

THE “IDEAL” WOMAN FROM THAI AND CHINESE
CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES
--A COMPARATIVE STUDY ON THE HEROINES
IN *FOUR REIGNS* and *A DREAM OF RED MANSIONS*

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วรรณกรรมเป็นสิ่งสะท้อนของสังคมและชีวิตความเป็นจริง วิทยานิพนธ์เล่มนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์ที่จะพิจารณามาตรฐานของ “อุดมคติ” เกี่ยวกับผู้หญิงในประเทศไทยและประเทศจีน โดยระเบียบวิธีการเปรียบเทียบวรรณกรรม เพื่อศึกษาวิจัยวรรณกรรมเรื่อง *สี่แผ่นดิน* ของม.ร.ว. คึกฤทธิ์ ปราโมชและ *ความฝันในหอแดง* ของเฉา เสวี่ย ฉิน (Cao Xue Qin) ซึ่งเป็นวรรณกรรมสองเรื่องที่มีชื่อเสียงมากของ ไทยและจีน

วิทยานิพนธ์เล่มนี้จะสำรวจความเหมือนกันและความต่างกันในด้านของค่านิยมเกี่ยวกับผู้หญิง ตลอดจนคุณธรรมและพฤติกรรมของผู้หญิงในสองประเทศนี้จากตัวละคร “พลอย” ในเรื่อง *สี่แผ่นดิน* กับ “เป่า ไช” ในเรื่อง *ความฝันในหอแดง* และจากมุมมองต่างๆ เช่น มุมมองด้านศาสนา มุมมองด้าน ความงามของวรรณกรรมและมุมมองด้านสังคม

จากวิทยานิพนธ์เล่มนี้ เราสามารถสรุปได้ว่า ไม่ว่าจะในประเทศไทยหรือประเทศจีน ผู้หญิงต้อง ปฏิบัติตัวตามค่านิยมทางวัฒนธรรมและสังคมที่เก่าแก่ แม้ว่าในสังคมปัจจุบัน ทั้งผู้หญิงไทยและผู้หญิง จีนมีความอิสระภาพมากกว่าสมัยก่อน แต่สังคมยังคงคาดหวังให้ผู้หญิงแบกรับความรับผิดชอบด้าน ครอบครัวให้มากกว่าความรับผิดชอบด้านสังคม และวิทยานิพนธ์เล่มนี้ยังสามารถสร้างให้เกิดความ เข้าใจที่ลึกซึ้งเกี่ยวกับวัฒนธรรมไทยและจีน ผ่านนวนิยายสองเรื่องนี้ และอาจจะเป็นเครื่องบันดาลใจ ให้ผู้หญิงสมัยใหม่พยายามสร้างความเท่าเทียมกันอย่างแท้จริงระหว่างหญิงและชายในสองวัฒนธรรมนี้

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HEROINES IN *FOUR REIGNS* AND *A DREAM OF RED MANSIONS*

ADVISOR: ASSOC. PROF SUCHITRA CHONGSTITVATANA, Ph. D., 173 pp.

Literature is the reflection of society and life, this thesis intends to discuss about the standard of “ideal” woman in Thailand and China through the parallel study method in comparative literature, through the analysis and study of the texts of *Four Reigns* of M.R. Kukrit Pramoj and *A Dream of Red Mansions* of Cao Xue Qin, two masterpieces in Thai and Chinese literary history.

This thesis will explore the similarities and differences in the value of women, as well as moral codes of female behavior between the two countries from two female characters: “Phloi” in *Four Reigns* and “Bao Chai” in *A Dream of Red Mansions*, and from different perspectives such as: religious perspective, literary aesthetic perspective and the social perspective.

From this thesis, it can be concluded that in Thai and Chinese society, women must adhere to the traditional cultural values. Even in the modern society, both Thai and Chinese women are more independent than before, but they are still expected to take more family responsibility than social responsibility. This thesis also will be helpful to enhance and deepen the understanding of Thai and Chinese culture through the two novels, in order to inspire modern women to make greater efforts in improving the true gender equality in these two cultures.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

1.1 Rational and Background

Both *Four Reigns*, which was created by the famous Thai writer M.R. Kukrit Pramoj, and *A Dream of Red Mansions*, which was written by Cao Xue Qin, a Chinese writer in the Qing Dynasty, are landmarks in the literary history of Thailand and China. *Four Reigns* was written in the mid-20th century, reflecting the changes in the modern history of Thailand. *A Dream of Red Mansions* was written in 1784, which is the middle of the Qing Dynasty, and reflects the vicissitudes of the aristocratic families between the different regimes. Although the historical background and chronology of the two novels is different, both are based on historical fact through a description of “the changes of the royal family and political system” and “the changes of family and regimes,” while the view in the two novels on women is based on the breaking up and elimination of the feudal social cage and imprisonment. At the same time, the two novels also show similar and different interpretations of the character of the “ideal” woman and an image of Thailand and China.

A Dream of Red Mansions is a monumental depiction about women and women’s activities. This novel provides a lot of excellent quality images of women. Through the portrait of a group of women, the writer uses his unique perspective and comprehensive description, to display fully the spiritual world and cultural character of Chinese women in the feudal era, showing their awakening senses of autonomy and rebellious spirits, as well as the unique and progressive views on women of Cao Xue Qin, the writer. Each of

the female characters has a special and self-distinctive personality. This thesis will try to show, through one of the main characters in *A Dream of Red Mansions* – “Bao Chai”, how Chinese people and Chinese society since ancient times have required and expected women to possess an “ideal” image.

Four Reigns relates the life experience and stories of an aristocratic woman, reflecting the important era of transition from absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy in Thai history. A view of women is not the writer’s main intention, nor the historical significance of the novel; but the protagonist and her lifelong companions throughout the novel are all women, with distinctive and representative characters, so definitely the view on women under traditional Thai culture can be extracted from this novel. From *Four Reigns*, we can also find what kind of conditions and requirements the Thai people and Thai society demand from women in order to be “ideal” or “perfect”.

Both China and Thailand are located in Asia, and share a similar culture and tradition; the attitudes and perceptions towards women of the two countries have many similarities as well, which can be seen from the two novels. But the differences in the development of the history of the two countries also indicate that there are many differences in the view of women between the two countries.

This thesis intends to compare these two masterpieces in Thai and Chinese literary history, in order to analyze and explore the similarities and differences between Thailand and China with respect to the view of the “ideal” woman. Both of the writers are male, and both were born in social systems dominated by male discourse: the feudal society of China and the stage of transition from the feudal society to capitalist society in Thailand.

Thus, the image of an “ideal” woman envisaged by the male writers from the novels must be created and imagined through the impact of male ideology and the related social background. This attitude towards the image of an “ideal” woman has had a profound impact on modern women in both Thailand and China, and also will be helpful to inspire modern women to make greater efforts in improving their status and fighting for true gender equality in these two countries.

1.2 Literature Review

To date, there is no research devoted to a comparison between *Four Reigns* and *A Dream of Red Mansions* directly, and no scholars have performed a comparative analysis between the two heroines “Phloi” and “Bao Chai” in the two novels. However there has been a lot of research and studies conducted on the two novels. “Phloi” in *Four Reigns* displays the best quality of a Thai woman in that period and represents the highest expectations for the characteristics Thais and Thai women should have from the whole Thai society, thus she has won praise and applause from many readers and commentators. But when talking about the shaping of the image of “Phloi”, M.R. Kukrit Pramoj, the writer of *Four Reigns*, gave a very surprising comment: “*Mother Phloi is very unsophisticated...most people are only at Mother Phloi’s own level: they are bloody stupid...*”¹

With respect to *A Dream of Red Mansions*, since ancient times, the research and study of this novel has never stopped, although “Dai Yu” is typically the main character used to

¹ จิตวา กลิ่นสุนทร และคณะกองบรรณาธิการ, สัมภาษณ์ผู้เขียน ที่แผ่นดิน ๒, ถนนหนังสือ, สุวิทย์ ว่องวิระ, *ปีเตอร์ที่ถือลูกศร ฟินิจี่แผ่นดิน*, สำนักพิมพ์ดอกหญ้า (1988), p141.

compare with other main female characters in Western literature or literature of other countries. “Bao Chai” is one of the main female characters in this novel, although the discussions about her are quite controversial; some critics believe that she is duplicitous and worldly-wise; she is also the destroyer of the love between “Bao Yu” and “Dai Yu”. However, there still are many commentators who think that her personality was formed under a social and family background, that are the proper characteristics of a Chinese woman to fit in that period, and the characteristics a Chinese woman should have in the modern society.

Although there is no literature to compare the two novels and the two heroines directly, from previous research on the subjects related to the two novels, we can see the main point of views from the following aspects:

1.1.1 Research on *Four Reigns* and “Phloi”:

With the success of “*Four Reigns*”, “Phloi” became a very famous female character, and she has been accepted by most Thai people as a typical “perfect” woman in Thai society, especially among well-educated middle and high class people in Thailand. But the discussions and judgments about Mae Phloi have never stopped; while she represents the “ideal” image that Thai women should have, at the same time, she is a complete watcher, always outside the changing world. Thai scholars discuss Phloi from different point of views as follows:

“Phloi” is the perfect woman in Thai people’s imagination, and this is the main point of view of many scholars as reflected in *Phloi Stupid? Phloi old-fashioned? Phloi clumsy?* (พลอยโง่? พลอยเชย? พลอยซื่อ?); Phloi is the most attractive character in this novel, readers love

her, feel sympathy for her, understand her, and are willing to share her happiness and pain because Phloi is such a gentle, kind-hearted, generous woman, and always forgiving of other people who treat her badly.

*“Phloi is gentle and sweet, she never acts like a ‘high’ person, although she has the right to be ‘high’, but she always keeps herself as a ‘normal’ person, which attracts the readers of ‘Four Reigns’ feel that ‘she is me, she is the Thai, this is how Thai people are.”*²

Contrary to this opinion, there are scholars who think Phloi is just an old-traditional woman in that period, who is always walking behind the era or period, she refuses to follow change, or she does not know the real meaning of change. In *The 20 Best Novels of Thailand*, Marcel Barang comments regarding Mae Phloi:

*“Dies a woman who has seen too much and understood too little...Her world is narrow, her interests narrower still...To her, changes are upsetting or harmful, and, since she does not even try to understand what is going on, they are always unexpected.”*³

The opinion of Phloi is quite similar to how the writer of this novel, M.R. Kukrit Pramoj thinks about Phloi as he said: *“Mae Phloi is very unsophisticated... Thai readers are delighted, they see her as absolutely sublime, because they themselves are like that, they know nothing better. Most people are only at Mae Phloi’s own level: they are bloody stupid.”*⁴

In addition to the arguments about Mae Phloi’s personality, there are also articles regarding the connection or reflection of feminism in this novel, from which we can see

² รัญจวน อินทรกำแหง, สุวิทย์ ว่องวิระ, โง่? พลอยเซ่? พลอยเซ่อ?, *นิเวศน์ศิลปกรรม พิธีกรรมสัมพันธ์*, สำนักพิมพ์ดอกหญ้า (1988), p144.

³ Marcel Barang, *The 20 Best Novels of Thailand*, Thai fiction Publishing (January 01, 2004), p285.

⁴ Marcel Barang, *The 20 Best Novels of Thailand*, Thai fiction Publishing (January 01, 2004), p285.

the way Mae Phloi behaves. *Mae Phloi and Feminism* (แม่พลอยกับเฟมินิซึม) by Phonsawan Suwanthada aimed to analyze the role of Mae Phloi based on feminist theory (feminism), and the main point of the author is that no matter how perfect Phloi is, she is only the imagination of men under a patriarchal society.

*“The study found that her personalities conformed to the woman type which women are supposed to be. That is, these personalities included her gorgeous appearance, her good social etiquette, and her great mind. Not only could she play the role as a mother, a wife, and a daughter to perfection, but she slightly held latent force in control of her family. This type of woman was typically accepted by men in the society (patriarchy) where there was a sense of their superiority over women.”*⁵

Another Thai scholar, Orathai Piayura, also made the same comment on the image of Phloi in *Si Phaendin and the Construction of the Female Gender Role*. According to this scholar, in literary studies, gender is a determinate factor of how texts are written and read, and how women are represented is restricted by conventional stereotypes, to be discussed, exchanged and evaluated by men, which can be seen very clearly from the image of Phloi:

“Phloi was presented according to ‘the good woman’ stereotype in Thai society. She enjoyed being a good daughter, good wife and good mother. These characteristics of Phloi were composed by a male writer whose imagination was framed by patriarchy. Her

⁵ พงษ์สวรรค์ สุวรรณชาติ, แม่พลอยกับเฟมินิซึม.

happiness was also presented from the male writer's point of view which may not be genuine happiness as a woman."⁶

1.1.2 Research on *A Dream of Red Mansions* and "Bao Chai":

Although there has been a lot of research on *A Dream of Red Mansions*, studies on the concept of the point of view of the females in this novel started quite late. While many commentators agree that *A Dream of Red Mansions* shows strong female worship, some have analyzed its underlying values and significance based on "female worship". In *The Interpretation of 'Female Worship' Value of A Dream of Red Mansions* by Fu Li, the author thinks that from the perspective of life in *A Dream of Red Mansions*, the value of female worship is full of originality and enlightenment:

*"The value of female worship is to get rid of ignorance and assimilation of orthodox powers consciously, to confirm the values of their own and others, to resist the humanity being defiled by the feudal autocracy and secular utility, and to show the nobility and dignity of life in the truly humane sense."*⁷

In *Chivalry and 'Female Worship'—the Discussion about the Female Position in A Dream of Red Mansions* by Liu Zaifu, the author indicates that female should include motherhood, wifehood and girlhood, but Cao Xue Qin seemed to adore "girlhood" too much, and therefore belittled the "womanhood" of females:

⁶ Orathai piayura, Si Phaendin and the Construction of the Female Gender Role, *มนุษยศาสตร์ สังคมศาสตร์* 28 (3) ก.ย. – ธ.ค. 54.

⁷ Fu Li, *The Interpretation of 'Female Worship' Value of A Dream of Red Mansions*.

*“In his worldview, females are only standing on the other side of the muddy world in their youth, once married, those females will be out of the purified world and into the muddy world, and it’s hard to keep their true and original status anymore.”*⁸

Some commentators suggest that the point of view of the female in *A Dream of Red Mansions* is an expression of criticizing and reflecting on the patriarchal culture. Tang Longfa, in *Feminist Problem is the Theme of A Dream of Red Mansions*, thinks that *A Dream of Red Mansions* reveals that patriarchy is the root causing the tragedy of women:

*“Once women are contaminated by the patriarchal marriage system, they will trap themselves into another form of tragedy, that’s why Bao Yu doesn’t want girls to get married.”*⁹

However, there are commentators with the opposite opinion who think that the point of view of the female in *A Dream of Red Mansions* still does not break through the range of the mainstream culture dominated by the male. Cui Jingjing, in *The Discrimination on the Gender Perspective of A Dream of Red Mansions*, thinks the concept of the “female” in *A Dream of Red Mansions* is symbolized by the writer:

*“Worshipping females is just the sustenance of spiritual pursuit of male literati, they express sympathy for the female from the surface, but in essence, this sympathy is with strong male aesthetic meaning, the main characters of this book are females, but it’s from a male perspective and foothold.”*¹⁰

According to Cao Xue Qin, even young girls are separated to different levels. The concept of the “female” has always been incomplete in *A Dream of Red Mansions*; the

⁸ Liu Zaifu, *Chivalry and ‘Female Worship’—the Discussion about the Female Position in A Dream of Red Mansions*.

⁹ Tang Longfa, *Feminist Problem is the Theme of A Dream of Red Mansions*.

¹⁰ Cui Jingjing, *The Discrimination on the Gender Perspective of A Dream of Red Mansions*.

concept has been symbolized, purified and broke down, but the pursuit of the literati and imagination of men is hidden behind those operations.

In conclusion, in different historical periods, the interpretation of the point of view of females in *A Dream of Red Mansions* changes because every period has its own mainstream culture; when the mainstream culture changes, the interpretation changes correspondingly. Even in the same period, different angles also make for various interpretations, which also show that the point of view of the female in *A Dream of Red Mansion* is a lasting topic, with multi-faceted and multi-angle rich connotation. However, throughout all the studies and research on the point of view of females in *A Dream of Red Mansions*, there are still weaknesses. Although there are many research papers discussing this topic, a more in-depth and systematic theoretical system has not yet been formed. The research on the female concept in this novel still lacks a more reasonable frame of reference; some of the articles and studies simply mocked the Western feminist theory, showing a lack of deep understanding of the independent character and rich content of the female concept in *A Dream of Red Mansions*, and ignore the particular soil and situation of Chinese history and culture.

In the beautiful and colorful female world in *A Dream of Red Mansions*, there is no other character who will arouse such a heated controversy as “Bao Chai”. Among the academic studies on *A Dream of Red Mansions*, there are two factions - “Pro-Dai Yu” and “Pro-Bao Chai”, - both of them diametrically opposed to each other which leads to endless debate, and is not only related to the creation method of Cao Xue Qin, but also related to the specific morality of readers in different periods. The discussions regarding

“Bao Chai” can be mainly divided into two factions: “Anti-Bao Chai” and “Pro-Bao Chai”.

In fact, although there are discussions and different opinions about Bao Chai, even the “pro-Bao Chai” fraction will mention Bao Chai’s tragic end after praising her at great length. This means that no matter how Bao Chai’s character is in line with the requirements for women in traditional Chinese society and the ethical morality under the feudal system, she is still a victim controlled by the male chauvinism in that era and system, no matter how “perfect” she is, she is unable to break through herself and achieve her real needs as a woman, as mentioned in *Bao Chai-the tragedy of perfect women* by Lei Zhenhua:

*“Among the collision between Confucianism and self-actualization, Bao Chai - this suffering soul hovers between heaven and hale ends with the tragedy of perfectionist.”*¹¹

1.3 Objectives

1. To explore the representation of the “ideal” woman in Thai and Chinese society in *FOUR REIGNS* and *A DREAM OF RED MANSIONS*;
2. To compare the similarities and differences of the “ideal” woman in Thai and Chinese cultures from social, religious and literary aesthetic perspectives.

1.4 Hypothesis / Major Argument

¹¹ Lei Zhenhua, *Bao Chai-the tragedy of perfect women* .

1. Although Thailand and China have different historical backgrounds, they share similarities in the values of women, as well as moral codes of female behavior.

2. The heroines of the two texts show that the main part of the value of women or the standard of the “ideal” woman in Thailand and China must adhere to traditional cultural values.

1.5 Research Methodology

1.5.1 This thesis will use the parallel study method in comparative literature research, through the analysis and study of the texts of *Four Reigns* of Thailand and *A Dream of Red Mansions* of China, which have no direct impact and exchange with each other, in order to compare the similarity and difference during the shaping of the image of the “ideal” woman in Thailand and China.

1.5.2 The comparison will focus on the characters and behaviors of the two heroines in the two novels from the historical background, cultural tradition, religious influence, as well as the social and family role of women in the two countries.

1.6 Scope of Study

This thesis will discuss the view of women and the practical meaning for society nowadays as reflected from two novels, *Four Reigns* of Thailand and *A Dream of Red Mansions* of China.

1.6.1 This thesis is using the English version of *Four Reigns* translated by Tulachandra, and published by Silkworm Books. The reason to choose this English

version of *Four Reigns* translated by Tulachandra is because this is the most accepted version and the most accurate English translated version for *Four Reigns*.

1.6.2 For *A Dream of Red Mansions*, this thesis uses both the Chinese version and English version translated by Yang Xianyi. As a native Chinese speaker, it is better for me to read the Chinese version as my mother language. In addition, there are two English versions of this novel. One is translated by David Hawks, the first English translated version of *A Dream of Red Mansions*. His version is considered by many to be the canonical English version of the text, but there are still some parts which do not conform to the Chinese tradition and local religion in the text. The second version is translated by Yang Xianyi and his wife Gladys B. Taylor; the language of this version is not as gorgeous as Hawks' version, but Yang Xianyi is Chinese and his version is more accurate to the Chinese original text; that is why I choose this version to use in writing this thesis.

1.7 Definition of “ideal” used in this thesis

The definition of “ideal” can be divided into different types, for example: from mathematics aspect, from a social science aspect, even from a chemistry and physics aspect. But in this thesis, we will talk about the definition of “ideal” from a literary aspect.

From the Oxford Dictionaries, when “ideal” is an adjective, there are two meanings: the first one is “*satisfying one’s conception of what is perfect or most suitable*”¹²; the second one is “*existing only in the imagination, desirable or perfect but not likely to become a reality.*”¹³ As a noun, “ideal” means “*a person or thing regarded as perfect, or*

¹² “ideal”, Oxford Dictionaries [Online], Source <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/ideal>.

¹³ “ideal”, Oxford Dictionaries [Online], Source <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/ideal>.

a standard of principle to be aimed at.”¹⁴ This is the definition of “ideal” from a literary aspect which will be used in this thesis to describe the two heroines from the two novels.

1.8 Significance and Usefulness of the Research

1.8.1 To provide further understanding of the similarities and differences.

1.8.2 To deepen the understanding of notions of the “ideal” woman from Thai and Chinese cultural perspectives.

¹⁴ “ideal”, Oxford Dictionaries [Online], Source <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/ideal>.

CHAPTER II

Synopsis of Four Reigns and A Dream of Red Mansions

To discuss the two female characters in *Four Reigns* and *A Dream of Red Mansions*, we need to have a general understanding about these two masterpieces in Thai and Chinese literary history. In this chapter, I will introduce the main contents and the backgrounds of the two novels, as well as the writing intention of the two authors, in order to show that to choose “Phloi” and “Bao Chai” is not a coincidence, but has some necessary reasons.

2.1 Introduction of *Four Reigns* and M.R. Kukrit Pramoj;

Four Reigns, a masterpiece of the famous Thai contemporary author M.R. Kukrit Pramoj, is more of an epic that reflects the national destiny and the revolution of the Thai nation; an encyclopedia which reflects the development of more than 50 years of modern society in Thailand. M.R. Kukrit Pramoj was well versed in historical dialogue, and he reproduced this meaningful history in an artistic way in *Four Reigns*. In this novel, there are two clear historical clues. One clue is the “real” changes in the Thai Royal dynasty in history, which runs more than 50 years during four reigns of Thai kings, from King Rama V in the late 19th century to King Rama VIII in the middle of 20th century, and covers all of the developments of diplomatic and domestic activities in Thailand during these four reigns. Another clue is the history of four generations in Phloi’s family; Phloi’s parents to Phloi, and Phloi’s children and grandchildren. However the author not only showed his

own historical knowledge with abstract deduction, he also seizes the two clues to deepen the understanding and interpretation of the relationship between history and people.

Four Reigns began to be serialized in *Siamrat* in 1950, and since the novel was published in the newspaper, the intriguing plots and vivid characters closely attracted many readers. Soon after the novel was published, it set off a stir of interest in *Four Reigns* in Thailand. Many readers wrote to ask whether the novel was based on a true story, to which, M.R. Kukrit Pramoj replied:

*“Phloi is just a character from my imagination, there is no prototype of this character.”*¹⁵

He also indicated that although all the characters are not real, the background of this story is completely true.

Four Reigns reflects the modern history of Thailand from King Rama V to King Rama VIII. The author describes vividly the thoughts, feelings, emotions, personalities, language and the destiny of the characters, in order to show the history during that period. The plots and main characters are not real; the author only builds a historical narrative frame for those characters; the frame consisting the important historical events and social modality that occurred in Thailand during that period.

The author focused on the changes in the court, specifically writing about the history and destiny of the noble family of Phloi, which had some underlying reasons. In the mid-19th century, Western colonizers came to Asia and knocked on the door of Siam, and the Western material and spiritual civilization impacted the old customs and traditional way

¹⁵ ลีลาฤทธิ์ ปราโมช, แม่พลอยมีตัวจริง?, จาก *พิเคราะห์ลึกลับที่พิบิจิตต์แผ่นดิน*, p9.

of life of Siam. Notwithstanding, King Rama IV advocated learning from the West. The important political and social reforms of King Rama V, the “new look in the court” of King Rama VI, and the situation beset with difficulties at home and abroad, along with the outbreak of the bourgeois revolution during the reign of King Rama VII, all show that the characteristics of the era were the alternation between old society and new society, a decline of royal power and nobility, the invasion of bourgeois ideology and the modernization of the lifestyle. Another characteristic of the social movements during this period was the change from high class to low class, which did not have as much impact on the low class people, as on the court and nobility. At the same time, the revolution or the reforms advocated by the court and nobility accelerated the historical process of their decline and fall.

Phloi experienced and witnessed such events as the king visiting Western countries, the queen assisting in the affairs of state, men and women hugging and dancing, the king and queen performing on the stage and banquets not being seated by title. The nobles were worried about the changes in the court, which also aroused Phloi’s imagination of the future, as if she had been awakened from a long and old dream, feeling herself standing on the edge of the new era which was just born or was about to be born. But her childhood education and the characteristics of her personality stopped her from stepping further; she felt bewildered, confused and had to obey someone else’s arrangement. She was inducted into the trend of the period, but never really understood the era.

