also the discussion in Chapter 1, this volume.

25 See Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Thailand: The politics of despotic paternalism* (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2007; revised edition), 135–6, 167–75.

now that we have a better understanding of the author's character and background. However, we will not be the first because Dr Kepner also tells us that Thai literary scholars have already begun to reassess the significance of Boonlua's novels and to do their best to unearth the meanings and messages hidden in them.

Finally, I want to address how Boonlua responded to the challenge that Thai classical literature should be banned from schools and universities. When addressing a rather hostile audience at Thammasat University in 1974, Boonlua quieted the audience with her unconventional but sincere analysis of classical Thai literature, mooted the accusation that these works are nothing but instruments of the ruling class produced and circulated to legitimise its political power. She surprised her young listeners by telling them that they should not believe the conventional wisdom that the *Ramakian*, the Thai version of the *Ramayana*, written soon after the founding of Bangkok, which was intended to celebrate the life of the royals and to support the legitimacy of the new Chakri dynasty. She said that the royals in that story were weak:

As for Prince Rama, oh dear, he can't seem to do anything right, can he? ... The ruling class is good for nothing at all in the *Ramakian* ... Prince Rama himself is consumed with jealousy and he has a shocking inferiority complex ... As for the ruling class portrayed in *Khun Chang Khun Phaen*, can anyone who reads it say that it shows good rule? I say, we're awfully lucky not to have such a king ourselves ... In the *Ramakian*, Siva has power but not always the wisdom to use it properly ... Why don't we use this story to teach students about the *responsibility* that ought to accompany power?<sup>26</sup>

Once again, the *siwilai* Boonlua and the *watthanatham sung* Boonlua allowed the enigmatic Boonlua to look unconventionally and critically at literature, even foundational works such as the *Ramakian* and *Khun chang khun phaen*, and to speak her mind with confidence and conviction. Thus, even in the rapidly evolving Thailand of the 1970s, Boonlua, with her conservative and elitist sentiments, remained relevant, because she was able to articulate and to connect the conservative past to the contentious present in civil yet unconventional ways. In the end, she was grudgingly accepted by the radical students for what she was: *sakdina seri niyom*, a liberal aristocrat, and perhaps another name for a civilised woman.

---

26 Kepner, *A civilized woman*, 297, 299 (emphasis in the original).

This text is taken from *Read till it shatters: Nationalism and identity in modern Thai literature*, by Thak Chaloeontiarana, published 2018 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.