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Susan Fulop Kepner, *A Civilized Woman: M. L. Boonlua Debyasuvarn and the Thai Twentieth Century*

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Reviewed by Thak Chaloemtiarana.

Long-time admirers of Susan Fulop Kepner's translations and introductions to modern Thai literature have been waiting a decade and a half for this book. Most of us have read and used Dr Kepner's translations of Botan's *Letters from Thailand* [*Chotmai chak mueang thai*] (1977), Kampoon Boontawee's *A Child of the Northeast* [*Luk isan*] (1991), and her anthology of writing by Thai women *The Lioness in Bloom* (1996) to introduce modern Thai prose fiction to non-Thai readers.**(1)** We have heard of, if not read, her 1998 dissertation, written under the guidance of Professor Emeritus Herbert Phillips at Berkeley, and we wondered when we would have the chance to read a book version of that dissertation. The wait is now over, and Dr. Kepner has not disappointed us.

A Civilized Woman: M. L. Boonlua Debyasuvarn and the Thai Twentieth Century chronicles Boonlua's early upbringing as the youngest of thirty-two 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. Chris Baker published an excellent review

of this book in *The Bangkok Post* on 4 November. Those interested in a detailed synopsis of the book should read Chris Baker's insightful review. I shall focus here on more a general review of Dr Kepner's book, with particular attention to the depiction of the fading world of the Thai nobility after 1932 and especially to how elite upper class *phu dii* women as exemplified by Boonlua adjusted to political changes. I will also highlight Boonlua's difficult time working and dealing with the Thai bureaucracy, and finally examine Boonlua's views on the use and abuse of Thai literature.

The Biography

At first glance, aside from Dr Kepner's assertion and the confirmation by Professor Phillips—who interviewed and audiotaped her in 1966—that Boonlua Debyasuvarn (1911-1982) was famous, some less knowledgeable Thais, myself included, would not automatically think of her 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 in universities. In the minds of many of us, Boonlua's novels were not as successful as those of her better known sister M. L. Buppha, who used the pen name *Dok Mai Sot*. Boonlua admitted that she did not want to write novels because her elder sister was already famous and she did not want to be seen as the "other sister" who also wrote. This sentiment, tinged with a bit of resentment, may explain why Boonlua chose a different career path as an educator and literary critic. In the end, she even became known as an expert on *Dok Mai Sot*. Boonlua stayed away from writing novels until after she had retired from government service in 1970 and long after her sister had stopped writing. But this biography is not just about literature or Boonlua's contribution to how Thai literature is taught. It is more about how a woman from the ruling class adjusted to life after the fall of absolute monarchy.

A Civilized Woman relies extensively on Boonlua's autobiography *Khwam samret lae khwam lomlaew* [Successes and Failures], published to mark her sixtieth birthday in 1971. According to Sulak Sivarak, this autobiography has been considered one of the best Thai autobiographies because it did not focus just on the achievements of the writer, but it also highlighted her failures and disappointments. This autobiography was reprinted and given as a gift to those attending Boonlua's cremation in 1984. This volume was accompanied by a sister volume *Boon bamphen* [Religious observations for Boon]—whose title played on the word *boon*, which referred both to Boonlua and to Buddhist merit—in which her friends, husband and students wrote eulogies to celebrate her life. Dr Kepner used these volumes as the backbone for her dissertation and now 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 were also addressed.

Boonlua's autobiography told a very personal story. In many places, however, it lacked specific details, helpful markers and historical context. Her friends, family and those familiar with Thai history and culture might know what Boonlua was writing about. But for outsiders the autobiography could be puzzling and unclear. Dr Kepner's intervention provides much-needed details, names, substance, and context to the autobiography by connecting Boonlua's life to Thai history and including explanations of Thai behavior and culture when necessary. In fact, *A Civilized Woman* tells us more about Boonlua than her own autobiography. And for this we are grateful to Dr Kepner.