Phloi is the main character who runs through the whole story. Her life and experience sums up the social changes during those several decades in Thailand. She is pure,

beautiful, gentle, well behaved, submissive - the typical image of a boudoir lady, good wife and mother in that era. She has the traditional virtues and noble sentiments of Thai women, but also has the imprint of feudal ethics and a suffering spiritual life left from her unhappy family. She ever had true love when she was a young girl, but never had happiness from true love in her later marriage. Readers enjoy and like this character, and feel sympathy for her life because humiliation, patience, obedience and the Buddhist doctrine could easily be found in her “virtues”. She has gone through four reigns, “*lived a long time – long enough....*”¹⁶ The death of her husband, the demise of King Rama VIII, and the old house she lived for several decades being bombed made her feel the old life was buried. She was distressed, both physically and mentally, and her life ended.

M.R. Kukrit Pramoj was a royalist, writer, journalist, historian, Buddhist thinker, dancer, movie actor, businessman, banker, elder statesman and latter-day pillar of democracy; but also a famous politician and former prime minister who played a very important role in the Thai political arena. He entered politics when he was 35 years old, was a member of parliament, chairman of parliament, cabinet minister and the 37th Prime Minister of Thailand. In 1975, M.R. Kukrit Pramoj stood his ground, prevailed over all dissenting views, and led a delegation to visit China, signing the Sino-Thai Joint Communiqué with then-Prime Minister Zhou En Lai of China, which also led to the formal establishment of diplomatic relations between Thailand and China. M.R. Kukrit Pramoj is a well-known writer as well, with even more far-reaching impact on the literary world than the political. He founded the largest circulation newspaper in Thailand:

¹⁶ MR Kukrit Pramoj, Four Reigns, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p 656.

Siamrat. As a scholar, he wrote many non-fiction works ranging from history and religion to astrology. Most notable are his epics and many short stories portraying various aspects of life and documenting contemporary history. He was a leading authority on traditional Thai culture and had a polymathic range of interests from classical dance to literature. Most famous for his literary works, he was named a National Artist of Thailand for literature in 1985, the inaugural year for the honor.

M.R. Kukrit Pramoj was born into an aristocratic family; his father was Phra Ong Jao Khamrop, a prince, a former palace security officer and a provincial army commander, who later became the first chief of police in Siam; his mother was Mom Daeng, nee Bunnak. Accordingly, he was also known as a staunch loyalist and served the monarchy for his entire life.

*“Thanks to the prestige of his palace connections and excellent education abroad, he was able to combine old statecraft and modern knowledge. His ability to adapt to any situation as well as his populist gift have allowed him to cultivate his own image over an exceptionally long period.”*¹⁷

Four Reigns is completely about life in the court. Without the author’s own experience in the court, he would not have been able to make this novel so close to the life in court seem so real. As M.R. Kukrit Pramoj himself said in an interview, although he left the court when he was very young, he was deeply influenced by the court:

¹⁷ Marcel Barang, *The 20 Best Novels of Thailand*, Thai fiction Publishing (January 01, 2004) p265.

“Because my mother, auntie, sisters and brothers are all court attendants, I could imagine when I heard them talking, and I know the way they talk, they argue, they make fun with each other because I heard it everyday, it was so familiar to me.”¹⁸

2.2 Introduction to *A Dream of Red Mansions* and Cao Xue Qin.

A Dream of Red Mansions is based on the tragedy of love and marriage between Jia Bao Yu, Lin Dai Yu and Xue Bao Chai as the main line, describing the rise and fall of four noble families with the Jia family, and reveals a variety of complicated contradictions inside this feudal family. The novel reflects the reality of feudal marriage, morality, culture and education, which are decadent and degenerate; shapes a series of images of nobles, civilians and slave women; shows an extremely broad and typical life environment of the feudal society in China; and, tortuously reflects the historical trends in which the feudal society is bound to collapse. This novel also highly praises the aristocratic rebels and the love story which is set against the feudal ethical code, reflecting the initial democratic ideology of pursuing individual freedom, as well as deeply and fully revealing the social roots of the tragedy of the love story and marriage between Jia Bao Yu, Lin Dai Yu and Xue Bao Chai. However, because of his historical limitations, while writing about the decline of the big feudal family, the author also shows pitiful and sentimental emotions.

Jia Bao Yu is the main character of the novel. He is very clever, and as the favorite descendant of the family, the whole family placed high hopes on him. However, his

¹⁸ บรรณาธิการ โดย สุวิทย์ ว่องวิระ, *พิเคราะห์ศิลปะกวีนิพนธ์สี่แผ่นดิน*, สำนักพิมพ์ดอกหญ้า (1988) p136.

unique characteristics and thoughts lead him to betray his family. The core of his character is to treat people equally, respect individuality, and advocate that people live freely in their own mind. For him, human beings are divided into real and fake, good and evil, beautiful and ugly. He is often disgusted with and has contempt for men, but he respects and is on intimate terms with females. Meanwhile, he disgusts his own family, because he loves and is close to those who have a similar personality and interest with him, but are in a humble status. His pursuit of individual freedom is mainly reflected in love and marriage. In the traditional feudal society, marriage is decided by parents, which is also related to the interests of the family. However, Bao Yu pursues a sincere relationship, without concern for the interest of the family. He falls in love with Dai Yu, which is full of profound social content and based on deep thoughts and feelings. The contradiction between love and feudalism prompts him to overcome his own weakness step by step, and fosters his rebellious thoughts and character. But his thoughts and ideas do not reach the height of negating the monarchical, patriarchal right of feudalism. He cannot completely break with the rule of feudalism, but neither can he give up his own democratic ideology requirements. Thus, he cannot find a way in reality and his society, and the only way for him is in the illusory surreal world.

Dai Yu is a typical artistic character who is more tragic than Bao Yu. She was born in a feudal family which is in decline. The feudal ethical code and secular utilitarianism has very limited impact on her; she still remains pure in nature, she is brave to love and hate, she does everything in her own way, rarely concerned about the consequences and losses. When her parents pass away, she has to sojourn with the Jia family. The snobbish and

harsh environment makes her self-possessed, and she protects her purity with frankness and sharpness to avoid disgrace and humiliation. Under this cold environment, Bao Yu is her only spiritual sustenance; she becomes dedicated to the pursuit of love, strongly demanding Bao Yu be faithful with her. But the love between them is destined to be a tragedy because it is against the feudal marriage system which is to obey the orders of parents. Their rebellious ideological core of love is at conflict with feudalism, because it touches the fundamental interests of the feudal system. Finally, Dai Yu passes away retaining her pure love and her resentment for the environment, and achieves her vow: *“for pure you came and pure you shall go”*¹⁹.

Xue Bao Chai, born in a rich and powerful family, is completely different in character from Dai Yu. They both read a lot of poetry and literature, are very clever and have imaginative agility; while Dai Yu is dedicated to the pursuit of a rich and purely spiritual life, Bao Chai firmly grasps the interest of reality and pursues great wealth. The real intention of Bao Chai, her mother and her brother in choosing to live in the Jia family is to achieve the marriage of Bao Chai and Bao Yu. Although Bao Chai cannot get Bao Yu’s love, she has the advantage of getting married with Bao Yu. With her “perfect” character and competence, Bao Chai gradually attracts the eyes of the feudal patriarchal parents in the Jia family, and she becomes the potential wife of Bao Yu. But “the well-matched jade and gold” marriage is a mere formality, and the success of getting married is just the beginning of Bao Chai’s tragedy.

¹⁹ Cao Xue Qin and Gao E, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, English version translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, January 1, 2001, p269.

A Dream of Red Mansions has brilliant artistic achievements. The narrative and description is as rich as life itself - deep, vivid and natural. This novel uses a comparative approach in its artistic expression. The author arranges two worlds which are in contrast with each other: one world is the Grand View Garden which is female-dominated, this is the world of the ruled; another world is the male-centered society, and this is the world of the ruler. The author takes the different attitudes of the same person towards two things as comparison, or takes the attitudes towards the same thing of two different persons as comparison, in order to reveal the secrets which are hidden deep inside the soul of people, and to express the author's love and hate tendencies. *A Dream of Red Mansions* is an encyclopedic novel that paints a broad social and historical picture with an aristocratic family at the center, with the various classes of the society vividly depicted.

Cao Xue Qin (about 1715-1763), the author, was born in an aristocratic family; his grandfather, Cao Yin was a childhood playmate to Kangxi Emperor while Cao Yin's mother was Kangxi's wet nurse. The family's fortunes lasted until Kangxi's death and the ascension of Yongzheng Emperor to the throne. Yongzheng severely attacked the family and later confiscated their properties. Cao Xue Qin was still a young child then, and lived in poverty with his family, witnessing the whole process of a feudal rich family going into decline after flourishing. Because of the luxurious life in his boyhood, Cao Xue Qin was familiar with the human feelings and realities in a big noble family and the feudal ruling class. In the impoverished life of his later years, he rather soberly and deeply observed life, and saw clearly the evil of the exploiting class. With this basis for recognizing and understanding life, coupled with his progressive ideology, artistic

accomplishments, serious creative attitude and the right creative method, he finally finished this novel in “blood and tears”, a novel which is considered to be a masterpiece of Chinese literature and is generally acknowledged to be the pinnacle of Chinese fiction.

2.3 The social background of the two novels and the writing intention of the authors.

2.3.1. Four Reigns

In *Four Reigns*, M.R. Kukrit Pramoj vividly portrays the fates and characters of a new generation of youth in Thailand, showing the varied development of the Thai nation at a particular historical juncture. The author expresses his likes and dislikes in order to establish an eternal moral order that conforms to the development of the historical trend through a dialectical relationship between historical and moral development, exploring the pain hidden inside the soul of the Thai nation during the historical process, while looking for and building a relatively reasonable moral code and national character from the clash and confluence between different cultures. From this perspective, *Four Reigns* has a very high regard from a historical aspect.

Although this novel has been published for more than half a century, since 1951, when discussing the theme or writing intention of *Four Reigns*, there are various opinions from the related research that we can mainly divided into the following categories:

2.3.1.1 A Chinese translator of *Four Reigns* points out: “*the author widely collected abundant historical information, and, with his strict attitude that is faithful to the historical truth, his realistic writing style and fascinating story, has reproduced a half century of Thai history, objectively revealing the historical necessity of the feudal*

society's final demise and the rise of capitalism, and has faithfully recorded the progress of an era."²⁰

2.3.1.2 Another Chinese translator of *Four Reigns* mentioned: *"all revealed the main theme of this novel, that the feudal system was on decline, and society was changing, all the necessity of historical development."*²¹

2.3.1.3 According to the entry for "Kukrit Pramoj" written by Fan Hefang in *The Encyclopedia of China (Foreign Literature)*: *"it [referring to Four Reigns] uses the true history between the time of King Rama V to King Rama VIII as background, showing the important events related to the royal life, etiquette and history, and the ideological outlook of people during that period through a group of fictional characters. Although the author occasionally shows his deep sympathy for the decline of the feudal family, the novel is nonetheless a great masterpiece."*²²

2.3.1.4 A *Brief History of Thai Literature* written by B. Kopheb, a scholar in the former Soviet Union, points out when introducing Kukrit Pramoj that, he *"has the courage to put forward a very critical opinion of the government, therefore, he has repeatedly faced court trails. He is well-known for his sarcastic and critical articles and poems; his novels and books are essentially against Western culture's influence on traditional Thai culture, and against corruption in the government."*²³ However, B. Kopheb did not specifically mention *Four Reigns*.

²⁰ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*: Chinese Version1, translated by Qian Guang, Shan Xi People's Press, 1984, p5.

²¹ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*: Chinese Version2, translated by Gao Shu Rong and Fang Ying, Shang Hai People's Press, 1985, p990.

²² The Encyclopedia of China editorial committee, *The Encyclopedia of China (Foreign Literature)*, Encyclopedia of China Publishing House, 1982, p541.

²³ B. Kopheb, *A Brief History of Thai Literature*: Chinese version, translated by Gao Chang Rong, Foreigns Literature Press, 1981, p160-161.

2.3.1.5 While Thai and foreign critics typically comment on the writing technique and description of the characters in *Four Reigns*, they do not point out the main theme of this novel. Regarding the theme of the novel, the author, M.R. Kukrit Pramoj said:

*“The main purpose of writing Four Reigns is to sketch a detailed background of those historical events occurring from King Rama V until King Rama VIII.”*²⁴

Through the comments cited above, we can see that some of them argue that the theme of this novel is against the feudal system. However, others disagree with this opinion, and argue that the theme of this novel is to praise the feudal system. Given these differing opinions, we should analyze and research to find the answer to the real theme based on the subjectivity, objectivity of this novel.

The subjectivity of the theme: although the setting is from real life, the formation of the theme is influenced and restricted by the author’s thoughts, feelings and worldview. Thus, a different author may have a different judgment and evaluation. From the life experience of M.R. Kukrit Pramoj, we can see that he was born into a royal family with the title of Mom Rachawong. It can be said that he was a beneficiary of the monarchy system, and, even though many of his works point out the problems of the society and criticize the government, he never displayed any veiled criticism of the royal family.

The objectivity of theme: it is the centralized summary of the ideological significances of all materials, a certain theme can only be extracted from certain materials. The material plays the role of constraints and requirements in refining the theme, the theme is the understanding, judgment or evaluation of all materials. In *Four Reigns*, Phloi

²⁴ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*: Chinese Version1, translated by Qian Guang, Shan Xi People’s Press, 1984, p5.

is a prototype character representing the feudal aristocratic woman. The author uses the enjoyable scenes of Phloi's family to show the peace and prosperity of the country, and uses the decline and changes in Phloi's family to show the decline of royalty and the changes brought by constitutional monarchy after the military coup.

The times of theme: any ideas or concepts are the special products of that era; are the specific category of history. As an ideological form, the theme of a novel has an extremely close relationship with the ideological trend and spirit of the era in which it is written. Therefore, the relationship between the theme of *Four Reigns* and the ideological trend of the era when it was published is clearly evident. *Four Reigns* was published after World War II when the domestic political situation in Thailand was unstable, coupled with a serious economic crisis. The people generally felt that the existing system of rule was not as good as during the absolute monarchy period. *Four Reigns*, a novel praising the royalty, was published at the right moment, and was well received by readers and society, which may have also been preparation for the revival of the royalty.

Some critics said that, therefore, from this perspective, *Four Reigns* is not an anti-feudalist work, but praises the royalty and the feudal system. However, this argument is based on Chinese scholars, and since China does not have a constitutional monarchy as does Thailand, Chinese scholars are used to criticizing the monarchy system as being a "feudal system", which is not necessarily an objective way to comment on this novel. However, since this thesis is focusing on the female perspective from the angle of the female role or female status, there are some opinions to share:

Pornsawan Suwanthada, an assistant professor in the Thai language department, Khon Kaen University, mentions in *Mae Phloi and Feminism* regarding feminism reflected in *Four Reigns*;

*“if we consider that the author is a normal male writer, who lives in Thai society which is a male-dominated cultural society, always shows the superiority over women, or we can call it a patriarchal society; or if we consider that this author is a high class male related to the royal family, the readers must have thought that the novel from this author reflects the typical cultural environment in which women cannot depend on themselves at all, then I have to say you are wrong. Because in this novel, we can see that the author pays high respect to females, and expresses a high regard for female capacity, which is from their own knowledge, and we have to agree that women have equal rights and the same ability to perform their duty as men.”*²⁵

In *Si Phaendin and the Construction of the Female Gender Role* by Orathai Piayura, an assistant professor of Thai language and literature, Department of Thai, Khon Kaen University;

*“The author of the story delivered a didactic message that people should behave according to their roles prescribed by the patriarchal society by many clever devices. One of the devices, in the case of Phloi, was to make other characters praise her every time she said good things or did good deeds.”*²⁶

From the opinions about feminism in this novel, we can see that different Thai scholars have different comments about the view of women in this novel. Some say it is a

²⁵ พรสวรรค์ สุวรรณธาดา, แม่พลอยกับเฟมินิสม์, *มนุษยศาสตร์ สังคมศาสตร์* 28 (3) ก.ย. – ธ.ค. 54, p64.

²⁶ Orathai piayura, *Si Phaendin and the Construction of the Female Gender Role*, *มนุษยศาสตร์ สังคมศาสตร์* 28 (3) ก.ย. – ธ.ค. 54.

novel based on the patriarchal society, while others say that although women and men are still not completely equal in the society, the author is trying to appreciate the goodness of women. No matter whether Mae Phloi in this novel is a “perfect” woman according to the male-dominated society or not, we will discuss Phloi and the female role, and the points of views of women in Thai society as reflected in this character in *Four Reigns* in the next chapters.

2.3.2. A Dream of Red Mansions

The famous Chinese writer Lu Xun said in *A Brief History of Chinese Fiction*:

*“The greatest virtue is that he dares to describe life realistically without subterfuge or concealment, unlike earlier writers who made their characters either black or white. Hence all the people in this book are real. The most significant thing about this work is that it put an end to the traditional view of novels and how to write them.”*²⁷

This novel shows a broad vision of social life, including a variety of colorful secular worldly wisdom. *A Dream of Red Mansions* is the history of an era, an encyclopedia of the feudal society, and because of the rich content of this novel, different people give it different themes or theories. Some say it is a historical novel reflecting the feudal history of prosperity and decline; some say it is a romance novel reflecting the eternal love story between Bao Yu and Dai Yu; some say it is a political novel reflecting the political situation during Emperor Kangxi’s reign; some say it is the author’s autobiography; some say it is a novel which preaches a sense or concept of reality and Buddhism; and some

²⁷ Lu Xun, *A Brief History of Chinese Fiction*, Translated by Yang Xian Yi and Gladys Yang, Foreign Language Press, 1959, p416.

say it is a work about liberation or relief. In a word, the benevolent see benevolence and the wise see wisdom. As Lu Xun said in one of his speech:

*“About the purpose of this novel, Confucianists see theories from I Ching; Taoists see obscenity; wits see a touching love story; revolutionaries see political conflicts, rumor-mongers see the secrets in the palace...but for me, I only see that Bao Yu sees lots of deaths in his life.”*²⁸

Multiplicity and multi-theme has become a major feature of *A Dream of Red Mansions*.

2.3.2.1 The historic and political significance of *A Dream of Red Mansions*. This novel reflects the decline and fall of the feudal society and the history of political struggle of the feudal dynasty. Looking at the background of that era, there is no doubt that during the dynasties of Emperor Kangxi, Yongzheng and Qianlong was the most glorious and prosperous era in Chinese history, and China was the most powerful country in the world at that time. However, the world was undergoing dramatic changes; in European countries, the rise of the Renaissance, ocean exploration, human and cultural liberation, and scientific and technological inventions, which were seemingly irrelevant to China, finally became the important factors to destroy the powerful Chinese Empire. In the Qing Dynasty, the palace was always filled with a complex power struggle; once the nobility lost in the political struggle, they fell into a very miserable situation - some were killed, some were exiled, and some were confined. The struggling inside the Jia family in *A Dream of Red Mansions*, and the decline of the Jia family, is exactly a microcosm of the

²⁸ 鲁迅,《迅全集-集外集拾遗补编 <绛洞花主>》,人民文学出版社,第145页.

society at that time. Cao Xue Qin had been through this process from the experience of his own family.

2.3.2.2 *A Dream of Red Mansions* reflects a profound understanding of love which is the basis of human nature and a complaint about how the feudal society destroyed this aspect of humanity. In this novel, the author does not write so much about the decline of the royal family, but mainly focuses on the women who are the victims in this big family. The author creates Bao Yu, the main character with a philosophy of love. Bao Yu is the embodiment of love from human nature; but the author also knows that this love from human nature has no way out. To be a monk is the ending that the royal family and society prepares for Bao Yu.

2.3.2.3 As a milestone of Chinese fiction, *A Dream of Red Mansions* is normally considered a sad story, especially a female tragedy. “Twelve beauties of Jinling” in this novel reflects the tragic history of women under the historical limitations of that period. But just as William Shakespeare said regarding *Hamlet*, “*there are a thousand Hamlets in a thousand people’s eyes*,” there are a thousand interpretations of *A Dream of Red Mansions* as well. However, disregarding the tragic aspects, perhaps we can make a different discovery about the theme of this novel, which is the upgrading of the status of women and the awakening of female awareness. We can discuss this from several different aspects:

A. The awakening of female awareness of women in the Qing Dynasty from the male point of view, which can be divided into two main bodies: the author himself and Bao Yu, the main character of the novel.

To show respect for females from the author's writing intention, we can look at what the author wrote in the beginning of the novel:

*“In this busy, dusty world, having accomplished nothing, I suddenly recalled all the women I had known, considering each in turn, and it dawned on me that all of them surpassed me in behavior and understanding; that I, shameful to say, for all my masculine dignity, fell short of the gentler sex. But since this could never be remedied, it was no use regretting it. There was really nothing to be done. I decided then to make known to all how I, although dressed in silks and delicately nurtured thanks to the Imperial favor and my ancestor's virtue, had nevertheless ignored the kindly guidance of my elders as well as the good advice of teachers and friends, with the result that I had wasted half my life and not acquired a single skill. But no matter how unforgivable my crimes, I must not let all the lovely women I have known pass into oblivion through my wickedness or my desire to hide my shortcomings. Although my home is now a thatched cottage with matting windows, earthen stove and a rope-bed, this shall not stop me from laying bare my heart. Indeed, the morning breeze, the dew of the night, the willows by my steps and the flowers in my courtyard inspire me to wield my brush. Although I have little learning or literary talent, what does it matter if I tell a tale in rustic language to leave a record of all those lovely women. This should divert readers too and help distract them from their cares.”*²⁹

We can see from this description that one of the intentions of the author was “to leave a record of all those lovely women”. *A Dream of Red Mansions* verifies the author's

²⁹ Cao Xueqin and Gao E, *A Dream of Red Mansions* Chinese version, Hei Longjiang Fine Arts Publishing House, April 1, 2012, p1.

intention. From his description, the lovely women such as Dai Yu, Bao Chai and Xiang Yun, are not only beautiful and intelligent, but also have their own independent personalities and ideas. The author does not see women with a secular public vision; he does not see them as inferior to male. From this perspective, this novel reflects the rise of the female consciousness.

From Bao Yu's behavior, many Redology (the academic study of *A Dream of Red Mansions*) scholars think that the character of Bao Yu is shaped based on the author Cao Xue Qin himself, which is highly possible. Cao Xue Qin's life experience has many similarities with Bao Yu's life. The female awareness in this novel is mainly expressed from the attitudes of Bao Yu towards females; or we can say that the author is expressing his own point of view of females through the narrative of Bao Yu. In Chapter 2, Bao Yu says:

*“Women are made of water, men of mud’, ‘I feel clean and refreshed when I’m with women, but find men dirty and stinking.”*³⁰

In Chapter 20, Bao Yu talks about his point of view of women:

*“He had come to the conclusion that while human beings were the highest form of creation, the finest essences of nature were embodied in women, men being nothing but the dregs and scum.”*³¹

In Chinese traditional culture, males are superior to females; but the author mentions several times that females are superior to males, indicating that a certain degree of female worship ideology is reflected in this novel. In addition, the elegant and beautiful

³⁰ Cao Xueqin and Gao E, *A Dream of Red Mansions* Chinese version, Hei Longjiang Fine Arts Publishing House, April 1, 2012, p15.

³¹ Cao Xueqin and Gao E, *A Dream of Red Mansions* Chinese version, Hei Longjiang Fine Arts Publishing House, April 1, 2012, p199.

appearance of Bao Yu and his behavior with women shows that he regards females as real human beings, and respects females and appreciates the great wisdom of females.

B. The promotion of female status in ancient China through the description of female characters in the Jia family, such as Dai Yu and Bao Chai.

A Dream of Red Mansions focuses on female characters, so we can see the important position and role the female characters play in this novel. The author portrays females at great length, such that it can be said that the life and fate of those female characters are the main focus of this novel.

C. The awakening of female consciousness from the poetry in *A Dream of Red Mansions*.

The poetries in this novel give a very strong reflection of female consciousness. Comparing the poetries of Dai Yu, Bao Chai and Bao Qin in *A Dream of Red Mansions* with the large number of other female poetries in the Ming and Qing Dynasty, the poetries in this novel are ones with the richest female consciousness in that era with no doubt. In Chinese literature history, the phenomenon of men writing novels about women or writing as women was very common during the Tang and Song Dynasty. The poetries written by the author in *A Dream of Red Mansions* are the best proof. In this novel, the author lets all the females speak out about what they want through those poetries. Accordingly, in this novel, the creativity, ingenuity and intelligence of the females is well respected. In a word, *A Dream of Red Mansions* is one of the peaks of Chinese literature history, while it also is a great novel of female awakening, female self-conscious improvement and the rise of female status.

CHAPTER III

The concepts of the “ideal” woman in Thai and Chinese society

Thailand and China are both Asian countries, and although there are differences from cultural, religious perspectives, they share certain similarities. Concerning the image of the “ideal” woman, there are some similarities, but also different standards about the definitions of the “ideal” woman, and different angle of looking at the “ideal” woman from the two countries.

In Thailand, the “ideal” woman should be a combination of traditional culture, with a counterpart that is modern and independent-minded. She should be an unsurpassed beauty, and play the role of a dutiful daughter, a loyal and faithful wife, a gentle and kind mother, as well as being a strong and resolute individual. In China, since ancient times, Confucianism has shaped the image of the “ideal” woman from the male perspective in the feudal patriarchal society at various times, and passed the image to females through required “etiquette” and a social indoctrination system. The distinct gender prejudices have been gradually accepted by females and internalized as a code of conduct, which plays an important role in the formation of the characteristics, personality, temperament and ideology of females. Females gradually accept the Confucian standard of the “ideal” woman. In this Chapter, we will talk about the different concept of the “ideal” woman in Thailand and China; then we will discuss the different interpretation of the destiny of the “ideal” woman in Thailand and China.

3.1 The concept of the “ideal” woman in Thailand and China:

According to Sheila Ruth, images that men use to define women have dual types: the “good” and the “bad”. Men’s attitudes towards women can develop to be an ambivalent judgment of women. If a woman can play her specified roles well, behave according to some standards and can respond to male needs, she may be judged as good at one time, but maybe bad at another depending on her abilities to serve the one who makes the judgment. The male projected ideal images of women are based on one basic presupposition: that “*women are and ought to be completely defined and understood within their biological capacities, sexual or reproductive.*”³² Those qualities define the “place” of women in the world.

To be a “good woman” or an “ideal” woman, one has to meet the requirements set by men both in sexual and non-sexual aspects. For example, the primary ideal woman in the Western world is the nurturing “Mother” or the “Virgin Mary”. Her role is instinctively loving and caring for her children and family. Good women or ideal women need to be pure, innocent, good, proper looking, and conservative.

3.1.1 The “ideal” woman according to the standards of Thai society.

Thailand is an Asian country, as well as a Buddhist country. Its culture and social value has typical Asian characteristics, which also are widely influenced by Buddhism, as we can see from Thai literature. For Thai society, Thai tradition has defined the ideal image of Thai women as *kulasatri* (กุลสตรี) or the *virtuous woman*. The primary role of

³² Sheila Ruth, *Issues in Feminism – An Introduction to Women’s Studies*, Mayfield Pub. Co., 1990, p108.

the ideal woman is the nurturer's role. The mother is highly praised in Thai society as the one who plays the greatest role in taking care of the well-being of her family. The words relating to motherhood connote respect and refer to positive, fertile meanings. The nurturer role and the code of *kulasatri* (กุลสตรี) idealize the patterns of social and sexual behaviors of women. There are numerous guidelines for the "proper" woman, such as being grateful, pleasant, modest in her dress and social manners, and very conservative in sexuality. Although more and more modern Thai women are working out of their houses, the notions of *kulasatri* (กุลสตรี) and *mae sri ruen* (แม่ศรีเรือน) remain as the "ideal" goal for the majority of Thai women to achieve for their family's honor and self dignity.

The concept of the "ideal" woman was established in the Sukhothai period (A.D.1239-1377). *Traibhumikatha*, or *Three Worlds According to King Ruang*, describes the perfect woman as a woman from Uttarakuru Continent.

*"As Traiphummikatha has strong and long-standing influences on Thai traditions, the most important being the beliefs in transiency, heaven and hell, and in Karma which constitute the main supports to moral codes in Thai society."*³³

The values of the "ideal" woman in Thai society has been continuously reinforced through time as Thai literature typically portrays images of the "good" female protagonists and the "bad" anti-heroines in such a way that only good women will be accepted and praised in Thai society.

³³ Published by The National Identity Board, Office of the Prime Minister, Women in Thai Literature, Bangkok, Thailand, 1992, p22.

Because *Traibhumikatha* was conceived as a religious work, references to women are made from a religious point of view.

*“The women described in Traiphummikatha are idealized types: the women of Utarakura and the Perfect Woman are of unsurpassed beauty, possess immortal youth and unmarred happiness in their carefree lives which are unspoiled by sadness or pain, not even the pain of childbirth or travails of child-rearing. As for the Perfect Woman, she is bestowed with the shining quality of being able to make the Righteous Sovereign happy at all times.”*³⁴

Regarding the definition of the “ideal” woman, we can find a very detailed description about the women of Uttarakuru and the Perfect woman in *Tribhumikatha* as below:

“The women of this continent are all very beautiful. Their bodies are neither too short nor too tall, neither too fat nor too thin; they are neither too fair nor too dark. Their color is perfectly beautiful like shining bright yellow gold, and it please all of the men. Their toes and fingers are round, beautiful and slim, their toenails and fingernails are beautifully red, just as if someone had prepared a solution of sticklac and painted it on; their two cheeks appear creamy, smooth, and soft, just as if they had been daubed with face powder; their faces are clear and are without any defects or blemishes. To see one of their faces is like seeing the moon on a night when it is full; they have eyes with pupils that are as black as those of a three-day-old baby deer, while the whites of their eyes are as pretty as a conch shell that has just been polished; their lips are as red as the fruit

³⁴ Published by The National Identity Board, Office of the Prime Minister, Women in Thai Literature, Bangkok, Thailand, 1992, p22.

from a gourd-like plant called fakkhaw when it is ripe; their legs are as pretty as the twin trunks of a golden banana tree; their stomachs are flat and pretty, and the upper portion of their bodies are well-rounded, slender, and willowy; their hair is fine and soft – in fact the hair on their head is so very fine and soft that it takes eight strands of their hair to make one strand of ours; the color of their hair is black and beautiful, like the color of the wings of a carpenter bee, and when they let it down so that it reaches the lower part of their shoulders, the tip of each strand curls upward; whenever they sit, stand, or walk it appears that they are always smiling; their eyebrows are black and pretty, just as if someone had made them; when they talk their voices are clear, and there is no sign of phlegm, saliva, or the like; their necks are adorned with decorative jewelry and ornaments; their graceful figures and complexions are as pretty as those of a maiden who has just entered her sixteenth year, and their bodies never grow old – all of them remain as youthful as that throughout their entire lives.”³⁵

Here is the description of a “gem woman” in *Tribhumikatha*, except for the appearance, the merit a woman should collect, the proper behavior and her attitude towards her husband can also be found here:

“She will generally be born in the royal family of the city called Madda...She comes by air, just like a female devata...

The face of the gem woman appears polished and smooth, and is clean, clear, and very beautiful. Her body and skin are soft like cotton that has been fluffed a hundred times and been dipped in clear, very beautiful oil taken from the joint of a special kind of

³⁵ *Three Worlds According to King Ruang – A Thai Buddhist Cosmology*, translation with introduction and notes by Frank E. Reynolds & Mani B. Reynolds, Asian Humanities Press, 1982, p128-129.

yak oxen called camara. Whenever the body of the great Cakkavatti king is cool or cold, the body of the gem woman is warm; whenever the body of the great Cakkavatti king is hot, the body of the woman is cool. The body of the gem woman has a fragrance like a core of sandalwood and aloes wood that has been ground up and mixed with all of the four sweet-smelling essences; this very pleasing smell wafts about in the air at all times. When the gem woman talks or laughs her breath wafts about like the odor of the lotus called blue water lilies and the trees called chongkolni when they are in bloom; the breath of the gem woman has that kind of sweet smell at all times.

Whenever the king comes and pays a visit to the gem woman in her dwelling place, she does not remain seated, but generally gets up to greet the king; she then brings her golden pillow and sits, attending and fanning the king; and she massages his feet and hands, and sits in a lower place. The gem woman never at any time goes to lie on the gem bed before the great Cakkavatti king; nor does the gem woman ever at any time leave the gem bed after he does. Whatever kind of work she is going to do, she first of all respectfully informs the king so that he will know. When the king orders her to do it, she does it; she never at any time disobeys the one who is her husband. Whatever she does, all of it satisfies her husband; and whatever she says, all of it pleases her husband. Only the Cakkavatti king and he alone can be her husband; as for other men, they cannot be her husband; and as for the gem woman, she is never the least bit unfaithful to this king. ³⁶

³⁶ *Three Worlds According to King Ruang – A Thai Buddhist Cosmology*, translation with introduction and notes by Frank E. Reynolds & Mani B. Reynolds, Asian Humanities Press, 1982, p166-167.

The female protagonists in literature suggest social values and attitudes towards women; the “ideal” woman must have flawless beauty; take on roles as a daughter, a wife and a mother; and undertake their responsibilities as best as they can. The society and culture also projects the common characteristics of “good” or “ideal” women, such as that they are loving, nurturing, caring for the well-being of their husbands and children, submissive, grateful, sensitive, dependent, willing to serve men and believe in fate and accept their situation.

3.1.2 The “ideal” woman according to the standard of Chinese society.

As a country with a long history, China has both a splendid culture and deep-rooted traditional concepts. In this traditional concept system, the requirements and standards for women can be said to be very harsh. Traditional Chinese society is a typical patriarchal society; family is the basic unit and a reflection of the patriarchal rule in the society. In the patriarchal culture, women are not likely to create their own image and value system; female images are created by males according to their own needs. It not only affects the development of women, but also limit the improvement of the overall quality of women, which weakens and waters down women’s expectations and requirements for pursuing success in the society.

On the other hand, education of women has been given great importance in China from long ago. However, because of the system of society, men can obtain the opportunity for an official career by studying, but for women, even though they are intelligent, profoundly learned and talented, they still do not have the opportunity to use

their capabilities, but can only stay home and be taught by the mother or female teacher, or be trained to learn female virtues and female work. The history of education for women in China can be considered as a history of education about female virtues, which includes the cultivation of female virtues, and how to be a daughter, woman, wife and mother.

Biography of Women in Ancient China by Liu Xiang in the Western Han Dynasty, lists seven virtues and vices - an “ideal” woman should and should not have. These include “mother duty”, meaning a good wife and mother who can help her husband and teach her child; a “reasonable and rational mind”, meaning she should be sensible, judicious, mannerly and thoughtful when dealing with people; “wisdom”, meaning she should be courageous and intelligent; “chastity and meekness”, meaning she should be able to obey the ethical code; “righteousness”, meaning her activity is righteous; “intelligent eloquence”, meaning she is eloquent and capable of dealing with people and situations with a calm manner; and “lechery”, meaning the women who leads a loose and dissolute life. From this list, we can see that virtuousness, wisdom, kindness and chastity are the basic virtues women should have, but the last is a vice that should be cast aside. We can find the necessary qualities and virtues an “ideal” woman should have in traditional Chinese society from *Four Books of Women*.

Four Books of Women includes *Commandments for Women* written by Ban Zhao, the first female historian of China during the Eastern Han Dynasty; *The Analects on Women* written by Song Ruo Zhao in the Tang Dynasty; *The Disciplines for Women* written by Empress Renxiaowen in the Ming Dynasty; and *The Quotations about the Model of*

Women written by Lady Liu in the Ming Dynasty. In *Commandments for Women*, the author mentions the virtues women should have, including “being humble”, “a wife should be guided by her husband”, “a wife should respect and follow her husband”, “the four cultivations of her own behaviors”, “concentration on her husband”, “being obedient” and “being modest”. In *The Analects on Women*, the author also mentions that an “ideal” woman should have “virtues”, be able to “be industrious and thrifty in running the house”, “have filial piety with seniority and respect the senior and husband”; she also should have “social etiquette”, as well as be able to “educate the children well”. In *The Disciplines for Women*, there are seven appropriate virtues for “ideal” woman which include “morality”, “self-examination and self-cultivation”, “diligence and thrift”, “accumulating merits”, “to obey the imperial decree”, “to respect parents, husband and seniors, offer sacrifices to gods” and “to educate and teach children with love”. Finally, in *The Quotations about the Model of Women*, the author pays more attention to “women’s education”, “the virtues of being a consort”, “the antenatal training”, “piety and deference”, “chastity and virginity of women”, “loyalty and righteousness”, “loving-kindness and thrift” and “social etiquette for women”. As can be seen from the four books, an “ideal” woman who is qualified for the social and cultural standard should be “humble”, have “filial piety” and “motherhood”, but should not pay too much attention to “wisdom”.

In addition, it can be concluded that the most famous and influential standard for shaping an “ideal” woman from *Four Books of Women* is “the three obediences and four virtues”. The “three obediences” are “to obey her father before marriage, her husband when married, and her sons in widowhood”. The “four virtues” mean “morality”, “proper

speech”, “modest manner” and “diligent work”. When discussing the standard of the “ideal” woman, we can start from these “four virtues” which have dominated women’s education in China for a long time.

“Morality” is the virtue of women in the conduct of her self-cultivation and pursuit of moral character. Ban Zhao says in *Commandments for Women*: “*To guard carefully her chastity, to control circumspectly her behavior, in every motion to exhibit modesty, and to model each act on the best usage, this is womanly virtue.*”³⁷

Ban Zhao also points out that women should keep their chastity, and “*there is no need to be intelligent for women*”³⁸, because men go out to work, while women look after the house. Even if the women are very intelligent, they do not have any opportunities to show their intelligence. “No need” here is a warning to all women that wisdom and intelligence is not a necessary virtue for women.

From *The Disciplines for Women*, there is a similar description about the proper virtues or moralities an “ideal” woman should have as below:

*“To be chaste and quiet, to be serene and elegant, to be upright and dignified, to be honest and single-minded, these are the proper virtues of women. To be obedient and respectful, to be merciful and kind, to be charitable and amiable, to be temperate and mild, if she can do all of those, she has the proper virtues for women. Morality and virtue is derived from the human temperament, and forms into a habit, it does not coming from the outside world, but from the inside of people themselves.”*³⁹

³⁷ Ban Zhao, *Commandments for Women* [Online], Source http://www.360doc.com/content/12/1122/14/594070_249529308.shtml.

³⁸ Ban Zhao, *Commandments for Women* [Online], Source http://www.360doc.com/content/12/1122/14/594070_249529308.shtml.

³⁹ Empress RenXiaoWen, *The Disciplines for Women* [Online], Source http://www.360doc.com/content/12/1122/14/594070_249529308.shtml.

The “proper speech” of women means that she should be able to talk to other people properly, understand what others say and know what she should and should not say. Chinese believe that everything has a right side and wrong side; if we want to compete and try to dispute the rights and wrongs all the time, it will certainly cause verbal conflict. “Radical words” will lead to a “permissive heart”, which is not appropriate for the “humbleness” a woman should have. Thus, Ban Zhao insists on the principle of being gentle, and reminds women that “*no need to be glib and quick-tongued,*”⁴⁰ but better to “*stay silent after doing good deeds, and do not judge or gossip people who do bad deeds*”⁴¹, and be able to “*endure contempt and insults.*”⁴² In traditional Chinese society, women are in a subordinate position; they should comply with the conventional master-slave relationship, should not be the first to speak, and should not express their own opinion in public. *Book of Rites* or *Record of Rites*, which is one of the Five Classics constituting the core of the traditional Confucian canon, says “*a man does not talk about family matters, while a woman does not talk about matters outside home*”⁴³, so a woman should always be aware of what she says and avoid making herself disagreeable.

“Modest manner” here means the appearance of a woman; she should be dignified, elegant and gentle when she is outside, and should not be frivolous. A woman with modest manner may not be very beautiful, but she should pay attention to the external overall image of her appearance, have good personal health habits, maintain a clean body and dress neatly. Since ancient times, the standard of the appearance of an “ideal” woman

⁴⁰ Ban Zhao, *Commandments for Women* [Online], Source http://www.360doc.com/content/12/1122/14/594070_249529308.shtml.

⁴¹ Ban Zhao, *Commandments for Women* [Online], Source http://www.360doc.com/content/12/1122/14/594070_249529308.shtml.

⁴² Ban Zhao, *Commandments for Women* [Online], Source http://www.360doc.com/content/12/1122/14/594070_249529308.shtml.

⁴³ Dai Sheng, *Book of Rites*, Chapter 27, p520.

has never changed: she needs to be beautiful. In *Shi Jing*, or the *Book of Odes*, which is the earliest existing anthology of Chinese poems and songs, the first chapter begins with the standard of a men's marriage object:

“Guan-guan go the ospreys, (guan guan sui jiu)

On the islet in the river. (zai he zhi zhou)

The modest, retiring, virtuous, young lady; (yao tiao shu nv)

For our prince a good mate she. (jun zi hao qiu)”⁴⁴

According to *Ci Yuan* or *Lexicography of Ancient Chinese*, “Yao Tiao” here means delicacy, (of a woman) gentle and graceful, pretty and gentle. “Shu” means good, pure, virtuous, beautiful, charming and clear. “Shu nv” means a fair maiden, a lady, a gentle woman. “Yao tiao shu nv” is the common standard for all men to choose a ideal mate.

Although the *Four Books of Women* does not require women to be beautiful, they are required to be clean, dignified and steady. So as for the image of the “ideal” woman, a beautiful appearance is naturally essential, which we can find from *Dream Shadows* written by Zhang Chao, literature of the Qing Dynasty:

“For a woman to have the expression of a flower, the voice of a bird, the soul of the moon, the posture of a willow, bones of jade and a skin of snow, the charm of an autumn lake and the heart of poetry—that would indeed be perfect.”⁴⁵

The last virtue, “diligent work”, refers to the instructions on running a household, which includes supporting the husband and teaching the children, respecting the aged and

⁴⁴ Zhu Xi, *Book of Odes, Shi Ji Zhuan*, the electronic version is corrected by Christine Ruotolo [Online], Source <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/chinese/shijing/AnoShih.html>

⁴⁵ Zhang Chao, *Dream Shadows*, translated by Lin Yu Tang, Time Publishing and Media Co.LTD, Anhui Science and Technology Press, 2012.7, p58

caring for the young, and cultivating the good habits of diligence and frugality. In *Commandments for Women*, Ban Zhao expresses that a woman's duty is to manage the house. In *I Ching-Book of Changes*:

*“Thus the superior man has substance in his words and duration in his way of life,”*⁴⁶

This means that the foundation of the family is the relationship between husband and wife. The tie that holds the family together lies in the loyalty and perseverance of the wife; her place is within, while that of the husband is without. This is in accord with the great law of nature that husband and wife take their proper places. At the same time, a woman should keep the family away from hunger and be able to entertain the guests, as said in *Book of Rites*:

*“A girl at the age of ten ceases to go out (from the women's apartments). Her governess teaches her the arts of pleasing speech and manners, to be docile and obedient, to handle the hempen fibres, to deal with the cocoons, to weave silks and form fillets, to learn (all) woman's work, how to furnish garments, to watch the sacrifices, to supply the liquors and sauces, to fill the various stands and dishes with pickles and brine, and to assist in setting forth the appurtenances for the ceremonies.”*⁴⁷.

Therefore, in traditional Chinese culture and the education of women, the four virtues are the most important moralities for women. Women are encouraged to comply with the virtues and keep them in mind all the time in order to become the “ideal” woman which is in line with the social and traditional standards.

⁴⁶ *I Ching: the Book of Change*, “37. The Family”, translated by Tr. Wilhelm [Online], Source <http://wengu.tartarie.com/wg/wengu.php?l=Yijing&no=37>.

⁴⁷ Dai Sheng, *Book of Rites-Nei Ze*, translated by James Legge [Online], Source <http://ctext.org/liji/nei-ze>.

3.2 The different interpretations of the “ideal” woman in the two novels from a cultural perspective:

These two great works in Asian literature history, *Four Reigns* and *A Dream of Red Mansions*, both have far-reaching impact in Thai and Chinese literature history, and have attracted many readers. One of the great charms of the two novels is the distinctive and beautiful female images vividly shaped by the authors. In “Grand View Garden”, there was a “kingdom of women” with a group of innocent, beautiful and lovely women, such as Lin Dai Yu, Xue Bao Chai. Similarly, around the royal Thai court, there was a “kingdom of women” as well, where one could have seen women such as the gentle, generous and dignified Phloi, naughty, cute and independent Choi, and Choei who is brave enough to break the rules and pursue her own life.

From religious, cultural and social transformation perspectives, there are two completely different attitudes in analyzing works of literature, as well as ways of interpreting the characters in literature, especially the personality and destiny of female characters. Therefore, if we analyze the two characters: - “Phloi” and “Bao Chai”, to see how Thai society and Chinese society look at the typical image of an “ideal” woman as shaped in these two famous novels, we can discern differences of values between the two countries.

3.2.1. Analysis of “Phloi” and “Bao Chai” from a Thai cultural perspective: good personality and happy life:

Among all the women portrayed in *Four Reigns* and *A Dream of Red Mansions*, Phloi and Bao Chai can be described as two of the most dazzling, wonderful characters. As the perfect example of women in Thai and Chinese societies, these two Asian women, albeit from different countries, have strikingly similar fates.

First, regarding their life experiences in which Phloi and Bao Chai are both from noble families. Phloi has aristocratic descent; when she was ten, she was taken away from home by her mother who was not willing to succumb to the status of a concubine, and she was sent to the court to serve a princess. She then was educated in an ideal mode, and eventually married into a wealthy family. Most of her life is happy, and she is loved by the princess, friends, husband and children until her death. Bao Chai was born in a rich and grand family that “*gold is like iron to them, and pearls like sand.*”⁴⁸ After her father died, she went to live with the Jia family with her mother and brother, and she finally married Bao Yu.

Second, regarding the appearances in the two “kingdoms of girls”, in which Phloi and Bao Chai can be called the queen of their “kingdoms”. In *Four Reigns*, the author does not describe too much about Phloi’s beauty directly, but we can feel her stunning beauty from the praise of her appearance from other people. When Chao Khun, Phloi’s father, went to attend her tonsure ceremony, Choi’s father praised Phloi’s beauty to him:

“*You have a pretty daughter, Khun Luang. I think Phloi is the prettier of the two, sir. Which is natural since she has such a beautiful mother.*”⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Cao Xue Qin and Gao E, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, English version translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, January 1, 2001, p30.

⁴⁹ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p81.

Phloi also has the feeling that she is growing up to be a beautiful woman, as in the description in her tonsure ceremony:

*“As for Phloi, if truth be told, she who tended to consider herself pretty enough on ordinary days was very impressed indeed by what she saw in her mirror.”*⁵⁰

In *A Dream of Red Mansion*, the author describes Bao Chai as *“her face seemed a silver disc, her eyes were lustrous and almond-shaped, her lips red without rouge, her eyebrows dark without being penciled.”*⁵¹

In Chapter 63 of *A Dream of Red Mansions*, when the women are playing a “poem game”, Bao Chai takes out a picture of a peony with the words *“Beauty surpassing all flowers”*⁵², and there is a line of Tang poetry in smaller characters beneath *“Though heartless she has charm”*⁵³. The author compares Bao Chai’s beauty to a peony. Bao Chai, who is as elegant and dignified as a peony, shows her Asian female style, and can be described as a national beauty.

Third, regarding their talent. Phloi was intelligent and extraordinary since she was a child. Although her life experience before ten makes her character shy and introverted, her character is still quiet, steady and delicate. At the beginning of her palace life, Phloi feels it is difficult to adapt to the trivial formalities and harsh rules in the palace:

“To begin with, she had a reading lesson in the morning, with Khun Sai conducting the class of two...In this class, the girls were acquiring not only the art of reading but a

⁵⁰ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p79.

⁵¹ Cao Xue Qin and Gao E, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, English version translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, January 1, 2001, p281-282.

⁵² Cao Xue Qin and Gao E, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, English version translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, January 1, 2001, p648.

⁵³ Cao Xue Qin and Gao E, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, English version translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, January 1, 2001, p648.

sense of gratitude towards knowledge it-self and towards those who handed it to them, and at the end of every lesson, with joined palms and bowed head, they performed their gesture of thanks and reverence to the textbook and the teacher.

Then there were the myriad activities having to do with the preparation of food or betel nuts, or the care of clothes, or the making of sachets and scented water. Phloi had become Khun Sai's little assistant-apprentice at these tasks, had even once or twice tried her unskilled hand at rolling phlu leaves in the elegant manner of the palace...The results of Phloi's effort appeared oddly stunted beside them, but Khun Sai said never mind, not to worry, and that some day she would be able to do it with her eyes closed.”⁵⁴

But she soon learns how to serve the princess, dress in the different color of each day, learn skills such as fruit carving and mending clothes, and become one of the most favorite maids of the princess:

“At Sadet's residence she was known as a favourite attendant, if not the most favourite. (Some colleagues resented this and, prompted by jealousy, took pleasure in maligning her and finding fault with her.)”⁵⁵

Compared to Phloi, Bao Chai has even more comprehensive and excellent knowledge. The family environment with rich cultural education and intelligent mind creates the profound artistic accomplishments and extensive knowledge of Bao Chai. She is not only good at writing poems, books, playing chess, painting, she is also an expert in medicine, finance, she is even much better than Bao Yu and other males in the novels.

⁵⁴ MR Kukrit Pramoj, [Four Reigns](#), English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p42-43.