Boonlua's autobiography predated the appearance of her better known novels, especially *Suratnari* [The Land of Women], published in 1972. Before that she had published several novels, such as *Saphai maem* [Western Daughter-in-Law] in 1962 and *Thutiyawiset*—the name of a royal decoration conferred on wives of prominent officials—in 1968, but most of her writing was not as successful as her sister's. 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 submissions without asking her permission. As with other remarks 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 it 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—who 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 Chakkri Reign. Although all descendants of kings are related, in status-conscious Thai society, even among the nobility there are distinctions of rank that may appear confusing and even byzantine to the outside world. The rank order of Thai royalty is a descending one by generation. That is, by the third generation, the great grandson of a king holding the title *mom ratchawong* is no longer considered a prince or princess. Boonlua with the title *mom luang* was in the last generation of her line to claim a title, but she was not considered royalty.

Boonlua's pride in her birthright included the fact that her father was not only a *mom ratachawong* but he also held the royally conferred rank of *chao phraya*, the top rank of the Thai aristocracy [*khunnang*]. In many places in the autobiography Boonlua's identity as the daughter of a *chao phraya* was very important to her. To Boonlua, class and upbringing [*obrom*] determined who could be considered *phu dii*, or a cultured and upper-class person. The rest were common uncouth folks referred in Thai as *phrai*. At one point, an acquaintance retorted that Boonlua was always sickly because she was *phu dii*,

but the *phrai* were strong 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 a high ranking-prince for encouraging her even as a child not to take anything at face value and not to 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, to be analytical, and to be iconoclastic whenever possible. When she asked her father what he thought about the story of Moses parting the Red Sea that she learnt from the 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 looking 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 only a few in her autobiography. This is a conundrum. Given her great pride in 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 "*Somdet*" was *Somdet Chaofa Narisara Nuvatiwongse* or Prince Narit. *Somdet chaofa* is a title conferred on the son of a king born of a royal mother. When Prince Narit was born his rank was only *phra ong chao* (a grade lower than *chaofa*), 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 mystery of noble ranks sometimes led to misidentification. **(2)**

Although officially no longer considered a princess, Boonlua was proud of her heritage and continued to consider herself a member of the Thai nobility. In her autobiography, she said that her older siblings were told by her father to call *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 for 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 not allowing the children of the major wife to have higher status than the rest. 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 forty-two off-spring, Rama II seventy-three, Rama III fifty-one, Rama IV—despite his advanced age when he became king—eighty-four children, and Rama V ninety-seven. Although not all of the royal off-spring lived to adulthood, of those who did many became important players who helped guide Siam towards *siwilai,* toward making Siam a civilized nation. This system of polygyny and the practice of having many children also extended beyond the king to include other princes down the line. In Boonlua's case, her father had forty odd wives and thirty-two children. Boonlua, the youngest, was born when her father was fifty-nine years old.

This system of rule which relied on royal relatives began to unravel after Rama VI, and those who followed him became influenced by the European *siwilai* practice of monogamy. Rama VI had a daughter just before he died. Rama VII did not have any children, and neither did Rama 8. The number of high-ranking princes and princesses declined precipitously during the life-time 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 still quite considerable. But the end of absolute monarchy created a dilemma for the backlog of royal personalities up and down the hierarchy concerning their place in the new order. They would need to find ways to be contributing members of the new Siam.

Chris Baker wrote in his review of *A Civilized Woman*,

> The Thai aristocracy faced a crisis after 1932. They lost privileges and they lost purpose. Many of them spiralled [sic] 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.

Although I am in agreement with this astute observation, I contend that this adjustment was much harder for the women of the *phu dii* class, whose role was no longer just as mothers and wives who took care of aristocratic and noble men.