⁵⁵ MR Kukrit Pramoj, [Four Reigns](#), English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p88.

Fourth, regarding their virtues. No matter whether in the palace before marriage, in her husband's house after marriage or after having children, Phloi is always the one praised by the people around her. In the palace, she serves the princess as her own mother and benefactor:

*“She did not mind this at all, being of the opinion that she could serve Sadet a whole lifetime yet still not repay her for all her loving kindness.”*⁵⁶

She also treats Khun Sai, Choi's aunt and the housekeeper of the princess, with respect and love. Although she gets married into a rich family, and lives a good life, she still insists on looking after the house and taking care of her husband by herself:

*“But Phloi chose not to tell them directly what to do and to issue her few instructions through her maid Phit.”*⁵⁷

*‘You make everything look so inviting, that’s why. These betel leaves-most exquisite the way you roll them, and the carved nuts are a work of art. I can go on and on and if I were a poet I’d compose a sakkrawa in their praise.’*⁵⁸

She not only loves her children whole-heartedly, but she also treats the servants and maids at home with a benevolent attitude:

“She began to behave more conscientiously, more in keeping with her duties and responsibilities as mistress of a large household. For a start she set out to get better acquainted with its members. Once she had got over her shyness she found it on the whole enjoyable enough, or at least not as difficult as she had imagined. She had no

⁵⁶ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p88.

⁵⁷ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p223.

⁵⁸ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p226.

*trouble at all getting acquainted with Thiap, the chief cook...They were fast becoming good friends and each had a professional admiration for the other's culinary skills.*⁵⁹

Looking at Bao Chai, she is the model of a woman who complies with the rules set for women; she is a virtuous lady. With respect to virtues, she is open-minded, easy-going, and wins the heart of the servants. She is good at figuring out the interests and will of the parents. With respect to dealing with people, she understands thoroughly the world; she is smooth and slick, she takes like a duck to water in the Jia family, a family with complicated personal relationships. This noble lady, known as a cold beauty, makes every effort to adapt to the living environment of the Jia family, showing a sense of calmness. No one in the Jia family says anything bad about her. In Chapter 32, Xiang Yun sighed when thinking about her life as an orphan:

*"At home every day I often think that of all my cousins, Baochai is the best. What a pity we aren't real sisters!"*⁶⁰

This also can be seen from how the servants think about Bao Chai, in Chapter 32, Xi Ren says:

*"But there you are, it is true that nobody can help admiring Miss Baochai...she is really good natured and tolerant."*⁶¹

As for Lady Dowager, who is the one to decide the final fate of Bao Yu, Dai Yu and Bao Chai, we can see how she likes Bao Chai from her words:

⁵⁹ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p223-224.

⁶⁰ Cao Xue Qin and Gao E, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, English version translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, January 1, 2001, p306.

⁶¹ Cao Xue Qin and Gao E, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, English version translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, January 1, 2001, p307-308.

*“Talking about the girls, I’m not saying this as a compliment to Aunt Xue, but the truth is that none of our four girls can stand comparison with Bao Chai.”*⁶²

In *Four Reigns*, the image of Phloi is full of rich significance. This is seemingly an ideal image, her appearance is the epitome of beauty and her heart is the symbol of kindness. From beginning to end, Phloi lives in the glory of love; the double meaning of this love is to love others and to be loved by others. Phloi was gentle and charming in her childhood, as her mother’s favorite daughter; she was dedicated to the princess and obtained her grace and love immediately. During her adult life, she is loved by Nuang and Khun Prem, loved by her children and grandchildren, even her father and her half-sister, who is harsh and mean to her in the beginning, turned to be kind to her at last. From this perspective, we can say Phloi is very lucky. Phloi’s tender and kind personality is shaped by being loved by the people around her, and she happily enjoys the sweetness of love. At the same time, she also gives her love to other people, including her worship and loyalty to the king and princess, along with her caring for friends and family. For the worship and loyalty to the king and princess, Phloi loves them as her own family:

*“I will always be loyal to the throne, as were our grandfathers and grandmothers before us. We are Nai Luang’s loyal subjects and it follows that we’re going to be loyal subjects to his wives and children.”*⁶³

But this feeling is more like an unconditional loyalty and awe. No matter how history changes, no matter whether life is joyful or sorrowful, Phloi is always obedient to the king who is a personalized idol for her:

⁶² Cao Xue Qin and Gao E, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, English version translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, January 1, 2001, p328.

⁶³ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p356.

*“This provided sufficient reason for Phloi. If His Majesty liked it, it was all right, it was a good thing. With her upbringing Phloi had a firm belief in the righteousness of royal policy and in court officials doing their duty and acting in loyal accordance with it.”*⁶⁴

This is also shown by the lines often quoted in the inner court in Phloi’s youth:

“Our Lord says it is beautiful and we say it is beautiful.

Or are there any among us to say that it is not?

Chao wa ngam ko wa ngam pai tam chao,

*Ru khrai lao cha mai ngam tam sadet?”*⁶⁵

Her tonsure ceremony was held by the princess; she obeyed the royal arrangement about her marriage; she educated her children to be loyal to the king when she was seriously sick, she still managed to support herself to welcome the king as a blessing for herself.

For the love to her family and children, Phloi not only reached the perfection of human relations, but also sublimated to the perfection in a religious sense. She loved her parents, brothers and sisters, her husband, her sons, daughter-in-law, daughter, and son-in-law.

She chose to understand and forgave Nuang, her ex-boyfriend who betrayed her:

“... ‘It’s not as if I’ve never known any unhappiness...All this time, when I thought about Phi Nuang and me, I don’t think I ever forgot to warn myself that it could end up this way.’ She said she wasn’t going to stop feeling very close to Choi and that she would

⁶⁴ MR Kukrit Pramoj, [Four Reigns](#), English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p309.

⁶⁵ MR Kukrit Pramoj, [Four Reigns](#), English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p333.

go on loving and respecting Choi's parents as though they were her own, and Phi Nuang like her own brother. 'Wish him well, there's enough suffering in the world and we shouldn't add to it.'"⁶⁶

She was tolerant of the absurd things Khun Prem, her husband, did before their marriage; she treated On, son of Khun Prem and his ex-wife, with much more love:

*"Why, they were fated for each other – she couldn't put it any other way to herself. She would love him like a son. Not out of a sense of duty, or a desire to do the right thing or to perform a meritorious act – no, nothing of the sort. She would love him – she was loving him – like a son, because – well, because that was the way she felt, because that was the way it was meant to be--"*⁶⁷

She even forgave her half-sister, Khun Un, when Khun Un came to ask for help:

"Phloi said to herself, 'she has been wounded and is suffering, and I must do all I can to help her.'"⁶⁸

All of the love and forgiveness she gave to others can be understood from the aspect of Buddhism.

But readers and critics still asked, "did Phloi ever loved Khun Prem", because of her first love for Phi Nuang. Phloi has a dream about Phi Nuang:

*"They would have started from nothing-she and Phi Nuang-and gone on, hand-in-hand, struggling, growing, building together. She had looked forward to enduring hardship and overcoming obstacles."*⁶⁹

⁶⁶ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p141.

⁶⁷ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p233.

⁶⁸ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p339.

⁶⁹ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p228.

After this romantic dream was broken in her young age, she does not even know what love is and is not sure whether she still can love someone else or not. That is why she feels confused after she married Khun Prem and has to face the question raised by Khun Prem, “how much do you love me?” Phloi could not answer this question with a single word “love”, because she is still not sure about the feeling she has for Khun Prem; however, Phloi is deeply moved by being loved, as she told Khun Prem:

*“You are so good to me. I have never in my whole life received so much kindness and consideration as I do from you. We live together and it’s natural that we love each other. But over and above this I feel infinitely grateful to you. I’m in your debt. I owe you everything.”*⁷⁰

This is the first time Phloi tells Khun Prem she loves him. Even if in the beginning of their marriage, Phloi does not love him because she barely knows him before, we cannot come to the conclusion that Phloi has no love for Khun Prem in their later marriage. For Phloi, she has tasted the joy and happiness of love since she was young. When she grows up, she gets married to a mature man who can take care of her very well and loves her very much. Phloi grows up under traditional Thai culture in which obedience is a good virtue for women. She worships the king, respects her father, Sadet and her husband her whole life. After the change of the kings, and the death of her father and Sadet, Khun Prem, - her husband, is the only spiritual strength for her; to rely on him and be loved by him makes her feel secure and happy:

⁷⁰ MR Kukrit Pramoj, Four Reigns, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p227.

*“You are the only one for me, Khun Prem. No one can ever take your place in my heart.”*⁷¹

Therefore, from this point, we do not need to discuss the relationship between Phloi and her husband, whether Phloi loves Khun Prem or not and whether Phloi’s life is happy or not. No matter whether Phloi’s marriage was a decision made by her father and Sadet, Phloi enjoys happiness from her marriage to Khun Prem, and from their four children. So we could say Phloi has nothing to regret about her marriage. On the contrary, in her whole life, happiness is much greater than the pain she suffers; her kindness, tolerance, calmness are the most beautiful virtues according to Asian ethics and morals. We have every reason to believe that Phloi is the ideal epitome of Asian moral beauty according to the values of Thai society.

As for Bao Chai, shaping her ideal self-image is the goal she is pursuing; but her pursuit has different meanings. While in a traditional sense, she pursues the “*Wifely virtue*”⁷²; in reality, she appears to be more the image of a gentle and tender lady under orthodox Confucian values. We have talked about Bao Chai’s great virtues; she is capable of bearing the overall situation in mind and putting the general interest above all, which also makes her the “ideal” daughter-in-law of the Jia Family. In the love story between Bao Yu and Dai Yu, Bao Chai looks rather out of the picture, in that “arranged marriage” period, the approval and acceptance from parents and family is the basis to guarantee the marriage, which is why Bao Chai can eventually marry Bao Yu. Even though during the wedding, Bao Chai has to suffer from the role she has to play, for her,

⁷¹ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p229.

⁷² Cao Xue Qin and Gao E, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, English version translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, January 1, 2001, p43.

to marry Bao Yu, and make sure that the marriage between gold and jade becomes true, is the most important thing. Furthermore, to marry the man she loves is also her dream since she moved to the Jia Family.

Bao Chai is intelligent, she knows well that Bao Yu's true love is Dai Yu, and although the parents like her more than Dai Yu, on the wedding day, she is treated as a doll and Bao Yu marries her because she is considered by Bao Yu to be Dai Yu. Even if she knows that, she can control her feelings well and be patient enough to wait until Bao Yu moves his heart and feeling to her. In Chapter 98, after marrying Bao Yu, Bao Chai knows that Bao Yu still feels sad about Dai Yu's death; she is not in a hurry to replace Dai Yu in Bao Yu's heart, but can wait until a good time to win Bao Yu's heart.

“He took comfort too from the thought that, although Daiyu was dead, Baochai was one woman in a thousand and there might be something in the prophecy of a ‘match between gold and jade.’ As he seemed unlikely to do anything drastic, Bao Chai felt easy enough in her mind to wait dutifully on their ladyships, devoting the rest of her time to amusing him. Although Bao Yu was too weak to sit up for long, the sight of Bao Chai sitting by his bed rekindled his amorous proclivity. But she would urge him gravely:

‘That can wait. We’re already husband and wife, but the main thing now is to recover your health.’

Reluctantly, he had to fall in with her wishes, for during the day his grandmother, mother and Aunt Xue took turns to keep him company, and at night Bao Chai slipped away to sleep elsewhere, leaving nannies sent by the old lady to wait on him. So he had to

convalesce quietly. Moreover, Bao Chai's gentle ways made him gradually transfer to her some of the love he had felt for Dai Yu."⁷³

Then, after Bao Yu gradually recovers from the illness and the sadness for Dai Yu, they start to treat each other well and get along with each other as a real couple:

*"Then Xi Feng expatiated, 'Just now I went to Cousin Bao's place and heard laughter in his room. I wondered who was there and peeped through the window. Cousin Bao Chai was sitting on the edge of the Kang, with Cousin Bao standing in front of her. He pulled her sleeve and pleaded, 'Do talk to me, cousin! One word from you would cure me completely – I swear it!' But Bao Chai turned her head away, refusing to meet his eyes. He bowed to her then and tugged at her jacket. When she wrenched away, of course his legs were so weak after his illness that he toppled over and fell on top of her. Then blushing scarlet she scolded, 'You're getting more and more undignified!'"*⁷⁴

From another description, we can see clearly how Bao Yu changes his attitude towards Bao Chai. Realizing that Dai Yu is dead already, and will never come back to him, with Bao Chai carefully taking care of him, he decides to treat Bao Chai well and move his love to Bao Chai:

"Now Bao Yu in his contrition wanted to set Bao Chai's mind at rest, while she, for fear lest longing might drive him to distraction, thought it best to show affection to win him over to take Dai Yu's place in his heart. So that evening when Xi Ren moved out, he

⁷³ Cao Xue Qin and Gao E, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, English version translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, January 1, 2001, p1065-1066.

⁷⁴ Cao Xue Qin and Gao E, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, English version translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, January 1, 2001, p1068.

*made abject advances which Bao Chai naturally did not reject. And thus that night at last their marriage was consummated.”*⁷⁵

But eventually, although Bao Yu seems to recover from his sadness and grief for Dai Yu, it is only on his face and outside behavior; deep inside, his heart is dead and he has made up his mind from long ago that he will leave and honor his promise to Dai Yu, which was that if she died, he would become a monk. In the end of the novel, Bao Yu leaves his home, wife, and unborn child, and becomes a monk, which drives Bao Chai crazy and makes her really sad; but she soon can adjust herself well, and turn to comfort other people:

*“However, Bao Chai showed her usual good sense, saying that it was no use complaining as Bao Yu had been someone quite unique and this had been fated to happen.”*⁷⁶

From the discussion of Bao Yu and Bao Chai’s marriage, many people will reach the same conclusion that Bao Chai has a tragic marriage which she does not deserve. However, if we think from a Thai perspective, Bao Chai married a man she loves. She has a chance to change him, to live the life of a real couple with him, and be respected by him and the whole family. Even if the time is quite short, she still enjoys the short happiness from him and from their marriage. The most important thing is that her great virtue brings her some goodness, which is her child; being pregnant is a gift for her from Bao Yu and the family, which we can also see from Chapter 120:

⁷⁵ Cao Xue Qin and Gao E, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, English version translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, January 1, 2001, p1147.

⁷⁶ Cao Xue Qin and Gao E, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, English version translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, January 1, 2001, p1233.

“This was their fate,’ Aunt Xue answered. ‘What else could families like ours have done? It’s lucky that she’s with child. If she gives birth to a son, he’s bound to make good and all’s well that ends well. Look at your elder daughter-in-law: now lan’s juren and next year he’ll be a court scholar, doesn’t that mean that he’ll become an official? After all that bitterness, she’s having a taste of sweetness now to reward her for her goodness. You know my daughter, sister. She’s not flighty or petty-minded; you needn’t worry about her.’

Lady Wang, convinced of the truth of this, reflected, ‘Bao Chai was always a quiet, unassuming child with simple tastes; that’s why this has happened to her. It seems that everyone’s lot in life is predestined! Although she wept so bitterly, she retained all her dignity and even tried to console me, she’s really one in a thousand.’”⁷⁷

3.2.2. Analysis of “Phloi” and “Bao Chai” from Chinese cultural perspective: dependent personality and tragic ending.

Different from analyzing the result from a Thai cultural perspective, from a Chinese cultural perspective, “Phloi” and “Bao Chai”, who represent the “ideal women” of Thailand and China, are representatives of tragic characters.

The definition of “tragedy” is:

“Tragedy, a branch of drama that treats in a serious and dignified style the sorrowful or terrible events encountered or caused by a heroic individual. By extension the term

⁷⁷ Cao Xue Qin and Gao E, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, English version translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, January 1, 2001, p1232-1233.

*maybe applied to other literary works, such as the novel.*⁷⁸ Or *“tragedy is a form of drama based on human suffering that invokes in its audience an accompanying catharsis or pleasure in the viewing.”*⁷⁹

“Tragedy” derives from classical Greek myths and legends. But nowadays, modern dramatic works begin to be concerned more and more about personal tragedy and criticize the social system through the characters. The “core” of the tragedy is no longer the “contradictions among human and God” as in ancient Greek myths and legends, but the various irreconcilable conflicts between people.

The concept of tragedy in ancient Greek myths and the interpretation of tragedy from Western culture is different from the definition of tragedy in Chinese culture, which is influenced by multiple factors, including unique historical factors and the cultural factors; thus tragedy is given different meanings. From the perspective of social systems, in Chinese society, virtue, morality and filial piety are the main principles, which are the values that have been respected and followed in China for thousands of years before the abolition of the monarchy. There are parts worth preserving, but also many wore-out concepts. Since the last century, Chinese scholars and intellectuals ruthlessly refute how to break completely the shackles on Chinese society and Chinese people from the feudal system, which has also become the reason why Chinese people are more accustomed to looking at the historical background and the social system of the characters when reading literary works.

⁷⁸ “Tragedy”, *Encyclopedia Britannica* [Online], Source <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/601884/tragedy>.

⁷⁹ “Tragedy”, *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia* [Online], Source <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tragedy>.

Mr. Zhu Guang Qian, the founder of the study of aesthetics in 20th century China, said in his *The Psychology of Tragedy*:

*“In fact, drama is almost the synonym of comedy in China, Chinese playwrights always like a happy ending as ‘one good return deserves another’.”*⁸⁰

However, analyzed from the historical factor of modern China, since The May Fourth Movement in 1919, Chinese literary men are accustomed to seeing tragedy as a part of traditional Chinese culture. Tragedy is used in order to criticize the old cultural system in China, as an anti-feudal weapon, and to promote the new ideas of science and democracy, which has its historical value. However, the main purpose is to criticize the old traditional values and social system by means of analysis on tragedy.

In the two novels we are discussing, the era of the two main characters is the period of absolute monarchy in Thailand and China, when both countries experienced a time when their imperial dynasties flourished. Also for China, this was a time of absolute and complete feudal autocracy. At the same time, the two characters are females, no matter how much their appearance, personalities, life experiences meet the expected standards of the society at the time, could not compete against their historical backgrounds. This is the typical tragedy from a Chinese cultural perspective, which is to reflect on the fate of the whole society and times from the fate of the individual.

Therefore, from this angle, although those two women create a brilliant picture in the novel, these talented and beautiful women cannot decide their own fate, even if they live in a rich family. No matter whether they are noble women or humble women, they both

⁸⁰ Zhu Guang Qian, *The Psychology of Tragedy*, People's Literature Publishing House, Beijing, 1983, p218.

become the victims of the society. No matter whether in the king's palace, the minister's mansion, or in the Jia family, they both are subject to their own "ritual laws". From a Chinese cultural perspective, M.R. Kukrit Pramoj and Cao Xue Qin can be considered to denounce the pain and misfortune of females under the patriarchal pressure with their shrewd vision and smooth, vivid touch.

In a society dominated by males, even "ideal women" such as Phloi or Bao Chai, as well as the other women in the novels, cannot escape from their tragic fate. Behind the "glory", Phloi feels as if she had lost her spiritual support after the death of her husband and the king, and her life ends, which follows absolute prostration of her mind and body. We can see how tired and stressed she is with her own words:

*"I begin to understand a little...but I'm so tired. I've lived under four reigns—lived a long time—long enough..."*⁸¹

Bao Chai has to accept the fact that her youth will be filled with loneliness after Bao Yu's departure. In a word, the misfortunes of Phloi and Bao Chai are the products of the patriarchal society, as well as their beauty. They are made by the society, and they are destroyed by the society at last.

The environment decides the character, the character decides the destiny. Tracing the reasons of their destinies, the tragedy of Phloi and Bao Chai is closely related to their comprehensive and orthodox education since they were young. Under the male-dominated ideology of spiritual control, they can only live with a negative attitude towards life; when this attitude reaches its limits, it will be turned into the numbness to

⁸¹ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p656.

the established lifestyle. The whole person, from the soul to the body, will listen to the secular arrangements, without their own independent thought, without even “selfness”, and eventually be swallowed mercilessly in the “happiness”.

Examining Phloi’s whole life, she is spiritually and physically influenced and surrounded by males. Before going to the palace, she lives with her mother in a small house next to the main house of her father, and her father treats her coldly and indifferently. Even when she is taken away from home by her mother, her father does not say anything to her. But even so, she still loves her father very much. She misses her father when she is in the palace; she feels excited and thankful because her father attends her wedding; she keeps all the teachings from her father in mind, and does not dare to be against him. We can understand Phloi’s gratitude and respect for her own father, but Phloi also treats her brother Chit and her mean half-sister Un very well, even if they used to treat her very bad. But when they turn to ask for help from her, she is willing to do everything to help them. Phloi treats them like this, so when coming to the king or the princess who represents the royal power, of course Phloi gives her best and serves with devotion; the king and princess are regarded as the supreme “God” in Phloi’s heart. The meaning of her whole life revolves around this apotheosis image, and this image represents the domination of the sovereign in the society during that time, which is one continuous line from the domination of paternity to the domination of authority of the husband.

However, we still can feel the deep pain hidden in her soul and heart; the strangeness and helplessness which was incompatible with the world around her. We may even say

that her kindness did not get a real good return. During Phloi's life, she suffers numerous misfortunes. In her childhood, because her mother was a concubine, she had to face the cold shoulder of the daughter of her father's official wife. When she left home for the palace, her mother died in childbirth. Her first love Nuang betrayed her and broke her heart. After marrying Khun Prem, even with his love for her, the two of them could not mutual understand each other because of their different status, and Khun Prem died before her, leaving her alone again. Although her children respected her very much, all of them chose their own favorite way of life contrary to her intentions, which she had worry about all the time.

Phloi unconsciously continued the tradition of Thai women from generation to generation by being "obedient to father at home", "obedient to husband after marriage", and "obedient to son after husband's death". However, her life which was at the tipping point between the old era and new era, did not turn out to be the way she expected. The princess and king, whom she devoted all her heart and soul to love, died naturally, or died from an unexpected accident, and ultimately, the assassination of King Rama VIII shattered her heart, collapsing her last and most important spiritual pillar, and finally extinguished the spark of her life. The good people had to suffer from pain, the valuable things were destroyed, this thought made Phloi's ending was full of tragic significance. However, if we understand Phloi's internal and external development path, we will find that the destruction of Phloi had undeniable historical inevitability.

First, we can feel that Phloi's mental development was almost completely separated from the historical events, becoming a self-enclosed world. The story reveals the other

side of Phloi's spiritual world, which is her ignorance to the historical developments. She could not understand and did not expect the historical process and her own position in history; every heavy advancing step of the history was out of her expectation, and constituted a wild thrill and shock to her soul, giving her a feeling of panic, anxiousness, pain and fear, which we can see from the following paragraph:

*“Phloi's life in the early years of the new reign thus revolved round her family and a few close friends, having its ups and downs inside the domestic border, with little or no involvement in what went on beyond it.”*⁸²

She could only measure the historical step by holding an established moral scale. She did not understand the historical significance and cultural background behind the phenomenon such as the dancing ball held in the palace, or the upsurge of riding bicycles. She felt distressed for Khun Prem's manic efforts to catch up with the historical trend, such as frequent changing clothes, enthusiastically raising horses and horse riding:

*“The new court was a youthful court with its own style of work and play and everyday living, and Khun Prem had adopted the style, adopted it with ease in his own natural, unself-conscious way. Even his gestures and movements had become different, Phloi noticed.”*⁸³

She was shocked even more that her sons fought with each other because of “politics”. The rumbling of guns in the wars at home and abroad was nothing but a distant city sound for Phloi:

⁸² MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p308.

⁸³ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p289.

*“She heard about World War I from Khun Prem and paid little attention on it at first. The farangs were fighting among themselves in far-away Europe. Nothing to be afraid of or get excited about. None of our business which battles were won or lost by which side.”*⁸⁴

The years from King Rama V to King Rama VIII was the period which we can call the historical stage of Thai society gradually moving from feudal ignorance to modern civilization. This was also the special period when the ancient oriental cultural tradition gradually disintegrated, and new values gradually took shaped. This was a period of alternation between old and new, and was full of universal pain. Therefore, the soul quiver of Phloi was not only the mentality of one specific person, but a national sense of crisis and pain of historical inevitability. The development of history had its own rule, which would not transfer or follow with the willpower of humans. Facing the wheel of history, not even the most beautiful morality could survive the misfortune of being crushed. The destruction of Phloi was a vivid illustration of this historical law. There was no imprint of the historical evolution in her spiritual world; she could not take the initiative to appreciate the inexorable law of history, but could only grasp her deep-rooted moral values, complying with the trend she never understood, and responding freely and passively to the rolling tide of the world. Ultimately she lost her emotional significance, becoming an abstract historical symbol.

Phloi was dedicated to the princess, which meant her body, life and hope were all handed over to the princess. In the palace, Phloi’s value as a “human” was replaced by

⁸⁴ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p329.

humility and obedience. Her mother's exhortations and the surrounding atmosphere of the monastery all raised the status of the king as an idol in her heart. However, apart from worshipping and respecting the king, Phloi did not understand the king at all. She never thought that the king was also struggling in the historical trend. Over the course of the four reigns, the kingship was gradually being reformed, heading towards a modern civilization with the whole Thai nation. The story demonstrates their hard choices when facing the reforms; but what Phloi worshipped and obeyed was almost always the feudal king, and the dignity, solemnity and order, which the king was abandoning or had already abandoned.

Similarly, born in a noble family, Bao Chai is identified as an ideal woman since the time she was young. To be an imperial concubine was the highest target for women in the feudal Chinese society. Bao Chai was educated carefully at the highest standards by her father who placed high hope on her. She started to read *Four Books of Women*, *Biography of Women in Ancient China* since she was very young. When she grew up, she read the history, philosophy and literature of Confucius; she is good at writing poetry and articles; and she is taught to follow the way a model ideal woman should follow. The way she was taught and the way she was raised makes Bao Chai gradually lose her woman's nature and close the deepest part of her soul. In Chapter 42, after advising Dai Yu about what to read and what should not be read, Bao Chai confesses to herself:

"You may not believe it, but I used to be a madcap too, at seven and eight I was a real handful. Our family could be considered a scholarly one, and my grandfather's chief delight was collecting books. There were a lot of us in those days, boys and girls together,

and we all hated serious books. Some of my boy cousins liked poetry, others librettos. We had books like The Western Chamber, Tale of the Lute and A Hundred Dramas of the Yuan Dynasty, a whole collection of that sort. They used to read them in secret, and so did we girls. When the grown-ups later found out, we were beaten or scolded and the books were burnt, which put a stop to that.

So it's best for girls like us not to know how to read. Even boys, if they study to no good purpose would do better not to study at all, and that's even truer in our case. Poetry-writing and calligraphy are not required of us, nor of boys either for that matter. If boys learn sound principles by studying so that they can help the government to rule the people, well and good; but nowadays we don't hear of many such cases reading only seems to make them worse than they were to start with. And while study leads them astray, the books they read are debased too. So it's worse than taking up farming or trade, for in those professions they could do less damage. As for us, we should just stick to needlework. If we happen to have a little education we should choose proper books to read. If we let ourselves be influenced by those unorthodox books, there's no hope for us.»⁸⁵

This is a very important paragraph and description of Bao Chai that allows us to see Bao Chai's past and present life more clearly. As she says about herself, she used to be very naughty, and then after the influence of the feudal patriarchal ideology, she finally learns that "innocence is a virtue for women". The confession of Bao Chai reveals her

⁸⁵ Cao Xue Qin and Gao E, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, English version translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, January 1, 2001, p447.

present life and the process of “her transformation”. In *The Theory of Childlike Innocence* of Li Zhi, a scholar in the Ming Dynasty of China, he said:

*“Innocence, in essence, is a true heart, if we think there shouldn’t be innocence, then there shouldn’t be a true heart as well. The so-called innocence, in fact, is the absolutely sincere heart of human beings without any influence from the outside world. If we lose innocence, we will lose the true heart, if we lose the true heart, we will lose the right to be a real person. If a person does not have faith, he will lose forever the complete personality he is supposed to have.”*⁸⁶

According to Li Zhi, when people lose their innocence and become fake persons, it is because they have received the feudal education from *Six Classics*, *Confucian Analects*, and *Mencius*. Bao Chai just shows the whole process from having a childhood heart to completely losing her innocence from her confession. This is the main point of the tragic personality of Bao Chai; she gives up all her hobbies and happiness. Whether behavior is good or bad depends on the established life criterion from the society. The excellent quality and great nature of Bao Chai finally was mercilessly destroyed by the feudal ethics, as she became a victim of these ethics. The most pathetic aspect is that after being the victim, she even tries to transform and twist her companion according to the male-dominated way.

From a Chinese cultural perspective, the marriage of Phloi and Bao Chai are also the best proof of their tragic life and ending. The male-dominated society not only creates the

⁸⁶ Li Zhi, *The Theory of Childlike Innocence* [Online], Source <http://www.5156edu.com/page/10-04-10/55221.htm>.

tragic characters of Phloi and Bao Chai, but also is a cause of their marriages and lives which are full of tragic overtones.

In the love story between Bao Yu and Dai Yu, many commentators consider Bao Chai as the shameless villain trying to destroy Bao Yu and Dai Yu's love. But there is another opinion that Bao Chai is not an insidious woman, otherwise the author would never have put her together with Dai Yu in the novel, showing his sympathy to the destiny of both women. In Chapter 5, the author describes Bao Chai as "*alas for her wifely virtue, her wit to sing of willow-down, poor maid! Buried in snow the broken golden hairpin, and hanging in the wood the belt of jade.*"⁸⁷ So we can see that Bao Chai is definitely not the villain standing between Bao Yu and Dai Yu's love; she is only a pathetic woman with rigid behavior and imprisoned thoughts under the feudal ethics. From some angles, it can be said that Bao Chai is the biggest victim among the domestic exchange covered with the "*well-matched marriage between the gold and the jade*"⁸⁸.

When Aunt Xue agrees to marry her to Bao Yu, she discusses with Bao Chai:

"Although your aunt has proposed it, I've not yet given my consent, telling her we'd decide after your brother's return. But are you willing or not?"

Bao Chai answered gravely, 'you shouldn't ask me that, mother. A girl's marriage is arranged by her parents. As father is dead, the decision's up to you, or you can consult brother Pan; but you shouldn't ask me.'"⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Cao Xue Qin and Gao E, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, English version translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, January 1, 2001, p43.

⁸⁸ Cao Xue Qin and Gao E, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, English version translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, January 1, 2001, p48.

⁸⁹ Cao Xue Qin and Gao E, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, English version translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, January 1, 2001, p1035.

This conversation between Bao Chai and Aunt Xue shows that Bao Chai no longer wishes too much about her life under the established life rules of the society and strong morality. Even with the marriage, which is the most important issue in her life, she completely loses the right to choose or make a decision; she has become the standard of female virtue and morality in the patriarchal society. Furthermore, she still has to suppress her own needs with the appropriate way of speaking, in order to maintain the gender ruling order which suppresses her emotions and feelings.

Does Bao Chai love Bao Yu? There is no direct answer from the novel, although most of readers and commentators would say “yes”. However, we should notice that the deep feelings and love between Bao Yu and Dai Yu is not a secret in Grand View Garden. As an intelligent and sensible woman, Bao Chai knows clearly that she is not the one Bao Yu loves. As well, Bao Yu has always been against the theory of “career economy ideal”, he retorted upon Bao Chai:

*“imagine a pure, innocent girl joining the ranks of time-servers and place-seekers, who set such store by reputation.”*⁹⁰

Bao Chai could foresee what is going to happen after marrying Bao Yu, and this is the reason why Aunt Xue tells Bao Chai that she agrees with the marriage,

*“Bao Chai lowered her head in silence, and presently shed tears.”*⁹¹

Although Aunt Xue could see that Bao Chai looks rather unwilling, she thinks,

⁹⁰ Cao Xue Qin and Gao E, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, English version translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, January 1, 2001, p334.

⁹¹ Cao Xue Qin and Gao E, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, English version translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, January 1, 2001, p1052.

*“Still, she is a woman who has always been submissive and a model of propriety. Knowing that I’ve agreed, she won’t raise any objections.”*⁹²

If Bao Chai really thinks this is the perfect marriage she has ever dreamed of, why is she so sad? Even though Bao Chai thinks the combination between her and Bao Yu is inappropriate, she is a reasonable and considerate woman, even with a highly orthodox feudal ethics education, and she will not, nor is powerful enough, to fight against marrying a man who does not love her. The truth is that Bao Chai is not happy after marrying Bao Yu, but the only thing she can do is weep secretly. Finally, because of their huge gap between the ideals of life, Bao Yu leaves home and Bao Chai has to live her life miserably alone, becoming the victim of the feudal ethics and the family exchange, her youth and beauty are ruthlessly ruined. The most tragic thing is that Bao Chai adapts to the male-dominated ruling system and the feudal ethics. At the same time, she initiatively participates in the destruction of her own beauty and become a sacrificial lamb in the patriarchal system.

Bao Chai is unfortunate. Even if she tries to escape her destiny, she cannot escape the great bitterness of life; this is the limitation of the world and of human beings. The unfortunate married life of Bao Chai is an emotional torment for a woman, and the torment is from the most sentimental and affectionate man, Bao Yu. If the most affectionate man who has compassion for womanhood can make a woman so full of pain, then why is love worthy of expecting? Bao Chai tries her best to make her love and

⁹² Cao Xue Qin and Gao E, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, English version translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, January 1, 2001, p1053.

feelings mature and deep, but it is a shame that Bao Yu cannot understand her; this is the deepest sorrow for a woman. Facing the sorrow, Bao Chai comforts herself:

“As life speeds past, we learn to hold it dear

What cares whether foul or fair the day?”⁹³

Everyone’s final destiny is death; we are always walking towards death. Time passes, so we should not be wandering in misfortune, but should cherish this present short life. Bao Chai understands this, and she can overlook her own misfortune from a higher height; this is the strength of wisdom, and this strength brings Bao Chai as much relief and freedom as possible from her unfortunate fate.

Phloi’s marriage, which seems very happy, is, in fact, as unfortunate as Bao Chai’s. While Bao Chai still has an opportunity to choose her marriage, Phloi does not even have this right; her whole life is similar to a bird kept imprisoned in a cage.

Phloi has a short, but warm first love. The love between her and Choi’s brother, Nuang, is beautiful and pure; but since they are both young and stay far from each other, Nuang betrays Phloi. After being betrayed and suffering emotional pain, young Phloi reacts extremely calmly; her reaction even surprises her best friend, Nuang’s sister, Choi. For Phloi, she is ashamed to show people the devotion or commitment to the relationship, even if it is the most common and beautiful emotion in the world; as she said to Choi:

“I didn’t want people to talk about me-about us. There are some who would like to see me behave in a certain way so they could start gossiping and bandying my name about.”⁹⁴

⁹³ Cao Xue Qin and Gao E, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, English version translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, January 1, 2001, p225.

She never has any direct body contact with Nuang. Although her inner world is as passionate as fire, she does not dare to show her pain and sadness to anyone after being betrayed; she even thinks this is her fault. After losing her first love, Phloi has to follow her father and the princess's will, and marry Khun Prem, a man she does not know very well, not to mention love. Although her life after marriage is quiet and happy, Phloi never thinks about whether she "loves" Khun Prem or not. Phloi only respects and follows this man as her husband; love has already become a dispensable feeling for females under that society, as the description in the novel below:

*"A simple answer of 'very much' might have satisfied Khun Prem, but not herself. Finally she said, 'you are so good to me. I have in my whole life received so much kindness and consideration as I do from you. We live together and it's natural that we love each other. But over and above this I feel infinitely grateful to you. I'm in your debt. I owe you everything.'"*⁹⁵

Although after her marriage, Phloi has a happy life with her husband and her children, there were still many ludicrous aspects to this feeling. We can hardly find any equal and rational "dialogue" between Phloi and her husband or children. Phloi was always a hardworking and accessible "good wife" and "good mother", rather than a "human". For her:

⁹⁴ MR Kukrit Pramoj, [Four Reigns](#), English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p99.

⁹⁵ MR Kukrit Pramoj, [Four Reigns](#), English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p227.

*“I feel myself as belonging to him. This is something absolute and unarguable. I belong to him completely and absolutely. I take him as my owner, as centre and mainstay of my life, forever, unless and until he himself should wish to cease being so.”*⁹⁶

Phloi managed the home for her “owner”, suffering silently with interior pain and anxiety for her husband who was either familiar or strange, until her husband died from an accident; she could not figure out why he abandoned her like that. Phloi took attentive care of her children, carefully speculating on their mood swings and behavior, fixing the cracks in their relationships, and trying to gather all of them together to enjoy the happiness of a family. However their career choices, their pursuit of love and their life journeys were all out of her expectations. Phloi could not speculate on the reasons why her children did not follow her will, she could only feel anxious and sad; her generous love seemed to be so solitary and poor. Indeed, if we take a look at Phloi’s spiritual world, we can feel that her blind loyalty, obedience and generous love were caused by her religious belief, as well as the historical, social realities, and the inevitable result of the long-term historic process of the Thai nation. Similar to her husband Prem, Phloi could not withstand the more and more violent oscillations of her soul, finally passing away full of sorrow and regret, with fear and suspicion about the world she would never understand.

It should be said that the two writers place complicated feelings in Phloi and Bao Chai. They praise their ingenuity and beauty; but at the same time, show sympathy for their unfortunate tragic fate, regret for how they slavishly believe in the spiritual male-dominated rule, and criticize their philosophy of life. In order to show how the two

⁹⁶ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p221.

dignified, beautiful, talented and knowledgeable girls are destroyed by the feudal ethic, in the two novels, the authors show the nice, healthy factors of the two characters, as well as their worn-out and suffocating parts, and unify the contradictions to be natural in the characters. While the contradictions are shown more profound, they reveal and expose more deeply how the traditional feudal ethics spiritually poisons and ruins the two women, and also more sharply criticizes the “man-eating” nature of the feudal ethics.

Looking back at the development of the history of human society, it can be said to be a history of manipulative male hegemony. This hegemony has been exercised through the external ruling of social power, but also as a more internal, imperceptible spiritual reign. Men not only have become the top layer of the social power pyramid with their positions responsible for “self-cultivation, family harmony, state governing and world peace”, but also have become the rulers and occupants of female spirits. As “ideal women” in a male-dominated society, Phloi and Bao Chai are considered to be the product of the alienation and transformation by men according to their own will and needs. They received strict orthodox education when they were young, but since then, their talent, beauty, virtues and everything about them was imprinted by the male-dominated society. They gradually lost their selfness and conscience; they did not understand, nor were they able to control their own fates; and ultimately they entered into the bondage of the inevitable destiny, becoming the tragic victims of the society.

CHAPTER IV

Comparative analysis of the “ideal” woman from religious, aesthetic and social perspectives

Literature is the reflection of society and life; in *Four Reigns* and *A Dream of Red Mansions*, the female characters, “Phloi” and “Bao Chai” are based on real women in Thai and Chinese society at that time; their personalities and the ways of dealing with people are all shaped from the existing social rules and values. In this chapter, I will focus on analyzing why “Phloi” and “Bao Chai” are seen as the “ideal” women from religious, aesthetic and social perspectives.

4.1 The image of the “ideal” woman in Thai and Chinese culture reflected from a religious point of view.

Religion is the main content of a national culture, which permeates literature. Both religion and literature have a “people oriented” internal social basis and share many common imaginations - emotional and aesthetic psychological basis. Therefore, when we study literary characters, analyzing them from a religious angle can make for a better and deeper understanding of the character and the author’s intention. Different religious doctrine brings different religious color into the literary characters. Tracing from the religious cultural angle, we can see that Phloi’s character reflects the ideology of “Five Precepts and Five Virtues”, which are the female self-conduct rules and “self-awareness” derived from the “Four Noble Truths” and “Noble Eightfold Path” of Theravada

Buddhism. For Bao Chai, we can see the aesthetic characteristics of “zhong he” or “harmony” and self-awareness advocated by traditional Chinese Confucianism.

4.1.1 Phloi: Theravada Buddhist ideology and the “ideal” woman cultural boundaries portrayed from *Four Reigns*;

The reasons why religious doctrine impacts the thoughts and behavior of literary characters is, first, religious doctrine has an important impact on the author’s psychological and aesthetic taste. Thai literature has strong religious color, which is connected closely with Thai Buddhist cultural tradition. Most ancient Thai literature was created based on Buddhist ideology. As the national religion, Buddhism has a high status in the social and spiritual life in Thailand, such that Buddhist ideology still has a profound impact on contemporary literary works of Thailand. Contemporary literature is different from ancient literature; new poetry styles, fiction, film and television, internet and other most fashionable forms of media have replaced the oral tradition of ancient times, which included the texts of myths, Buddhist Jataka stories and dramas. Buddhist ideology still continues to survive in the new literary style, and even shows new features. Buddhist ideology in contemporary literature relates more closely with the secular life. For example, an emphasis on Buddhist practice being for the goodness and harmony of society, not just for personal relief; to propose that “working is the practice (of Buddhism)” does not necessarily mean the need to ordain as a monk. Literary works often promote Buddhism through the Zen theory contained in the natural scenery; the author’s personal understanding and interpretation of Buddhism also permeates the

literary works. Monks, scholars, writers and poets try to look at Buddhism from a broader perspective; they experience Buddhist theory from philosophical, psychological and sociological perspectives, and many literary works reflect the contradiction between Buddhist ideology and material pursuit in the hi-tech era creating secular confusion.

Doctrinally, ideal action in Theravada Buddhism can be described as meritorious action (punna-kamma) or action that does not accrue demerit (papa-kamma).⁹⁷

At the highest stage of spiritual self-realization, the state of arahantship, one's actions are totally beyond the power of kamma and rebirth (samsara). Terms used to characterize ideal behavior and attitudes are truthfulness (sacca), generosity (dana), loving-kindness (metta), compassion (karuna), equanimity (upekkha), wisdom (panna), and morality (sila), to name a few.

In both Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism these virtues are referred to as "perfections" (parami or paramita) of character associated with the person of the bodhisatta (Sanskrit, bodhisattva), one who is on the path to Buddhahood.⁹⁸

"In Buddhist texts authored by male monastics, women appear positively as female renunciants who attain arahantship and renowned lay women who give generously to the sangha, but negatively as a threat to the stability of the male renunciant order and as greedy, weak in wisdom, and inferior to men."⁹⁹

Four Reigns is not a novel trying to preach Buddhist culture, but Buddhist doctrine and ideology is reflected through this novel from the main character, "Phloi".

⁹⁷ Donald K. Swearer, *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia*, Silkworm Books, 2009, p4.

⁹⁸ Donald K. Swearer, *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia*, Silkworm Books, 2009, p4.

⁹⁹ Donald K. Swearer, *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia*, Silkworm Books, 2009, p190.

Under the influence of the doctrine from Buddhism and Buddhist scripture, in Thai traditional culture, the “ideal” woman is portrayed as a loyal wife and devoted mother, which I will mainly discuss in the part of the image of the “ideal” woman in Thai and Chinese culture from the social role. To discuss from a religious point of view, I will use the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism for the analysis to discover how Phloi’s whole life proceeds, and how she and her life reflects Buddhist influence.

“Phloi” is a typical traditional Thai woman with almost all the good virtues set by society. Her thoughts and behavior follows what she has been taught since she was born, which we can see from The Four Noble Truths of Buddhism; the nature of suffering (Dukkha); suffering’s origin (Dukkha Samudaya); suffering’s cessation (Dukkha Nirodha); and the path (Dukkha Nirodha Gamini Patipada Mada).

The definition of the first noble truth (Dukkha) is *“birth is dukkha, aging is dukkha, death is dukka; sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, & despair are dukka; association with the unbeloved is dukkha; separation from the loved is dukkha; not getting what is wanted is dukkha. In short, the five clinging-aggregates are dukkha.”*¹⁰⁰

Phloi’s life started with dukkha; she was born in a rich family, but she had to leave home at 10 years old; after being separated from her father, brother and sisters, her mother left her at last. After she grew up as a young lady, she was betrayed by her first love. We can see from those descriptions in the novel when Phloi was taken from her home and had to leave her cold-hearted father and beloved brother and step-sister Choei:

¹⁰⁰ “Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta: Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion” (SN 56.11), translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. [Access to Insight](#), 12 February 2012.

*“Her throat was aching, her eyes so blurred she could hardly make out Khun Choei’s face.”*¹⁰¹ When her mother decided to leave her alone in the palace, *“her first dinner in the Palace, after such a promising start, quickly collapsed into a nightmare of a meal, into visions of loneliness and starvation. Happiness is indeed a fragile thing...”*¹⁰²

When her mother died in childbirth, for Phloi:

*“The task was beyond her power-anybody’s power-and must be left to the healing patience of time.”*¹⁰³

And when her first love, Phi Nuang betrayed her:

*“she felt no pain at first, but her eyes were blurred-there seemed to have been a blinding glare as from an exploding lamp. She couldn’t make out what was in front of her. The light must have gone out but she wasn’t sure. Suddenly it became very cold and she had this sensation of slowly falling-it could have been in a dream.”*¹⁰⁴

Phloi suffered a lot in her life. When she became a middle-aged woman, she suffered the pain of losing her husband and son. This shows that human life is mixed with different kinds of suffering; even great or good people have to suffer in their lives first before achieving success.

The definition of the second noble truth (Dukkha Samudaya) is *“the craving that makes for further becoming-accompanied by passion & delight, relishing now here &*

¹⁰¹ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p11.

¹⁰² MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p39.

¹⁰³ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p87.

¹⁰⁴ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p139.

now there – i.e., craving for sensual pleasure, craving for becoming, craving for non-becoming.”¹⁰⁵

In “*Four Reigns*”, Phloi suffered a lot in her life because of the departure of loved ones and the death of people she loved. She seemed to deal with her feelings and her emotions well after those events occurred, but she was always thinking about the origin and the reason of the suffering. As described at the end of the novel, she asked herself why all these events happened. She gave herself the answer, which is that karma brought the suffering to herself and the people she loved.

*“But before sleep finally came certain thoughts, confused and blurred, did flit through some part of her mind. Had it really happened? But how could it be? What gods or demons, what dark powers of the universe had allowed this to come to pass? What devious course of karma? Why did Nai Luang have to die? Why die Ot have to die? Dearest beloved son, and sovereign. Death could reach Ot easily-he had been nobody special. But how did death penetrate the thick walls and the royal guards to strike in the bed chamber? Where are you, Khun Prem? Help me to understand...it’s all right, my love, never mind...I begin to understand a little...”*¹⁰⁶

The definition of the third noble truth (Dukkha Nirodha) is “*the remainderless fading & cessation, renunciation, relinquishment, release, & letting go of that very craving.*”¹⁰⁷

Phloi learned to be calm since she was a little girl; the separation from her parents and the pain from love all taught her to be strong and generous to people who treat her badly.

¹⁰⁵ “Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta: Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion” (SN 56.11), translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. [Access to Insight](#), 12 February 2012.

¹⁰⁶ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p655-656.

¹⁰⁷ “Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta: Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion” (SN 56.11), translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. [Access to Insight](#), 12 February 2012.

From that pain and sadness she suffered, but she gradually understood the reason for the pain and suffering, she had her own way to comfort herself. When Phi Nuang wrote to break up with her, she felt pain, but she did not feel angry with her betrayed lover:

*“I’m not angry, or jealous. Phi Nuang getting married. Doing what’s right. You tell me to forget, like telling the sun to stop shining or the moon not to glow...my love, you’ll follow the course of your karma, and I mine.”*¹⁰⁸ And as she told Choi, *“all this time, when I thought about Phi Nuang and me, I don’t think I ever forgot to warn myself that it could end up this way. Wish him well, there’s enough suffering in the world and we shouldn’t add to it.”*¹⁰⁹

Even if she was still shocked by the bad news, she still knew how to adjust herself, and try to find the correct way for herself.

The definition of the fourth noble truth (Dukkha Nirodha Gamini Patipada Madda) is *“the noble truth of the way of practice leading to the cessation of dukkha: precisely this noble eightfold path: right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.”*¹¹⁰

This is the fourth truth, which is also regarded as The Noble Eightfold Path, and it is the way to the cessation of suffering. The Noble Eightfold Path has eight sections, presented in three groups known as the three higher training: Sila, Samadhi, and Panna.

Sila is moral practice, abstention from all unwholesome actions of body and speech. Samadhi is the practice of concentration, developing the ability to consciously direct and

¹⁰⁸ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p139.

¹⁰⁹ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p141.

¹¹⁰ “Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta: Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion” (SN 56.11), translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. [Access to Insight](#), 12 February 2012.

*control one's own mental processes. Panna is wisdom, the development of purifying insight into one's own nature.*¹¹¹

The first stage, Sila or Morality, is composed of three parts: right speech, right action and right livelihood. Phloi is a person who is always careful about her speech and behavior, she always tells herself to follow the right direction, follow what Chao Khun Father taught her and what Sadet taught her, which is the highest moral standard she should follow, not to do bad things which will lead to bad kamma, and always do good things to collect merit for herself and other people. Phloi has a relatively unhappy life because her mother is the minor wife of her father. Phloi always remembers her mother's words since she heard them for the first time: *"and you must never become any man's minor wife. Never."*¹¹² She lives her life with the pain. That is why when she sees Prem's son from another woman for the first time, she does not feel angry or jealous at all; all she thinks is to love him as her own son:

*"To go on as before, Phloi reflected, to grow up in this half-hidden bungalow while your father lives in the big house, to be treated as the son of minor wife..."*¹¹³

Phloi could not bear the fact that the son would be treated as a minor wife's son. Even if he is not her own son, she can feel the same pain as him. She does not want the little child, who is completely innocent, to have to carry this pain as her did when she was a child. She shows her great generosity as a woman, wife and mother. The most important

¹¹¹ S.N.Goenka, *The Art of Living*, Vipassana Research Institute, India, 1988, p58.