<u>The Loss of Privilege and the Plight of Upper-Class Women</u>

Both Boonlua and her more famous sister Buppha did not marry until late into their forties. Getting married for women of the *phu dii* class was not easy when they were required to marry men of the same or preferably higher status. As elite social circles shrunk in size, upper-class women had few choices for spouses. This may perhaps explain why both sisters married late, and why they married men who prior to 1932 would have been considered below their station. Democratic sentiments helped elevate former *phrai* or commoners to high-class status and allowed Buppha and Boonlua to marry. Sukit Nimmanhaemin, who married Buppha, and Chom Debyasuvarn, who married

Boonlua were in fact upper-class by the 1960s—the former a future ambassador and the latter a medical doctor—but it took many years before they could be acceptable to the families of the old *phu dii* elite. The plight of aging upper class women was the subject of Kulap Saipradit's famous novel *Khang lang phap* (Behind the Painting, 1938). In Kulap's novel the heroine, *Mom Ratchawong* Kirati (who held the same rank as Boonlua's father), a fading beauty decided that it was best to maintain her upper-class position by marrying *Chaokhun* (a form of address reserved for a person of the *phraya* and *chao phraya* rank). *Chaokhun* was an older man but his rank (the same rank of Boonlua's brother) 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 royal regime. Staying home as a noble or aristocratic old maid was no longer an option in modernizing 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 attend Chulalongkorn. 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 taken by her sister, Boonlua chose to become a teacher instead. Being 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 of most 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,

> 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 get his own rank and privileges. *But as the daughter*

> *of a chao 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.**(3)**

This pride in her heritage may explain several things—Boonlua's resentment of the new bureaucracy, in which officials failed to recognize her sacrifice and the noble way in which she went about doing a job that was beneath her station, and also 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, for example, 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 under-appreciated 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*, the daughter of a *chao phraya*, and an educated woman with degrees from Chulalongkorn and the University of Minnesota, that made her struggle as a civil servant. This, she identified as one of her major failures.

<u>Boonlua and the Thai Bureaucracy</u>

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 grades could be degrading. She lamented that the ability to perform a job was secondary to the grade one held or the degree one had. As a *mom luang*, the daughter of an aristocrat, and a *phu dii*, Boonlua could be out-spoken and confrontational, a bad combination in an organization that frowned upon such behavior. She attributed her

actions to her upbringing as a precocious child encouraged to speak her mind and to be critical by her father and *Somdet*. Boonlua also blamed her training in dance drama [*lakhon*], her mother's *métier*, for her 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 speaking her mind if it would benefit those under her charge even if 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. Boonlua seemed to get along better with international colleagues than with Thai ones.

In her cremation volume—a place where, traditionally, no one speaks ill of the dead—her former boss and close relative *Mom Luang* Pin Malakul, former Minister of Education 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 that Boonlua had to change jobs often was that she was a lady with "high culture" (*mii watthanatham soong*). I think that Pin was referring to Boonlua's *phu dii* 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 sixty, she wrote down her struggles and failures as a civil servant in her autobiography *Successes and Failures*.

Pin's remark about "high culture" is perhaps an apt description of Boonlua, and it refines the label given to her as a *siwilai* or civilized woman. The discourse on "*siwilai*" or "civilized" began during the reign of Rama IV, flourished during the Fifth and Sixth Reigns, and culminated in Phibun's ultra-nationalism of the 1930s and early 1940s. Making Siam *siwilai* was a strategy for the Siamese to escape colonization. It was based on the assumption that if the Siamese appeared to be civilized to the colonial powers then Siam would not become a target of the white man's civilizing *noblese oblige*. The process of *siwilai* included the incorporation of Western, mostly British, ways. Not only

should Siam 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 its male members were also high officials who embraced this strategy, she was *ipso facto* raised to become "*siwilai*", receiving the benefits of a modern and westernized education. She was also raised to be analytical and outspoken. I think that in Boonlua's mind she was a civilized woman by birth and upbringing. In Dr Kepner's biography, M. L. Pin's remarks were also cited. Interestingly, Dr Kepner translated *watthanatham soong* as "civilized" and not "high culture." Therefore, we should note that Dr Kepner's own use of "a civilized woman" to describe Boonlua conflates two Thai concepts—*siwilai* and *watthanatham soong*. The two terms are different, but together they describe the enigma that was Boonlua. She was brought up to be *siwilai* but her high ideals and pride in being *phu dii* and holding onto *watthanatham soong* defined how she lived.