¹¹² MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p3.

¹¹³ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p234.

thing is she shows how to be a great person who is able to forgive and understand others, as Khun Prem said to her, *“You’re an angel, Mae Phloi.”*¹¹⁴

The second stage of the Noble Eightfold Path is Samadhi or Concentration, which is composed of three parts: right effort, right awareness and right concentration. Again, with respect to Phi Nuang, we can see how Phloi got over of the relationship between her and Phi Nuang so well, as she found the path on her own with right effort, right awareness and right concentration. After Phloi got married to Khun Prem, they went to Bang Pa In together, and she met Phi Nuang again. They talked with each other quite normally like two old friends:

*“Phloi was also relieved. She was happy to have met him again, and happier still to know beyond any doubt that her feelings towards him were entirely friendly and no more. He would always remain a good childhood friend, Choi’s brother, Khun Sai’s nephew, son of Khun Luang and Mae Chan whom she loved and respected as her own kin.”*¹¹⁵

In addition, we can see this from the way Phloi treated her step-sister Khun Un, who used to treat Phloi very badly. When she came to ask Phloi for help:

*“She had made up her mind as to what she must do. No one was in a better position than herself to extend a helping hand to Khun Un and rescue her from a deprived and lonely old age.”*¹¹⁶

The third stage of the path is Panna or Wisdom, which is composed of two parts: right thought and right understanding. In the latter half of Phloi’s life, she experienced a lot of sorrow, she lost her husband, lost a son, has to see her own sons fight with each other,

¹¹⁴ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p235.

¹¹⁵ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p248.

¹¹⁶ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p340.

and her daughter's marriage not happy at all. Apart for her own family life, the situation of Thailand is not so encouraging either:

*“We're not so kind-hearted as we used to be. We've become harsher, more prone to greed, anger and ill-will, altogether more grasping and aggressive.”*¹¹⁷

Phloi feels really tired with all the changes and the messes her family and her country encounters; but when she heard that her son, – On, has decided to enter the monkhood, she is so delighted and happy:

*“I believe the merit will reach him, On, I ask you not to doubt it, though I can't prove it to you. If you ask for a logical explanation I have none to give. I only know that without this belief I would be utterly lost.”*¹¹⁸

Phloi believes that her son's ordination will collect enough merit for himself and for his dead brother, Ot, and that this is also the way to comfort herself and others; to find the only peace and hope in their hearts from the unstable situation and troubled inner minds. We have to say that Phloi experiences a lot of “suffering” during her whole life, and endures all that suffering and carries on her life with great generosity. Perhaps that is why she has already reached the realm of “Gradual Cultivation” and “Sudden Enlightenment” of Buddhism.

*“Suffering begins with the beginning of life...birth is a great trauma. Every living creature must face all these sufferings.”*¹¹⁹

Human beings should face the suffering and understand why we suffer; not feel unsatisfied with the suffering; not try to eliminate the sufferings with the wrong way.

¹¹⁷ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p638.

¹¹⁸ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p635.

¹¹⁹ S.N.Goenka, *The Art of Living*, Vipassana Research Institute, India, 1988, p45.

Deep insight and deep compassion is not charity nor sympathy, but the “Oneness Compassion” of Buddhism. Phloi finally gets rid of her suffering and reaches another realm in which she can finally reach the “eternal” unification of body and spirit.

In *Four Reigns*, Sadet has several talks with Phloi about change and impermanence:

*“I’ve seen girls like you elevated into high prominence and seen them fall from grace, seen them surrounded by admiring fawners and seen those same fawners abandon them without any qualms...”*¹²⁰

Sadet told Phloi about some women living with happiness and misery. When a person lives a happy and good life at one moment, no one knows if she will fall into a miserable life in the next moment; this is the impermanence of life, and this is the reality of mind and matter. Every moment mental functions appear and disappear, one after another. Everything inside oneself, physical and mental, just as in the world outside, is changing every moment. Phloi learns how to manage the impermanence throughout her whole life, instead of just trying to keep the happy experiences and avoiding the sad ones - to pull the happy ones close, to push the sad ones away. Phloi simply examines every phenomenon objectively, with equanimity, with a balanced mind, until the last moment of her life. As Sadet used to say to Phloi:

“We don’t know what the future will bring but we do know that our good action here and now can only give rise to what is good in days to come, although we may not be aware of when or how. People who conduct their lives well are like those skilled and graceful dancers who keep in perfect rhythm with the music provided them by the piphat

¹²⁰ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p144.

*players. That's what I hope you'll be, Phloi: a consummate dancer on the stage of life...*¹²¹

Indeed, Phloi does what Sadet wishes of her, and plays the role in her life stage as a beautiful dancer.

Tracing Phloi's life and her inner world from the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism, it is not difficult to realize that Phloi lives her life with the influence of Buddhist teaching, and she knows that suffering is a necessary stage in human life. She feels pain and sorrow with the suffering, but she never feels despair. She tries to find the way to deal with her pain and sorrow, and finally achieves the correct path with her generosity and kindness. This is the basic personality a woman should have according to Buddhism, which we can also identify as the standard of the "ideal" woman in Thai society.

*As Theravada Buddhism teaches the ideals of selflessness, wisdom, and compassion that are identified with the life of the Buddha, saintly monks, and observant laity. It also establishes normative moral principles and rules necessary for social harmony.*¹²²

4.1.2 Bao Chai: Chinese Confucianism and the "ideal" woman shaped in "A Dream of Red Mansions".

"Zhong he" or "harmony" is an aesthetic concept with rich connotation in ancient Chinese culture, and is also an important feature of Confucius ideology and behavior. According to the famous Confucianist book *Zhong Yong* or *Doctrine of the Mean*, "Zhong' means that a person will not be affected by personal opinions or emotions, 'He'

¹²¹ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p144.

¹²² Donald K. Swearer, *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia*, Silkworm Books, 2009, p16.

means that a person can always show his emotions in a proper way."¹²³ From philosophy ideology angle, *"Zhong he means cooperation and harmony, which is a way or ideology to accept and mix different opinions, combine and cooperate with each other."*¹²⁴ "Zhong he" can be seen on a high ideological level, and also is reflected in Bao Chai's personality. Many Chinese scholars have mentioned her beauty of "zhong he" as *"Bao Chai's image in A Dream of Red Mansions is a typical high class lady, the most significant personality of her is the genderness, world-wise and her beauty of 'zhong he'"*¹²⁵ in *The Analysis on Bao Chai's Cultural Personality* of Niu Jian Ping. In another article *The Analysis on the Beauty of "Zhong He" from the Image of Bao Chai* of Ai Ling, *"for thousands of years, the beauty of 'zhong he' has influenced Chinese culture along with Confucianism. The image of Bao Chai in A Dream of Red Mansions, just reflects the beauty of 'zhong he'."*¹²⁶

"Zhong" in Chinese means "middle", the basic connotation of "zhong" is the middle of two extremes or two opposing factors, which reflects the ideology as "combining two into one" and "seeking common ground while reserving differences". "He" in Chinese means "peace", it is the derivative and development of "zhong", and the combination of two or more opposing and different factors. Therefore, "zhong he" or "harmony" is a scale, a standard, to emphasize how the opposing and different factors and forces seek common ground while reserving differences, coexist equally and peacefully, and penetrate each other. The concept of "zhong he" originated from agricultural production,

¹²³ "Zhong he", *Zhong Yong or Doctrine of the Means* [Online], Available from: <http://baike.baidu.com/view/57157.htm>.

¹²⁴ "Zhong he", *Zhong Yong or Doctrine of the Means* [Online], Available from: <http://baike.baidu.com/view/57157.htm>.

¹²⁵ Niu Jian Ping, *The Analysis on Bao Chai's cultural personality*, 1994-2009 China Academic Journal Electronic Publishing House.

¹²⁶ Ai Ling, *The Analysis on the Beauty of "Zhong He" from the Image of Bao Chai*.

multi-regional cultural integration is the cultural foundation of “zhong he”, the Ying and Yang and five elements philosophy laid the ideological foundation for “zhong he” ideology. With the development of the society in the Qin Dynasty, “zhong he” gradually became a cultural spirit. Confucius made a full summary of the cultural spirit, and it is regarded as the ideal of politics, ethnics, arts and personality training. Through the ages, “zhong he” ideology has penetrated all aspects of Chinese culture under the influence of Confucian philosophy. The image of “Bao Chai” also reflects the beauty of “zhong he”.

The aesthetic features of “harmony” in Bao Chai’s image can be seen from the novel. In Chapter 7 of *“A Dream of Red Mansions”*, Bao Chai tells Mrs. Zhou that she brought a choleric humour from the womb, no ordinary pills bring any relief, only one medicine called “Cold Fragrance Pills”, can cure her illness. “Cold Fragrance Pills” were made up by the author, but has special meaning in this novel, reflecting the philosophy of “zhong he”. The ingredients of “Cold Fragrance Pills” have two important features: first, all of the ingredients have a common feature, which is “mildness”; second, according to Chinese medical theory, the ingredients combine sweetness and bitterness, coolness and warmness, reinforcing and attenuating. The author makes “Cold Fragrance Pills” a complete aesthetic image, which is the symbol of the beauty of “zhong he”, and represents Bao Chai, who takes the pills. This is the summary and reflection of the essence of “zhong he” in Confucianism from the perspective of women’s culture.

First, there is a typical beauty of “zhong he” in Bao Chai’s appearance, which is not too outstanding or arrogant, but gentle and generous. In this novel, there are not too many

direct descriptions of Bao Chai's appearance; most are shown through Bao Yu's eyes. In Chapter 8, Bao Yu visits Bao Chai who is getting ill, and in his eyes is like this:

“Bao Chai was sewing on the kang. Her glossy black hair was knotted on top of her head. She was wearing a honey-coloured padded jacket, a rose-red sleeveless jacket lined with brown-and snow-weasel fur, and a skirt of leek-yellow silk. There was nothing ostentatious about her costume, which was none too new. Her lips needed no rouge, her blue-black eyebrows no brush; her face seemed a silver disk, her eyes almonds swimming in water. Some might think her reticence a cloak for stupidity; but circumspect as she was she prided herself on her simplicity.”¹²⁷

Bao Chai always dresses in elegant and light color attire, without cumbersome decorations or jewelry, and is very dignified and generous. She was born in a rich and powerful family, but she is not addicted to luxury things, always wearing half new and half old cloths, simple but generous, gentle and steady; but her natural beauty also deeply attracts the reader.

Second, Bao Chai's gentle and kind personality also reflects “zhong he”. In “*A Dream of Red Mansions*”, there are many characters, but Bao Chai is the most tempered, tenderest and gentlest of them. In Chapter 34, when Bao Yu is beaten by his father, Bao Chai and Dai Yu care about him and both go to visit him. Compared with Dai Yu, who did “not crying aloud, she swallowed her tears in silence until she felt as if she would choke”, Bao Chai acts more sensible. Although she also feels sad for him, “she had

¹²⁷ Cao Xue Qin and Gao E, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, English version translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, January 1, 2001, p80.

spoken with such intimate, tender concern, although attempting to hide her deep emotion”; instead of crying, Bao Chai brings medicine for Bao Yu.

Third, Bao Chai’s individuality reflects “zhong he”. The residence of Bao Chai in Grand View Garden is “Alpinia Park”, the author describes this place in Chapter 17:

*“In place of trees and flowers there was a profusion of rare creepers, vines and trailers, which festooned the artificial mountains, grew through the rocks, hung from the eaves, twined round the pillars and carpeted the steps. Some seemed like floating green belts or golden bands; others had berries red as cinnabar and flowers like golden osmanthus which gave off a penetrating scent, unlike the scent of ordinary flowers.”*¹²⁸

The plants have different shapes and fragrances, all planted in this small courtyard, making up a beautiful picture with uniformity in variety and harmony, which also represents the individuality of the owner: Bao Chai. The unity and coordination in Bao Chai’s personality fully reflects the beauty of “zhong he”; there are contents required by the ethical personality of a Confucian tradition hidden in Bao Chai’s image.

Bao Chai has an elegant and generous appearance, gentle and kind personality and harmonious individuality; this female image is the conscious practice of Cao Xueqin’s “zhong he” aesthetic ideal. So we can see from the description of Bao Chai that the purpose of the author is to shape the typical image of a noble lady under the feudal system, and to establish a dominant cultural type which can influence and lead all the women in Grand View Garden. Therefore, in Chapter 63, when the females and Bao Yu are playing poetry games in Bao Yu’s resident:

¹²⁸ Cao Xue Qin and Gao E, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, English version translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, January 1, 2001, p159.

Bao Chai “*shook the container and took out a slip on which they saw the picture of a peony with the words ‘Beauty surpassing all flowers.’...‘What a coincidence!’ all exclaimed laughingly. ‘A peony is just the flower for you.’*”¹²⁹

In Chinese traditional culture, the peony is known as the queen of flowers with a natural beauty and heavenly fragrance, and is generally agreed and accepted by Chinese people to represent dignity, elegance and beauty. The author compares Bao Chai with a peony to show that the concept of “zhong he” is the dominant ideology in Grand View Garden and the whole society in China.

But at the same time, Bao Chai’s fate also shows the limitations of the “zhong he” aesthetic morphology. Bao Chai is a model of the feudal lady, fully demonstrating “zhong he” characteristics, but she is also a tragic figure who becomes lost. The beauty of “zhong he” emphasizes the harmony and balance of personal feelings and emotions, requiring individuals to comply with coordinated and orderly ethical norms. These aspects are all intended to eliminate individual personality and emotional multi-expression. Once a person deviates from the moderation of “Zhong He” or “Harmony” and go to the extreme, then it will cause serious bondage to personal feelings and emotions.

First, repressed emotions: Since very ancient times, “zhong he” had the characteristics of temperance and moderation, and stressed the inhibitory and leading role of “ritual” on “harmony”. Bao Chai consciously practices Neo-Confucianist theory in her daily life; she is calm and self-restraint, aware of her behavior, has great virtue, and

¹²⁹ Cao Xue Qin and Gao E, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, English version translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, January 1, 2001, p648.

restrains herself with the ethic concept, repressing her own emotional desires. That is why the author portrayed her as a cold beauty.

Second, the restrained exquisiteness in life: In her personal life, Bao Chai is a typical woman with a true instinct for beauty and very high aesthetic taste, but she is used to stifling and repressing the exquisiteness and fun in her life. When Mrs.Zhou brings sprays of gauze flowers to the girls, Aunt Xue remarks about Bao Chai:

*“You don’t know what an odd girl she is, she dislikes wearing flowers or make-up.”*¹³⁰

Bao Chai is a beautiful teenage girl, but she does not like make-up, which even her mother thinks it is very strange. But in fact, this is the act of her unconsciously burying her own youthful beauty, as well as intentionally suppressing her own pursuit of beauty.

Third, the strangled talent: Bao Chai is a woman with excellent talent and rich knowledge; she reads a lot of poetry and books and she has knowledge in many fields. But for her, literary or artistic talent is nothing; she never considers such talent as a strength for a woman. She consciously places herself under the patriarchal ethical norms, and denies the independent value of her own existence. Although Bao Chai has talent comparable with Dai Yu, and is even more competent than Tan Chun, she always restrains herself and even teaches others with “work ethics and speech appearance”; she is submissive to males; her personality is completely eliminated by the “zhong he” theory based on ethics.

Fourth, buried love: The tragic marriage of Bao Chai and Bao Yu deeply reveals the unavoidable deficiency of the “zhong he” theory. Bao Chai loves Bao Yu very much, but

¹³⁰ Cao Xue Qin and Gao E, A Dream of Red Mansions, English version translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, January 1, 2001, p70.

she hides the feeling and love for him so deeply that others cannot easily see from her behavior. The author shapes her complicated character under the deep influence of ethics and the orthodoxy with very subtle, but vivid ways. She has true feeling and love, but she gets used to not showing her true feelings. Although Bao Yu appreciates her gentle and elegant personality, admires her agility, creativeness and vast knowledge, and is obsessed with her beauty, he cannot accept such a depersonalized woman from the emotional aspect.

Overall, the “zhong he” theory of Confucianism is based on the concept of “Moderation”, with “Ritual” as the standard to maintain unity and inhibit the concept of competition. Although “Moderation” means the modest way to remain impartial, it also tries to maintain the unity and balance reached by the opposing parties to remain firm and not go beyond the limits of “Middleness”. This is the reason that the “zhong he” theory has become a conservative theory to stop or block things from changing. The traditional ethics and ethical moral standard which is dominated with the “zhong he” theory gives Bao Chai the beauty of a traditional Chinese woman, but also eliminates her personality and makes her completely lose herself. The image of Bao Chai practices the aesthetic ideal of the “zhong he” theory, and therefore exhibits the contradictory nature of this aesthetic form.

4.2 The image of the “ideal” woman in Thai and Chinese culture from a literary aesthetic perspective.

Before discussing the image of “ideal” woman from a literary aesthetic perspective, we should have a general understanding of the definition of “aesthetic”. According to Wikipedia, aesthetic means *“a branch of philosophy dealing with the nature of art, beauty, and taste, with the creation and appreciation of beauty. More broadly, scholars in the field define aesthetics as ‘critical reflection on art, culture and nature.’ More specific aesthetic theory, often with practical implications, relating to a particular branch of the arts is divided into areas of aesthetics such as art theory, literary theory, film theory and music theory.”*¹³¹ In Oxford Dictionaries, aesthetics is simply defined as *“a set of principles concerned with the nature and appreciation of beauty or the branch of philosophy which deals with questions of beauty and artistic taste.”*¹³² So from an aesthetic perspective, we will try to find the literary beauty reflected by the two female characters.

Females have always been characters that attract the most attention in literature. In the two novels we are analyzing, two female images have been successfully shaped by the authors, both of whom constitute different, but beautiful, female literary figures. Because of the influence from their different traditional cultures, the aesthetic paradigm of female cultural personality and image in Thai and Chinese literature is different, and forms a fundamental paradigm as the result of cultural and aesthetic awareness. Looking at the images of Phloi and Bao Chai based on the fundamental paradigm will allow us to see more clearly their differences and similarities at the literary aesthetic level.

¹³¹ Aesthetics, Wikipedia [Online], Source <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aesthetics>.

¹³² Aesthetics, Oxford Dictionaries [Online], Source <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/aesthetics>.

Phloi: literary aesthetic values based on Buddhist ideology.

Thailand is a typical Buddhist country with a long history of Buddhism. Buddhism not only influences the psychological structure and attitude towards life of Thai people, but also brings far-reaching implications to Thai people's aesthetic taste, as well as literary and artistic creation. As one of the most famous writers in Thai history, M.R. Kukrit Pramoj inherited this tradition, which is also an important part of his philosophy. Phloi, the famous female character created by him, also displays a Buddhist sense which is unworldly, indifferent and quiet, transcending life and death.

Phloi's whole life is guided by Buddhist teachings. The following aspects show how Buddhist teaching influenced the aesthetic value in *Four Reigns*, and the "ideal" realm of Phloi from a literary aesthetic point of view.

First, Advocating beauty with "impermanence" at the core.

Throughout her whole life, Phloi experiences a lot of changes, but she understands the "impermanence" in life. "The pure beauty" is hard to find in the world, surreal beauty is illusory. In *Four Reigns*, Phloi's pursuit of beauty is to find refuge from the sorrow; beauty is the sadness, sadness is from the beauty, and beauty and sorrow here are unified. The impermanence ideology of Theravada Buddhist thought runs through the whole novel and Phloi's life, as well as the helplessness the author feels for society at that time. In this novel, the impermanence ideology is reflected through the female image – Phloi – which is to try to demonstrate the complicated, changing and mysterious psychological feelings of women, shape her humanity and beauty. We can see from Phloi's life experience, Phloi had to leave her home, father, brother and step-sister; lonely Phloi

arrived at the palace, then her mother left her, and died later when she was still very young.

*“The meaning of the glance was revealed to Phloi – by Khun Sai on her return from the audience with Sadet. Mother had died in childbirth after being delivered of her premature baby, born dead. The cremation had taken place, arranged by her Chachoengsao relatives. Khun Sai, swollen-eyed and choking with sobs, did not try to console Phloi. The task was beyond her power – anybody’s power – and must be left to the healing patience of Time.”*¹³³

The author does not expend too many words describing the feeling when Phloi heard about her mother’s death. He only tries to create an atmosphere of sadness about the first time facing the death of people she loves, and the sadness and sorrow of losing a mother through the simple and short description, to show Phloi’s attitude towards the sadness and pain in her whole life.

The first love between Phloi and Pi Nuang is finished very soon after; it was a very beautiful and romantic love, and deeply hurt Phloi. But facing this heart-broken result of her first love, Phloi’s reaction after a short while of sadness, is to return to normal life as soon as possible.

“Several days afterwards Mae Chan came to the palace again to say goodbye before leaving for Nakhon Sawan. She treated Phloi with affection as always and, understanding that Phloi had learned about the forthcoming marriage, felt free to discuss it openly with

¹³³ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p87.

Khun Sai in Phloi's presence. Phloi sat there, listening to them with composure, and found it astonishing that she should be able to do so."¹³⁴

In *Four Reigns*, Phloi's life is not always happy: she has to go through her mother's death at a young age; her husband's death in her middle age and her son's death in her old age. All these experiences are the deepest pain a woman can experience in her life. Phloi is a character shaped by the unity of grief and beauty. The author shows his sympathy, appreciation and sorrow for Phloi through her flawed life and her unavoidable inner grief. This fictional character and her life with the in-depth impermanence ideology reflects the persistent aesthetic pursuit of the author. Happiness is so precious because it only lasts a fraction of a second; this is the impermanence in Buddhism. So we would rather say that it is the beauty in the real world, than the unreal beauty.

Second, "Rebirth" and to understand the beauty of death.

In *Four Reigns*, Phloi witnesses the death of many people around her, such that the understanding of death influences her thoughts.

"In the past Phloi had been able to do it – accept the death of her loved ones. Each time she had mourned her loss, then come to terms with it."¹³⁵

The description, thoughts and perception about death can be seen as the externalization of the aesthetic consciousness in the literary works. When Phloi's husband dies, the author does not use too many paragraphs to describe Phloi's feeling, but we still can feel her sorrow from the short passage.

¹³⁴ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p146.

¹³⁵ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p633.

*“Phloi did not feel too lonely with Khun Prem’s body remained in the house...Phloi was kept busy throughout these months. The aching sadness in her heart was always there, surging up at odd moments, although she had come round to accepting the reality of Khun Prem’s death, and of her own life, which from now on until it should cease must be lived without him.”*¹³⁶

When Phloi’s son Ot dies, Phloi dreams about him, and this is a sign to tell Phloi that Ot has died already.

“One night, totally exhausted, she dropped off to sleep, then woke up suddenly to find Ot beside her! She sat bolt upright. He grinned at her, he had recovered and was looking well and strong. ‘Darling mother,’ he said, ‘you’re always asking when am I coming home. Well, here I am! I’ve come home to be with you, and I’m not going to leave you ever again.’

Then he was gone and this time Phloi really woke up. Happiness filled her heart for one fleeting second before flying away, vanishing as suddenly as Ot had.

*On arrived home from the South four days after the dream had occurred. He paid respects at his mother’s feet, sobbing his heart out. Phloi held him close to her and comforted him. ‘My son, my son, we are together again at last. You don’t need to tell me about Ot. I’ve known it for days. He came to tell me himself.’”*¹³⁷

The “coming home” and “not going to leave you ever again” here refers to the death, and death in Buddhism is the path leading to rebirth or another realm of being. This could also be seen as the understanding of life and the peaceful death of Phloi as she says: “we

¹³⁶ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p448.

¹³⁷ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p632.

are together again at last.”¹³⁸ Death is another form of coming back to the loved ones. When Phloi’s other son, On, decides to be a monk, Phloi suddenly feels relieved from her sorrow of losing a husband, son and the destiny of the country.

*“On would be received into the Sangha today. It was the love he had for his brother which had inspired him to take his path. Phloi was glad about this, and glad also that she was doing her little bit in getting a son prepared for entrance into the holy life.”*¹³⁹

According to Thai tradition, the ordination of son is the opportunity for the parents or dead family member to go to heaven. “Rebirth” in Buddhism convinces Phloi to believe that the death is not the end, but a path to be reborn.

*“In fact, we are not only reborn at the time of death, we are born and reborn at every moment...If we look at the mind too, we find that mental states of worry, happiness and so forth are changing every moment. They die and are replaced by new states. So whether we look at the body or the mind, our experience is characterized by continuous birth, death and rebirth.”*¹⁴⁰

This is the way to understand life from death, and eventually reach “enlightenment”. In the end, Phloi has less sorrow and desperation, but feels more joy and freedom. This could also be seen as the author himself trying to express his world view; to observe the world with near-death vision, then we can find the beauty of nature, in order to depict the world with the eternal spirit and soul, so we can create the eternal art.

¹³⁸ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p632.

¹³⁹ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p640.

¹⁴⁰ *Fundamentals of Buddhism: Rebirth – A Buddhnet Production*, Buddha Dharma Education Association 1996-2012 [Online], Source <http://www.buddhanet.net/funbud10.htm>.

Bao Chai: the female aesthetic style and aesthetic spirit from traditional Confucianism and Taoism.

The ancient time of China was an era full of different ideologies like all the flowers blooming together. During that period, Confucianism occupied a major position, but Taoism also plays a very important role. From the “aesthetic” point of view, Taoism pays more attention to “nature”. It is said in *Zhuang Zi* that:

*“In their plain simplicity, no one in the world can strive with them (for the palm of) excellence.”*¹⁴¹

Taoism claims that art should return to nature, as with the old saying in China: “Out of clear water lotus engraved by nature.” At the same time, Confucianism advocates “harmony” or “mean”. It is said in *The Doctrine of the Mean* that:

*“When joy, anger, sorrow and pleasure have not yet arisen, it is called the Mean (centerness, equilibrium).”*¹⁴²

Confucianism advocates that the subject of creation should focus on “harmony” or the “mean”; restrain excess emotional expression and emphasize that “people” should be unified with their “mind”.

Confucianism and Taoism are like humans and natures; the “human and nature” ideology constitutes the aesthetic mentality of Chinese people and the Chinese Oriental aesthetic feature. From *A Dream of Red Mansions*, we can see the combination of the two ideas in Bao Chai as shaped by the author.

First, The beauty of the universal love as “one for all”.

¹⁴¹ Zhuang Zi, *Zhuang Zi*, “The way of Heaven”, English translation by James Legge [Online], Source <http://ctext.org/zhuangzi/tian-dao>.

¹⁴² *Doctrine of the Mean*, English translation by A. Charles Muller [Online], Source <http://www.acmuller.net/con-dao/docofmean.html>.

In *A Dream of Red Mansions*, the author is very good at creating a mysterious, vacant, idle silent and beautiful atmosphere with a peaceful and natural charm, which is inseparable from the clean and vacant aesthetic philosophy in the “harmony” beauty of Confucianism. The author thinks that everything in the nature has a soul, a life and feeling like humans. He projects the beauty of females into nature. Expressing emotion through nature, deeper feelings can mix with nature better; meanwhile, nature enhances a newer and richer realm to feelings and emotion. In this novel, the temperament of the main female character we are discussing – Bao Chai – is well hidden in a very detailed, natural description of Alpinia Park where Bao Chai lives.

*“But stepping over the threshold he was confronted by tall weathered rocks of every description which hid the house from sight. In place of trees and flowers there was a profusion of rare creepers, vines and trailers, which festooned the artificial mountains, grew through the rocks, hung from the eaves, twined round the pillars and carpeted the steps. Some seemed like floating green belts or golden band; other had berries red as cinnabar and flowers like golden osmanthus which gave off a penetrating scent, unlike the scent of ordinary flower.”*¹⁴³

The description of the plants in Bao Chai’s Alpinia Park reflects Bao Chai’s personality and temperament, just like the place where she lives. Although she is a young girl, the plants in her house are not colorful flowers, other than the wistaria. Wistaria is a very beautiful, fragrance plant; it is very hardy and fast-growing, can grow in fairly poor-quality soils. In China, wisteria is always the material of paintings, to show its beautiful

¹⁴³ Cao Xue Qin and Gao E, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, English version translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, January 1, 2001, p159.

and elegant appearance; and poets use wisteria to show the generous element and spirit of humans, which is just the reflection of Bao Chai's personality.

When Bao Chai draws the slip in the poem meeting of the sisters, she draws the peony.

“She shook the container and took out a slip on which they saw the picture of a peony with the words ‘Beauty surpassing all flowers.’ Inscribed in smaller character beneath was the line of Tang poetry, ‘Though heartless she has charm.’ The instructions read, ‘All the feasters must drink a cup by way of congratulations, for this is the queen of the flowers. She can order anyone to compose a poem or tell a joke to enliven the drinking.’

‘What a coincidence!’ all exclaimed laughingly. ‘A peony is just the flower for you.’ With that they drank a cup each.”¹⁴⁴

The author compares Bao Chai to the peony, which is the queen of all flowers. Peony is the national flower of China, with more than a 2,000 year history of planting. The peony has huge flowers and bright color. Since ancient time, there have been many poems about peonies, that praise its national grace, elegant beauty, and the peony is considered to be the symbol of prosperity and wealth in China. When comparing Bao Chai with the other girls in Grand View Garden, she is definitely a peony among all of those girls, no matter from her beauty, her ability, or her personality.

In this novel, the author describes nature, not only for the background environment, or to heighten the atmosphere, but also to project the emotional life and feelings of the characters in the nature, such that people can feel the free imagination and spiritual

¹⁴⁴ Cao Xue Qin and Gao E, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, English version translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, January 1, 2001, p648.

pleasure from an artistic level. It also can be seen that the “human and nature” ideology from both Confucianism and Taoism is in a highly aesthetic realm. This is not only a humanistic ideal, but also a philosophy and superb art of life.

Second, A female aesthetic style through the “poetry”.

Poetry is a literary genre that uses forms and conventions to suggest different interpretation to words, or to evoke an emotive response. In China, poetry has a very long history. The Tang Dynasty, Song Dynasty and Yuan Dynasty were the most prosperous periods for poetry. In aesthetic activities, poetry can fully reflect the rich spiritual world of people, depict the emotions and feelings from the natural and human world, going beyond the earthly shackles; thus poetry has occupied a very important position in Chinese ancient literature history. There is no exception in *A Dream of Red Mansions*. The author uses a large number of poems to show the different personalities of different characters; at the same time, he also reveals their destinies through an illusory approach. We can see how the poems reflect the personality of Bao Chai from the novel.

*“Alas for her wifely virtue, her wit to sing of willow-down, poor maid! Buried in snow the broken golden hairpin, and hanging in the wood the belt of jade.”*¹⁴⁵

In Chapter five, in Bao Yu’s dream, he sees the destiny of all of the women. In this poem, the first and the last sentence is about Bao Chai. The poem praises her wifely virtue, but also indicates her unfair ending. The following is the inscription and poem Bao Chai writes when the Imperial Consort comes back and asks everyone to write one for their own house.

¹⁴⁵ Cao Xue Qin and Gao E, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, English version translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, January 1, 2001, p43.

*“Concentrated Splendour,
Bestowed Felicity
West of the Palace in this pleasure ground
Sunlight, auspicious clouds, rare sights abound;
High willows orioles from the vale invite,
Tall bamboos tempt the phoenix to alight.
This night’s royal tour gives rise to poetry,
Her visit fosters filial piety.
Such wisdom flows from her immortal brush,
Too awed to pen more lines I can but blush.”*¹⁴⁶

This poem reflects Bao Chai’s interpersonal skills, which are appropriate, subtle and unpretentious. In front of the Imperial Consort, she does not make herself too amazing or wonderful; on the contrary, she shows her modesty. In Chapter 37, the women and Bao Yu hold a poetry meeting again; this is Bao Chai’s poem.

*“For the sake of the flowers the door is closed by day
As I go to water the pots with moss overgrown;
Immaculate its shadow on autumn steps,
Pure as snow and ice its spirit by dewy stone.
Only true whiteness dazzles with its brightness;
Can so much sadness leave a flawless jade?
Its purity rewards the god of autumn,*

¹⁴⁶ Cao Xue Qin and Gao E, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, English version translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, January 1, 2001, p175.

Speechless and chaste it stays as sunbeams fade.”¹⁴⁷

We can see from the poem that Bao Chai always conducts herself with dignity, even when she writes poems. She never writes anything that is too extreme or strange; most of the time she will write from her own identity. She focuses more on the character reflected in the poem, rather than the writing skill. Bao Chai is strict to herself; she is not too pretentious or frivolous. At Bao Chai’s age, it is very rare for someone to have her calm and mature mentality, but also to embody such gentleness and calmness fully.

There are many female characters in this novel, but the author uses the best poems to show the distinctive personality of Bao Chai, which is strong and generous. He also uses poetry to reflect the presence between her individual pursuit and the contradictions in reality, in order to make the image of Bao Chai more brilliant in another way.

4.3 The image of the “ideal” woman in Thai and Chinese culture from a social perspective.

Social roles and social status are inseparable. The contradictions between the traditions and the social roles and family roles of modern females in Thailand and China are caused by many factors and aspects. The social status has the following features: 1. social status is recognized by the society; 2. social status is the symbol of the certain rights, obligations and responsibilities; 3. people who have a certain social status must have the appropriate capacity; and 4. social status has a subjective and objective attribute.

¹⁴⁷ Cao Xue Qin and Gao E, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, English version translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, January 1, 2001, p345.

The subjective attribute refers to the social position formed by reputation and prestige; the objective attribute refers to social position related to certain social duties and levels.

A comparison and analysis of *Four Reigns* and *A Dream of Red Mansions* reveals that under the old social systems, females in Thailand and China essentially only had simple family roles. Their duties were to stay at home, take care of and teach the children, cook for the family, serve their husbands and parents, and follow a dependent lifestyle as in “being obedient to father at home, being obedient to husband after getting married, and submitting to the son when husband died.” The social status of women gradually improved with the development of the economy and society. Women have been leaving the home to work in various fields and compete with men. But women with new identities have to face and deal with a heavier and more difficult burden than men - the contradiction and conflict between social roles and family roles. Under traditional social values, even though women are provided equal working opportunities as men, they still need to fulfill their obligations under the traditional customs, which is to take care of the family. No matter how superior the ability of a woman is in other aspects, the capacity for taking care of the family is always the constant standard for people to evaluate the overall capacity of women, and this is also the basic position for women.

From *Four Reigns* and *A Dream of Red Mansions*, we can easily find similarities of Thai and Chinese women in their social and family roles, as well as differences. After identifying these, we can discuss the image of the “ideal” woman from the perspective of the family and social role of women.

4.3.1 Phloi in *Four Reigns*: the traditional Thai female family role and the transformation of modern women between social roles and family roles.

With a long history, Thailand has inevitably gone through many changes - political, economic and cultural. Some of the changes may be negative, some positive; some may be constant, some passing. The process of modernization and globalization has been undeniably vital in having significant impact on the transformation of Thai people, more on women than on men. These changes can be seen in how women have taken different roles in the society and how their lives have changed immensely.

In Thai history, traditionally Thai women have been in a subordinate position most of the time. In the past, most men in high society had several wives; an edict promulgated in 1861 stipulated that men had the right to have several wives. “*No matter whether women were born in high or low society, they all had a lower status than men.*”¹⁴⁸ But compared with Chinese women, Thai women have also been in a relatively more balanced situation with men. According to many ancient inscriptions, we can see that Thai men and women have apparently been on equal footing since the Sukhothai period, when Thai history was first recorded in the inscriptions, where they enjoyed the same rights.

“*...The people of this city of Sukhodai like to observe the precepts and bestow alms. King Rama Gamhen, the ruler of this city of Sukhodai, as well as the princes and princesses, the young men and women of rank, and all the noble folk without exception,*

¹⁴⁸ Sarutta, Women's status in Thai Society, *Thaiways Magazine*, 10 Sep 2002, Vol.19 No.11.

both male and female, all have faith in the religion of the Buddha, and all observe the precepts during the rainy season...”¹⁴⁹

*“...The Brana and Lady...caused the Footprint to be engraved, and invited everyone to rejoice also with them.”*¹⁵⁰

In addition, since ancient times, the social role and social status of Thai women has shown a contradictory phenomenon in Thailand, with the role and status of Thai women changing according to place and time. For example, women in the countryside could be the main economic source of the family, and have a relatively high status. In the past, ordinary women had to do house chores and work in the field since men at the time were required to leave home either to do labour or guard the capital for about 4-6 months a year. *“Thus when the husbands were out, their wives had to bear the burden of earning a living. They had to do farming, weave cloth for their family members and looked for some odd jobs to gain some income.”*¹⁵¹ But when she migrates to the big city in order to earn a better living, she might become a low class worker in a factory or sell her body for sex, at which point her social status becomes the lowest in the society. In addition, economy is related to money; in Buddhism, monks are not supposed to be involving with money.

*“Obviously, the Buddha thought that the rule prohibiting the acceptance of gold or money was, indeed, a very important rule...In the renunciation of money by monks and nuns, they emphatically demonstrate their complete rejection of worldly pursuits.”*¹⁵²

¹⁴⁹ Stone Inscription No.1, A.D. 1292, *Women in Thai Literature (Book 1)*, Published by The National Identity Board Office of the Prime Minister, Bangkok, Thailand, 1992, p15.

¹⁵⁰ Stone Inscription No.8, A.D. 1359, *Women in Thai Literature (Book 1)*, Published by The National Identity Board Office of the Prime Minister, Bangkok, Thailand, 1992, p15.

¹⁵¹ Sarutta, Women's status in Thai Society, *Thaiways Magazine*, 10 Sep 2002, Vol.19 No.11.

¹⁵² Ajahn Brahmavamso, Vinaya Monks and Money, *Buddhist Society of Western Australia, Newsletter*, January-March 1996 [Online], Source <http://www.budsas.org/ebud/ebud018.htm>.

As it is said in *Samyutta Nikaya*:

*“Whoever agrees to gold or money, headman, also agrees to the five strands of sensual pleasure, and whoever agrees to the five strands of sensual pleasure, headman, you may take it for certain that this is not the way of a recluse, that this is not the way of a Buddhist monk.”*¹⁵³

So long ago, in a Thai family, men would be ordained as monks, and would not be involved with the economy, therefore women had to take up the family burden and needed to play a meaningful role in the economic field; they became the economic provider in the family, and shared a higher status in the family. However, when returning to the relationship between husband and wife, the wife should be dependent on the husband, at which point they are in a lower status again.

In discussing differences between women and men, the major explanations of all the gender problems tend to lie in the biological and physiological differences between the two genders. With this belief, women and men have been assigned roles and functions in the society accordingly.

*“Men are looked at as leaders, protectors, providers, and great thinkers, while women are supporters, nurturers, and homemakers. Men are in charge of the public sphere where recognition of their achievement is well-praised and significant. Women, on the other hand, are confined to the domestic sphere where their contribution is unrecognizable and trivial.”*¹⁵⁴

We can also see the role of women defined below:

¹⁵³ *Samyutta Nikaya*, volume 4, translated by Ajahn Brahmavamso [Online], Source <http://www.budsas.org/ebud/ebud/ebud018.htm>.

¹⁵⁴ Deborah Tannen, *Gender and Discourse*, Oxford University Press, N.Y. 1994.

*“Women, confined to their domestic sphere, have become financially dependent on men and taken up a submissive role in the family unit either as daughters, sisters, wives or mothers. They become men’s property as once stated in the Ayuttaya code of law that women could be sold by their father or husband.”*¹⁵⁵

Believing in the code of conduct set by men, women could be properly “handled” and the man’s world would not be “rocked”. In *Tribhumikatha*, believed to be written by King Li Thai of the Sukhothai period, the ideal qualities for women were those that evolved around servicing men. For example, a “perfect woman” should see to her man’s well-being and happiness before her own, respect, obey and cherish him, cook, clean and do all the chores attentively, speak sweet words and look after herself for his satisfaction. This concept of the “ideal woman” is similar to that of “Mae Sri Ruen” in King Rama II’s work of *Khun Chang Khun Paen*:

*“A perfect wife should have all the good qualities of a mother in looking after her husband in time of sickness; a young sister in time of play and joy; a wife for sexual pleasure and reproduction; a servant for her service.”*¹⁵⁶

Traditional Thai society attaches great importance to the production capacity, including reproduction and large population, which can be seen from many Thai proverbs such as “ดูช้างให้ดูหาง ดูนางให้ดูแม่” or “when you look over an elephant, look at its tail; when you look over a woman, look at her mother”. This means whether the elephant is good and strong depends on its tail, and whether a woman is competent and intelligent

¹⁵⁵ Panit Boonyavatana, *The Making of a Thai Woman*, “Gendered Pasts, Presents and Futures”, 7th International Conference on Thai Studies, Amsterdam, 4-8 July, 1999.

¹⁵⁶ Panit Boonyavatana, *The Making of a Thai Woman*, “Gendered Pasts, Presents and Futures”, 7th International Conference on Thai Studies, Amsterdam, 4-8 July, 1999.

depends on her mother. As we all know, Thai people give great attention to the elephant; therefore, comparing a woman with an elephant indicates the importance of the good quality and image of a woman. The value and standard of a “good woman” according to Thai tradition is “capability”, but not necessarily “good appearance” as can be found from these proverbs. People expect woman to have elephant-like qualities and the potential to create wealth, and of course the most important thing is the ability to reproduce. In other words, Thai women in marriage should play the role of a good mother and good wife. In addition to giving birth to children, they also need to take up the burden and responsibility of the economic life of the family, so that they can play the role of both the good biological mother and the role of the social mother.

According to the family law during the early Bangkok period (1782-1850), a man was the head of his family and possessed superior power over other members, including his wife and children:

*“Women, consequently, were supposed to be subordinate to the male head of the family, and they were expected to concentrate on reproductive roles. The consequence of this was the sexual division of labor, which could be clearly seen among the ruling class. While men pursued their prosperity by undertaking various kinds of administrative work, women stayed at home and fulfilled their domestic roles such as rearing children, doing housework and satisfying men’s sexual desires.”*¹⁵⁷

In addition to the traditions and law related rules, women are expected to be a good wife and good mother from a religious point of view. We know that Thai culture is based

¹⁵⁷ Edited by Suwana Satha-Anand and Asian Center for Women’s Studies, Women’s Studies in Thailand: Power, Knowledge and Justice, Ewha Womans University Press, 2004, p42.

on Theravada Buddhism. Theravada Buddhism tends to look at women's status with respect to their family role. This can be seen from "*Anguttara Nikaya: Sujata Sutta*", a very famous Theravada Buddhist scripture that tells the story of a young woman recently married who is not happy in her new role in her husband's household. She rebels against the situation. She has a conversation with the Buddha, who instructs her in the seven types of wives: mistress, slayer, thief, mother, sister, companion and slave. After describing their characteristics, the Buddha assigns the seven types to two groups – those who would be happy in their next life and those that would be miserable and asks her which of the seven types of wives she would chose to be.

"Now she who's called: a mistress, slayer, thief, who's harsh, immoral, lacking in respect, when death comes will wander in the miseries of hell. But mother, sister or companion, slave, in precept long established and restrained, when death comes will wander in the happy heaven world.

These, Sujata, are the seven kinds of wives a man may have; and which of them are you? 'Lord,' said Sujata, 'let the Exalted One think of me as a handmaid from this day forth.'"¹⁵⁸

Sujata responded by acknowledging that she was a slave and would be contented. This description of the handmaid or slave is that of a martyr. The Buddha describes her as,

"Fearless of the lash and stick, unmoved, all things enduring, calm, and pure in heart, she bears obedience to her husband's word, from anger free – call that wife a handmaid!"¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁸ Allen McKiel, *Beyond Tolerance – Religion and Global Community*, Published by Interfaith Resources, 2007, p131.

¹⁵⁹ Allen McKiel, *Beyond Tolerance – Religion and Global Community*, Published by Interfaith Resources, 2007, p131.

The Buddha was acknowledging the limits of her situation and instructing her in the outcome of the choice that was before her. He was explaining that the type of husband a woman ends up with depends on her family situation. If she were to marry an abusive man whose family contributed to her pain and suffering, she would be a slave. Her choice was what she would do about it – rebel or submit. The situation was not just, particularly from the vantage point of modern social sensibilities, but was quite brutal. If she wanted to be independent, her options were that of a prostitute, a thief, or a murderer. This path was one of anger and hate and would be carried with her into the next life. The Buddha presented her with her options. She decided to make the best of a bad situation.

In addition to “*Anguttara Nikaya*”, the most famous Buddhist treatise of Thailand – “*Three Worlds According To King Ruang – A Thai Buddhist Cosmology*” also gives a detailed and vivid description about the subordinate status and image of women in front of the men. We can see from the description about a “gem woman”:

*“She comes by air, just like a female ‘devata’, and comes down to pay her respects and bow down to the great Cakkavatii king.”*¹⁶⁰

“Whenever the king comes and pays a visit to the gem woman in her dwelling place, she does not remain seated, but generally gets up to greet the king; she then brings her golden pillow and sits, attending and fanning the king; and she massages his feet and hands, and sits in a lower place. The gem woman never at any time goes to lie on the gem bed before the great Cakkavatti king; nor does the gem woman ever at any time leave the gem bed after he does. Whatever kind of work she is going to do, she first of all

¹⁶⁰ *Three Worlds According to King Ruang – A Thai Buddhist Cosmology*, translation with introduction and notes by Frank E. Reynolds & Mani B. Reynolds, Asian Humanities Press, 1982, p166.

respectfully informs the king so that he will know. When the king orders her to do it, she does it; she never at any time disobeys the one who is her husband. Whatever she does, all of it satisfies her husband; and whatever she says, all of it pleases her husband. Only the Cakkavatti king and he alone can be her husband; as for other men, they cannot be her husband; and as for the gem woman, she is never the least bit unfaithful to the king.”¹⁶¹

So now we can start to discuss how Phloi is portrayed as a typical “ideal” woman according to all the aspects of her social and family roles. In order to match all the proper standards, she needs to be a good daughter for her parents; a good wife for her husband; a good sister and friend for her family and friends; a good mother for her children; a good servant for the court and her country; and a good master for the maids and servants in her house. These can be divided into two groups: her social roles and family roles - good servant and good master are her social roles; good daughter, good wife, good sister and friend, and good mother are her family roles.

First, Phloi does a good job in her social roles:

1. A good servant for the court and her country.

Phloi lives her life during the reigns from King Rama V to King Rama VIII, which is the period when women did not have any real opportunities to work outside the home, so for them, their social roles were mainly reflected by their status as citizens of the country. If she was living in the palace as a palace maid, then her social role meant her role as a servant and maid in the court or palace. Phloi is a typical palace woman who was brought

¹⁶¹ Three Worlds According to King Ruang – A Thai Buddhist Cosmology, translation with introduction and notes by Frank E. Reynolds & Mani B. Reynolds, Asian Humanities Press, 1982, p167.

to the palace when she was ten by her mother and stays until she gets married. The king and the princess, Sadet, are the gods in her whole life; she considers herself as the most loyal servant.

We can find a description of the relationship between the queen and the king from *Tribhumikatha* that the queen (the “queen” here refers to the women under the ruling of the king) calls herself the slave of her lord who is the king:

*“...My lord is the ruler, and is superior to the other rulers and kings here in the Jambu continent and also one yojana below this land and one yojana above it...He passes by his slave and sees his slave eating sugarcane, and he speaks as if he did not know his slave...My lord despises his slave and talks to his slave like that, because he has great prestige and honor...”*¹⁶²

*“...My lord who is worthy of respect, your slave will now offer you all 60,000 sets of cloth...”*¹⁶³

In *Four Reigns*, Phloi does her job as a good servant to the king or Sadet or the ruler of the palace. For Phloi, the monarchy is what she or Thai people need to believe and have faith for; they are the spiritual strength or spiritual power of the country. As for Sadet, Phloi not only respects her, but also loves her and is thankful to her. She is a second mother for Phloi after Phloi lives a life in the palace; she teaches Phloi and takes care of her as her own daughter, Phloi loves her with her whole heart, and wishes to serve her for the whole life.

¹⁶² *Three Worlds According to King Ruang – A Thai Buddhist Cosmology*, translation with introduction and notes by Frank E. Reynolds & Mani B. Reynolds, Asian Humanities Press, 1982, p178.

¹⁶³ *Three Worlds According to King Ruang – A Thai Buddhist Cosmology*, translation with introduction and notes by Frank E. Reynolds & Mani B. Reynolds, Asian Humanities Press, 1982, p182.

“I don’t wish for anything,’ Phloi said with feeling, ‘except to go on serving Your Highness.’”¹⁶⁴

When she is asked to marry Khun Prem, she feels insecure and afraid. She wishes to stay with Sadet who is her protector and asks for advice from her:

“I wish to continue serving Your Highness. The thought of starting a household has never entered my mind, Your Highness.”¹⁶⁵

As for the king, although Phloi does not have the opportunity to get close to him, the belief that the king is the ruler and the protector of the country and the people is deeply rooted in her mind. She reminds herself and the people around her again and again about how important it is to keep faith in the king:

“Nothing is too big or too small for his wisdom and compassion, Phloi thought to herself. How blessed we all are that it is he who is our Lord of Life, that it is in him that the supreme power to preserve or to destroy has been invested.”¹⁶⁶

She also reminds her husband, Khun Prem about this:

“You and I, Khun Prem, will always be loyal to the throne, as were our grandfathers and grandmothers before us. We are Nai Luang’s loyal subjects and it follows that we’re going to be loyal subjects to his wives and children.”¹⁶⁷

When the king launched a great cultural innovation in the country, people seemed to pay less respect to the king, but Phloi still sticks to her own belief and pays respect to the king no matter how the world has changed:

¹⁶⁴ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p144.