Although Dr Kepner skillfully 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, this biography can provide a credible and accessible introduction to some aspects of Thai history. However, my own enjoyment in reading this biography is to compare it mentally with Kukrit Pramote's *Sii phaendin* [Four Reigns, 1953], a novel about political change in Thailand from the time of Rama V to the death of Rama VIII. Both novel and biography looked at 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 than Boonlua. She longed for the fading *chao wang* (palace people) lifestyle centered on the royal court and palace. Written in 1953, Kukrit's novel was a nostalgic trip down memory lane that highlighted warm feelings for the monarchy and 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 followed by the sudden death of Rama VIII threatened the future and relevance of the monarchy in Thailand. Royalists like Kukrit carefully planned campaigns to revive the monarchy and to make it central once again in Thai life. The publication of *Four Reigns* was part of that attempt. 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 also lived under four reigns (Rama VI-Rama IX). She was not a romantic observer but an active participant in the exigencies of Thai history. More importantly, Dr Kepner's version of *Four Reigns* chronicles the difficulty for members of the old elite, in this case a woman, 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 and real.

The Use and Abuse of Literature

I end this review by addressing 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 and fascinated by Dr. Kepner's introduction of Boonlua's five major novels to her readers. 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 review, I took an inventory of the directories that list prominent Thai authors and their works in my own library and discovered that none included Boonlua in their list of famous Thai authors. The one place that I found her name mentioned was in the *Saranukrom naenam nangsu dii 100 lem* [Introduction to the Best 100 Books], published in 1999). Boonlua was cited there for her article on literary criticism, written to honor the life of Prince Wan Waithayakorn on his eightieth birthday in 1971. Had she lived, she would have been pleased that in the

Introduction to the Best 100 Books she had achieved the same recognition as her sister *Dok Mai Sot.*

Prior to the intervention by Boonlua, Thai literature as taught in secondary schools and universities was divided into classical literature (*wannakhadi*) and contemporary literature (*wannakam*). *Wannakhadi* held a higher status than *wannakam*. This somewhat elitist view became the subject of debate during the brief open democratic period between the 14 October 1973 event and the 6 October 1976 massacre of students at Thammasat University. Before she was asked to participate in a debate on 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 texts (especially *lakhon*), classical texts and contemporary prose fiction. She also tried to implement such a curriculum while serving in her last official post as Dean of the Faculty of Arts at the new campus of the Fine Arts University in Nakhon Pathom. But she failed.

Although trained in the classics from the time she was a young child, Boolua also understood why younger generations 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 *wannakhadi*. This fact automatically disqualifies the majority of all Thais except those who studied literature in the university. It is interesting to note that towards the end of her life Boonlua devoted her energies to modern prose fiction—reading, criticizing, and writing novels. Unlike classical literature, which was animated by courtly panache, specialized knowledge of religion, and the sonority of language, modern literature's dynamism is derived from a spirit of realism, immediacy and narrative honesty. Prose fiction, which appeared in Siam at the turn of the twentieth century, was readily embraced as the modern form of entertainment that anyone literate in the Thai language could

appreciate and enjoy. But Boonlua wanted her novels to have more meaning than just mere entertainment.

Chapter 8 of *A Civilized Woman*, "The Uses of Fiction", 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 has shared her thought about them in this fascinating chapter. Of the five novels, Dr Kepner focused her analysis on the two major ones, *Thutiyawiset* and *Suratnari*.

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 was about ambition, greed, how power corrupts, and the important role that women played in post 1932 Siam. 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 endeavor, including national leadership.

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

Suratnari tells a story about the encounter of ship-wrecked travelers in a country ruled by women. The inhabitants were Thai and so were two of the leading male characters whose ship sank in a storm. In 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 have 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 fetus), 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 Siam visitors (and her Thai readers). Moreover, the novel was not very entertaining because it constantly distracted readers and provoked them 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 Siam should make major political reforms if it was to survive. In the novel, the Thai visitors also noticed that the marginalized 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 became a colony of Great Britain. Although the inversion of gender roles and standing convention on its head were puzzling at first glance, upon critical examination, Boonlua's novel was clearly a commentary on a 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 Thai society.

Suratnari is just as enigmatic as Boonlua. 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, of Moses, and of the parting of the Red Sea, I am sure that *Suratnari* was written with a like sensibility. Surat women may have many men as wives and keep all their children, but in the final analysis their lives were still different from those of

the men of male-dominated Siam. We have seen how the kings and male nobles had hundreds of off-springs to help 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 twenty children at most. And unlike the real Siam, bearing children by female leaders can be fatal to the mother. Books that list the off-springs 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. In male-centric Siam, fathers doted on their children, who carried their bloodline into the future, but Boonlua may have noticed that her own father failed to honor his forty-odd wives adequately.

Boonlua is not the first Thai author to use fantasy and feminist ideas to intrigue her readers. One of the earliest novels read by Thais is Khru Liam's translation of Rider Haggard's She [*Sao song phan pii*, most likely published in 1915], in which a country was ruled by a woman with magical powers. One may also recall Luang Wichit's *Huang rak haew luk* [Sea of Love, Chasm of Death], published in 1949. This novel's main character was 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 (a queendom?) in Africa. The idea of fantasy and of a place ruled by women was not new in Thai literature. But *Suratnari* was unusual in that reversal of gender conventions in the novel was almost total.

Boonlua's *siwilai* and *watthanatham soong* may have allowed her to propose this audacious inversion of gender roles, but in the end her upper class *phu dii* upbringing failed to allow her to consider social egalitarianism as the ideal for Thai society. She admired the military dictator Sarit Thanarat (in power 1957-1963), who allowed the young King Bhumibol to play a larger role in national affairs and to be regarded as the symbol of the Thai nation both abroad and 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 modernization. Perhaps Boonlua did not mind his dictatorship, which may

have reminded her of how Siam 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—the 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, re-read and re-acquaint ourselves with Boonlua's novels. I will soon read *Suratnari* through a new lens now that I have a better understanding of the author's character and background. However, I will not be the first to do so. Dr Kepner also tells us that 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.

To end this review, I want to address Boonlua response to the challenge that Thai classical literature should be banned from schools and universities. When addressing a somewhat hostile audience at Thammasat University in 1974, Boonlua quieted the audience with her unconventional but sincere analysis of classical Thai literature, muting the accusation that it was nothing but an instrument of the ruling class produced and circulated to legitimize its political power. She surprised her young listeners by telling them that they should not believe that the *Ramakian* (the Thai version of the *Ramayana*), written soon after the founding of Bangkok, was intended to celebrate the life of the royals and to support the legitimacy of the new Chakkri 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?"**(4)**

Once again, the "*siwilai*" Boonlua and the "*watthanatham soong*" Boonlua allowed the enigmatic Boonlua to look unconventionally and critically at literature, even foundational texts 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 and unconventional ways. In the end, she was grudgingly accepted by the radical students for what she was—*sakdina seri niyom*—a liberal aristocrat, perhaps another name for *a civilized woman*.

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Notes

1. Botan, *Letters from Thailand*, Susan Fulop Kepner Morell trans. (Bangkok : D. K. Book House, 1977); Kampoon Boontawee, *A Child of the Northeast*, Susan Fulop Kepner trans. (Bangkok: Editions Duangkamol, 1988); Susan Fulop Kepter ed. and trans.,The Lioness in Bloom: Modern Thai Fiction about Women (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

2. For example, Prince Wan Waithayakorn is misidentified in the biography as the son of King Chulalongkorn. In fact, Prince Wan held a bureaucratic title that was similar to his father and the two could easily be mistaken for each other. Prince Wan's father, *Krommamuen Narathip Praphan Phong* was Chulalongkorn's half-brother. His son Prince Wan born a *mom chao* was later elevated to *phra ong chao* and conferred the title *Krommamuen Narathip Phong Praphan*. He is known as the creator of modern Thai words, a prince who was friendly with the leaders of the People's Party that overthrew absolute monarchy, ambassador to the US, president of the United Nations General Assembly, and Minister of Foreign Affairs.

3. Kepner, *A Civilized Woman*, page 207. Original quotation in *Boon bamphen*, page 33.

4. *Ibid*., pp. 297 and 299.