¹⁶⁵ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p188.

¹⁶⁶ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p153.

¹⁶⁷ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p356.

“Enter Nai Luang, and right away Phloi instinctively bent forward, lowering her head, composing her arms and hands into the gesture of rendering homage...

... ‘How noble, how handsome,’ she thought, ‘A kind of inner light radiating forth, a presence not of the common run of men.’”¹⁶⁸

2. A good master of her house.

Phloi is a humble and nice woman. Even when she is married to Khun Prem who brings her a rich life, she chooses to be a friendly and kind-hearted master, trying to avoid conflicts or misunderstandings between herself and the servants at home. At the beginning, Phloi seems to be too careful about dealing with people in the house. However, Khun Prem tells her to be the master of the house since everything belongs to her:

“Keys were a minor problem compared with people. People lowering themselves to the ground at her approach had Phloi turning round looking for the person for whom the gesture was meant before realizing that it was herself. She would have to get accustomed to this deferential demeanour they assumed in her presence, learn to take it in her stride.”¹⁶⁹

Facing so many servants, Phloi tends to be conservative, only giving instructions through her own maid, Phit:

“...But Phloi chose not to tell them directly what to do and to issue her few instructions through her maid Phit.”¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁸ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p360.

¹⁶⁹ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p223.

¹⁷⁰ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p223.

In the end, Phloi finally learns how to get along with the servants in the new house in her own way, and she becomes more confident with her new master role, becoming friends with the servants more than their master:

“She had no trouble at all getting acquainted with Thiap, the chief cook, whom everyone - including now herself – called Grandma Thiap. They were fast becoming good friends and each had a professional admiration for the other’s culinary skills.

Phloi went to see Grandma Thiap in the kitchen nearly every day, and sometimes made a dish or two in collaboration with her. Also nearly every day she paid a visit to Khun Nui and Khun Nian, no help look after the latter, to seek advice, or just for a little chat to pass the time of day.”¹⁷¹

In addition to her social roles, Phloi does a good job in her family roles as well, which we can discuss from four aspects: a good daughter, a good sister, a good friend and a good wife. According to Thai tradition, to be a good daughter before marriage, and then to be a good wife and good mother after marriage, are exactly how people in the society define a good woman according to her family roles.

1. A good daughter for her parents.

We cannot say Phloi has a very happy childhood because of the broken relationship between her parents. She could barely feel love from her father when she was very young, although this does not mean Phloi hated her father and blamed him for her mother’s leaving and death. On the contrary, Phloi loves her father as much as her mother, even if her father used to be very cold to her. She never blames him because she knows that she

¹⁷¹ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkorm Books, 2007, p224-225.

is the daughter of her father, and no matter, she needs to respect and love her father without condition.

Before Phloi leaves home with her mother, she goes to say goodbye to her father. Even if her father does not say anything to her, she still tries her best to show her full respect to her father:

“And then, with no one there to prompt her, she herself had had to choose the appropriate moment for making obeisance. She joined her palms together and bent forward, bringing head and hands down on the rug; then, straightening up, she saw the barely noticeable nod and prepared to crawl away.”¹⁷²

Before Phloi and Choi are ready to have their own tonsure ceremony, Chao Khun, Phloi’s father, comes to Choi’s house to visit Phloi, which encourages Phloi a lot:

“That night Phloi went to bed exhausted and happy – ecstatically happy. Chao Khun Father, before leaving, had said he would come again tomorrow. She had not told him how much she loved him – they had never been very demonstrative with one another – but had searched for a way to express her feelings and ended up by taking a fan and then fanning him as steadily and smoothly as she knew how while he chatted with old friends and acquaintances.”¹⁷³

When Chao Khun was sick, Phloi pays a visit to him as soon as possible, and feels extremely sad and sorry for his poor health:

¹⁷² MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p12.

¹⁷³ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p85.

*“Chao Khun Father himself had been in poor health, and this, rather than his grey hair and his thin body – he had always been slim in any case – was what made him look a great deal older than when Phloi had last seen him.”*¹⁷⁴

Except for the love Phloi gives to her father, she certainly loves her mother very much, even if she has left Phloi alone in the palace. We can see from the texts how much Phloi loves her mother and how much her mother makes her feel warm and secure:

*“Mother’s warm loving arms, rather than her words, comforted Phloi and soon lulled her, in spite of her fears of a motherless existence, into a deep unbroken sleep lasting till sunrise.”*¹⁷⁵

When her mother is leaving, even though Phloi feels sad, she still listens to her mother’s words, trying very hard to keep calm and waits for her mother in the palace, living her own life well as her mother wishes:

*“There were no sad tears when they parted that second time, no feelings of fear, or anxiety, or loss. At the gate they said goodbye in cheerful spirits, content with each other and with their respective lot, and went their separate ways loving each other with that unassuming love described by Phloi simply as being as big as the sky.”*¹⁷⁶

2. A good sister for her sisters and brothers.

Phloi was always a good sister for all her cousins and siblings. She and her half-sister Choei are very good friends, even if they have different mothers. Choei’s sister Khun Un does not like Phloi from the beginning, but this does not affect the relationship between Phloi and Choei. They are good friends from the time they were both young, and when

¹⁷⁴ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p121.

¹⁷⁵ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p41.

¹⁷⁶ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p56.

Choei marries a poor husband and lives a life as a normal woman, Phloi does not feel shame for her; does not blame her, but feels proud and admires her:

“Not that Phloi ever suspected for a minute that Khun Choei would be capable of such pettiness, but it is eminently satisfying to have your faith in people you love and admire affirmed again and again. No, poverty had not reduced Khun Choei’s inner dignity. She accepted being poor but was not crushed by it. Adversity had failed to give her bitterness, envy, or self-pity. If anything, it had brought into play a quality of hers which had been under-employed in the old prosperous days: courage. Courage worthy of those ancestors who had proved themselves so valiant in the battlefields of long ago. They would have applauded the way Khun Choei was conducting her own battles, Phloi thought. They would have been very proud of her.”¹⁷⁷

Phloi’s half-brother Khun Chit is spoiled by his father and sister, Khun Un; he does many bad things and treats his wife terribly. Phloi knows this well; feeling sympathy for his poor wife Phuang, and tries everything to make her life better:

“Phloi consoled and comforted her as best she could while her heart cried out in pity for this fellow creature, a wife and mother like herself.

...Before departing, Phloi gave her sister-in-law all the money she had in her purse – 50 baht, saying she would be sending more in a day or two.”¹⁷⁸

The way Phloi treats Khun Un can best reflect how generous and kind-hearted Phloi as a good sister, even if she is treated inequitably. When Phloi leaves home the first time, Khun Un almost shouts at her with the worst words she can bear, but when she comes

¹⁷⁷ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p295.

¹⁷⁸ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p380.

back from the palace to visit her father, Phloi still goes to pay respect to Khun Un, even if she does not want to:

*“Phloi performed a deferential wai which was ignored. She then asked Khun Un how she was and, receiving no reply, made no further attempt at communication.”*¹⁷⁹

After Chao Khun dies, life in the old house gets worse and worse. Khun Un spends all of her money to satisfy her brother Khun Chit, and ends in a miserable situation. She comes to Phloi, and asks for help from Phloi, begging Phloi to forgive her. Facing this sister who treated her so badly since she was a child, Phloi only feels sorry and pity for her, and is willing to help her as much as possible:

*“She had made up her mind as to what she must do. No one was in a better position than herself to extend a helping hand to Khun Un and rescue her from a deprived and lonely old age. Khun Choei was not equipped to do it. Nor Phoem. Only she could do it. How Mother would have laughed at the irony of it all, Phloi thought, but with her kind heart, Mother, too, would have approved. Chao Khun Father would have been enormously pleased – in fact, he would have expected nothing less from her. But perhaps the most important reason for the action Phloi was about to take was that she herself would not be able to live peacefully with herself if she were to shirk it.”*¹⁸⁰

3. A good friend for her friends.

Choi is Phloi’s best friend from the time they were both in the palace until the end of Phloi’s life. Choi shows Phloi a different world from hers; Choi has a naughty, but

¹⁷⁹ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p122.

¹⁸⁰ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p340.

straight personality. She helps Phloi pass the difficulties in her life, and Phloi does the same thing to Choi as well:

*“A naughty unruly child to most grownups, a terror to some of the children her own age, Choi was also one of the kindest human beings Phloi had known in her short life, and the most tender part of her big heart...”*¹⁸¹

4. A good wife for her husband.

According to Thai tradition, a good wife should be a good companion for the husband, be able to take care of the family and husband, and always be obedient to the husband. A good wife should be a handmaiden; she should have housework skills, and be a good housewife:

*“Phloi saw her point, and she began to behave more conscientiously, more in keeping with her duties and responsibilities as mistress of a large household. For a start she set out to get better acquainted with its members...Once she had got over her shyness she found it on the whole enjoyable enough, or at least not as difficult as she had imagined.”*¹⁸²

In addition to being a good master or mistress of the house, Phloi is also able to take care of her husband by herself:

“After a leisurely meal he asked Phloi for some betel nuts and she put the tray in front of him.

‘I’m becoming a betel – chewing addict thanks to you,’ he said.

“Why is that?” Phloi asked.

¹⁸¹ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p45.

¹⁸² MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p223-224.

'You make everything look so inviting, that's why. These betel leaves – most exquisite the way you roll them, and the carved nuts are a work of art. I can go on and on and if I were a poet I'd compose a sakkrawa in their praise. And it's not the appearance alone, but the flavor – the perfectly blended, subtle, gentle – on – the – tongue flavor! They're not like anything I've ever tasted before.'

'And you must have tasted plenty before.'

*'Oh, enough to deter me from wanting to make a habit of it. I've had betels that are tasteless and dull, and those so tart they nearly burn your mouth. Now I have yours and they are heavenly. Don't be surprised if I become an addict for life.'*¹⁸³

From this conversation between Phloi and Khun Prem, we can see that Khun Prem is quite satisfied with his wife's skill in preparing betel, and this is only one example to show how skillful Phloi is as a good wife making her husband happy.

To be a good wife, there is another rule which is the most important one to follow. She should obey her husband and be honest to her husband all the times. Phloi knows this. Even if she does not have love for Khun Prem at the beginning of their marriage, she knows that to be a wife, she should obey and follow her husband:

*"I feel myself as belonging to him. This is something absolute and unarguable. I belong to him completely and absolutely. I take him as my owner, as centre and mainstay of my life, forever, unless and until he himself should wish to cease being so. Some women may prefer to stay free of such a tie, but Phloi happened to be that feminine type who finds assurance in it, and happiness in that assurance."*¹⁸⁴

¹⁸³ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p226-227.

¹⁸⁴ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p221.

Phloi does not understand the new society and new modern trend, but she still follows what her husband tells her to do because, for her, a good wife should always follow her husband and make no complaints about her husband's opinion:

“As always, Phloi was pleased to have done something that pleased him...

...At heart, thought, Phloi did not feel as samai mai as her clothes and hair style would have you believe, and when Khun Prem came out with remarks about her old – fashioned ideas, whether jokingly or reprovngly, she usually laughed, tacitly admitting to them without fuss or bother.

...A tolerant, uncomplaining, not to say indulgent, wife was Phloi, and always anxious to do what was expected of her by her lord and master.”¹⁸⁵

Concerning her husband's feelings and health, Phloi suggests that Khun Prem have a minor wife, and promises him that she would not be jealousy. This is the way Phloi convinces herself to be a good wife, even if she will feel pain:

“If there is anything you would like to have, Khun Prem, or anything you would like to do, anything at all, that would please you, make you happy, you'll go ahead and – and please yourself, won't you? I have no objection at all. I mean it. Whatever you want to do –...

...She worried about them, yes. But would she change them if she could? She had always been proud of Khun Prem – Khun Prem, His Excellency Phraya Botamal Bamrung, respectfully addressed as Chao Khun by one and all; she had been proud of him, had admired him and looked up to him and rejoiced in his successes; now she had

¹⁸⁵ MR Kukrit Pramoj, Four Reigns, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p354-355.

her worries about his health, his moods, his behaving like a child in various ways, but at the same time she felt her really, wholly, belonged to her, her very own Khun Prem, and this rich, warm feeling was something she had but rarely experienced during his more active days...’’¹⁸⁶

5. A good mother for her children.

Phloi undertakes her duty as a mother even before she is pregnant with her own child. The first son she takes care of is the son of Khun Prem and his ex-wife. Given her own experience in her childhood, she understands that it is important to raise a child in a good environment with both a mother and father and a normal family, which is different from her childhood. She does a good job from the very beginning when she decides to take On to be her own son:

“She couldn’t put it any other way to herself. She would love him like a son. Not out of a sense of duty, or a desire to do the right thing or to perform a meritorious act – no, nothing of the sort. She would love him – she was loving him – like a son, because – well, because that was the way she felt, because that was the way it was meant to be...’’¹⁸⁷

After giving birth to three children, Phloi continues to prove to be a good mother; she loves her children, and her children give her the same love as well:

“All of them – Praphai and the three boys – were very attached to their mother. They told her their cherished secrets and shared their triumphant moments with her and when

¹⁸⁶ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p439-441.

¹⁸⁷ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p233.

miserable they came to her for comfort and consolation. They brought her the gift of love every day and made her a proud and happy mother.”¹⁸⁸

Phloi not only loves her own children, she loves what and who her children love. When An brings a French wife back home, even if Phloi is shocked, and Khun Prem is unpleasant, Phloi respects her son’s choice and gets along with An’s wife, Lucille, very well:

*“The two women smiled at each other, Lucille sweetly, Phloi rather timidly. Lucille in her dressing gown making up her face, Phloi sitting carefully on the edge of a chair, appreciating her daughter-in-law’s prettiness.”*¹⁸⁹

*“Lucille and Phloi got along very well. There was a great deal of affection between the two of them.”*¹⁹⁰

Praphai is Phloi’s only daughter. She loves her in a special way which is different from the boys. However, Praphai does not always behave as Phloi wants. Praphai chooses a man to marry who is not the right one Phloi thinks, but for her daughter’s happiness, Phloi chooses to be silent, and feels happy for her:

*“Praphai was happy, and this was much more important to Phloi than the fact that she couldn’t warm to her son-in-law, nor he to her.”*¹⁹¹

In the end, Ot dies of a disease, An ends his marriage with Lucille, and Praphai finally realizes her husband is a greedy man and their marriage is a mistake. However, On finally comes back home and decides to be a monk, which is all the parents in

¹⁸⁸ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p303.

¹⁸⁹ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p412.

¹⁹⁰ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p418.

¹⁹¹ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p534.

Thailand wish their sons to do, and this is the only happy ending for Phloi's children. In Thai tradition, a man has to ordain as a monk to help his mother, parents, family member or people he loves to go to heaven.

*“It should be noted that ordination is perceived as a singular way of repaying a debt to one's parents, especially one's mother...Within the calculus of meritorious action, by being ordained the ordinand gains a spiritual benefit for his parents...by joining the monastic order, if even for only a short period of time, a young man returns to his mother and father a spiritual boon.”*¹⁹²

So On's decision is to make up for all the bad things he has done or brought upon his family and parents. He also wishes to bring his family, especially his mother, to heaven. This is the only hope Phloi gets from her children, and there is a symbolic meaning to show that even if Phloi's children do not have very happy endings, On's ordination is a meaningful decision to prove and be thankful to their good mother – Phloi:

*“It was On who made his mother feel joyful again after these many months. He did it one day by asking her to allow him to enter the monkhood.”*¹⁹³

*“She watched him re-enter the hall and take his position before all the monks; she listened to the question and answer ritual in which he was found eligible to become a monk, and she saw him received into the Sangha.”*¹⁹⁴

4.3.2 Bao Chai in *A Dream of Red Mansions*:

¹⁹² Donald K. Swearer, *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia*, Silkworm Books, 2009, p53-54.

¹⁹³ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p634.

¹⁹⁴ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p642.

Similar to Thai women, traditional Chinese women have to play different roles in different environments, which can also be divided into family roles and social roles according to different activities. The social role is a necessary condition in order for everyone to achieve and realize their self-value. Before the modern time of China, Confucian culture occupied a supreme dominant position in Chinese society, which also caused a serious imbalance for Chinese women between their social role and family role. We can see very clearly during the growing-up of traditional Chinese women that they play a complex family role, but lack opportunities to play social roles. Now we will discuss traditional Chinese women's family role through Bao Chai in *A Dream of Red Mansions*.

First, the role of unmarried women is obeying the father (parents) at home. In the moral values of the feudal society in China, the father plays an authoritative role in the family. The traditional doctrine required the unmarried woman to obey the arrangements of their father. In order to adapt themselves to marriage in the future, girls were raised according to the marriage customs and culture. When girls were five or six years old, they were forced to have their feet bound because this was considered a symbol of beauty at that time. A girl's status was also very humble, unmarried girls needed to study handmade textiles and embroidery conscientiously; they were forced to be educated with moral cultivation such as "the three obediences and four virtues". Similarly, in political issues, women lost their rights. According to the law in the Qing Dynasty, women did not have the right to inherit property, unless there were no inheritable men in the family. In some family-firms or time-honored brand shops, there is a tradition to hand down the

hereditary secret formula or secret prescription only to men, not women. Under such strict constraints of traditional morality, unmarried females tended to show the image of a meek and soft little woman.

In *A Dream of Red Mansions*, Bao Chai lost her father when she was very young, and grows up with her mother and brother. So we can discuss the unmarried female role of Bao Chai from the angle of “filial and dutiful daughter” under the feudal patriarchal system. The feudal patriarchal system was the morality that was inherited from the historical cultural tradition in China for thousands of years. The parents were the absolute authority in the feudal family. As typical feudal noble families, the Shi, Wang and Xue Families are deeply influenced by this traditional ethics system. Bao Chai is the typical “ideal” example in that society; she is very good at getting along with different people; she knows how to be able to achieve success one way or another; she shapes herself within the feudal guidelines; and gets praise from almost everyone in the Jia Family. She is deeply loved by the elders and respected by the sisters.

Here we can see very clearly that the way Bao Chai treats Lady Dowager, who is her grandmother, is the reason that she can receive so much love from her grandmother. In Chapter 22, when people are preparing for Bao Chai’s birthday, there are descriptions of how Lady Dowager shows her love to Bao Chai and how Bao Chai pays her respect and pleases Lady Dowager.

“The fact was that the Lady Dowager had taken a fancy to Bao Chai since her arrival on account of her steady, amiable behavior. As this would be her first birthday in their

house, the old lady summoned Xi Feng and gave her twenty taels of silver from her own coffer for a feast and an opera.”¹⁹⁵

“That night, after the family had gathered to pay their evening respects to the Lady Dowager and then gone on to chat, she asked Bao Chai to name her favourite operas and dishes. Knowing the old lady’s partiality for lively shows and sweet, pappy food, Bao Chai gave these as her own preferences, adding even more to the Lady Dowager’s pleasure.”¹⁹⁶

In Confucian culture, people give great importance to filial piety. Bao Chai understands her grandmother’s kindness and mercy to arrange a great birthday party for her, and her gentleness and considerate also makes her grandmother more joyous. Being able to make elders happy while also being content with oneself is the supreme realm of filial piety. The real filial piety is to care about both the mind and emotions of the elders, which we can see from Chapter 45. After Bao Chai moves into Grand View Garden, she still cares about her grandmother and Lady Wang no less than before.

“As the weather was chilly now and the nights were lengthening, Bao Chai asked her mother for some sewing to do. Every day she paid two courtesy calls on the Lady Dowager and Lady Wang, and could not but keep them company for a while if they seemed so inclined...”¹⁹⁷

Only as a relative, Bao Chai could be so honored and show her filial respect for the elders, from which we can see that Bao Chai is very well-bred; it is the compassion and

¹⁹⁵ Cao Xue Qin and Gao E, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, English version translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, January 1, 2001, p213.

¹⁹⁶ Cao Xue Qin and Gao E, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, English version translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, January 1, 2001, p214.

¹⁹⁷ Cao Xue Qin and Gao E, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, English version translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, January 1, 2001, p428.

good virtue from Bao Chai's deep inside world. It is no wonder Lady Dowager praises Bao Chai:

“Talking about the girls,’ observed the old lady. ‘I’m not saying this as a compliment to Aunt Xue, but the truth is that none of our four girls can stand comparison with Bao Chai.’

‘You’re partial, madam,’ disclaimed Aunt Xue with a smile.

‘But it’s true,’ put in Lady Wang, ‘The old lady’s often told me privately how good Bao Chai is.’”¹⁹⁸

Lady Dowager, who has experienced ups and downs in life, giving such a high comment and praise to Bao Chai means that Bao Chai's tenderness and consideration must have impressed the old lady very much.

Bao Chai gives her concerns to the elders, as well as the sisters in Grand View Garden, and she cares more about Dai Yu and Xiang Yun who lost both of their parents than others. She is also concerned and more thoughtful with Xing Xiuyan, who comes from a poor family. The concern is from her heart because she can understand the misery of life and really feels sympathy for these unfortunate sisters. If everyone appreciates Bao Chai's compassion and concern, then Dai Yu is different. At the beginning, Dai Yu is hostile to Bao Chai because Dai Yu can feel the special feeling Bao Chai has for Bao Yu. But eventually Bao Chai's efforts get a sincere response from Dai Yu. In Chapter 67, Bao Chai's brother, Xue Pan, brings some local products from Su Zhou, which is Dai Yu's

¹⁹⁸ Cao Xue Qin and Gao E, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, English version translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, January 1, 2001, p328.

hometown. Bao Chai divides them and sends some to everyone, but she prepares a special gift only for Dai Yu.

*“Bao Chai, who had followed her case back to her own rooms, looked through the things in it one by one. Some she kept for herself; the rest she divided into appropriate lots. To some people she would just give toys; to others, stationery; or sachets, fans and pendants; rouge and pomade. She gave careful thought to what was a fair share for each, only making an exception in Dai Yu’s case she was to have twice as much as anyone else.”*¹⁹⁹

In Chapter 45, there is a paragraph about the heartfelt words Dai Yu says to Bao Chai to show her sense of appreciation. When Dai Yu suffers from a bad cough, Bao Chai goes to visit her and cares about her health, and gives her a good suggestion about how to use medicine:

“Today Bao Chai came to visit her and turned the conversation to her illness.

‘Though the doctors who come here aren’t bad, their prescriptions don’t seem to be doing you much good,’ said Bao Chai, ‘Why don’t you ask a real authority to come and examine you and see if he can’t cure you? You can’t go on like this, having trouble every spring and summer. After all, you’re not an old woman or child.’ ...

... ‘I saw your prescription yesterday,’ said Bao Chai, ‘It struck me there was too much ginseng and cinnamon in it. Although they stimulate the vital forces, you shouldn’t have anything too hot either. To my mind, the first essential is to calm your liver and improve your digestion. Once the fire in your liver is quelled so that it can’t overcome the

¹⁹⁹ Cao Xue Qin and Gao E, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, English version translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, January 1, 2001, p695.

'earth' element your digestion will be better and you'll be able to assimilate your food. When you get up each morning, you should take an ounce of the best quality bird's-nest boiled into gruel with half an ounce of crystal sugar in a silver pot. Taken regularly, this is a better tonic than any medicine."²⁰⁰

As for Bao Chai's concern, Dai Yu is touched by her warmth, and says something she has never said to Bao Chai.

"'How good you always are to others!' Dai Yu exclaimed with a sigh. 'I'm so touchy that I used to suspect your motives. I really began to appreciate you that day when you warned me against indiscriminate reading and gave me such good advice. I can see now I'd misjudged you all along. My mother died early and I've no sisters or brothers, someone to think of it; in all my fifteen years no one ever advised me as you did the other day. No wonder Xiang Yun speaks so highly of you. I used to be skeptical when she sang your praises, but not after my own recent experience. For instance, when you said anything I always answered back, but instead of taking offence you offered me good advice. That showed that I'd been wrong. If I hadn't realized this the other day, I wouldn't be confiding in you now.'"²⁰¹

Dai Yu always gives us an impression of being aloof and proud. Dai Yu has this feeling for Bao Chai because Dai Yu feels lonely and helpless all the time, but Bao Chai can feel for her and gives her the most encouraging words to make her feel secure and

²⁰⁰ Cao Xue Qin and Gao E, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, English version translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, January 1, 2001, p429.

²⁰¹ Cao Xue Qin and Gao E, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, English version translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, January 1, 2001, p429.

warm. We can also see the respect and love Bao Chai has for her sisters from the way she treats Xiang Yun, another girl who lost her parents like Dai Yu. From Chapter 32:

“‘And what was Xiang Yun doing in your compound?’

‘She just dropped in for a chat. You know that pair of shoes I started the other day? I’ve asked her to finish them for me.’

Bao Chai glanced around to make sure no one was about. ‘How could someone with your good sense suddenly be so inconsiderate?’ she asked. ‘Piecing together what I’ve seen and heard recently, I guess Yun’s a nobody at home. To save expense, her people no longer employ sewing-women but make practically everything they need themselves. That’s why, during her last few visits, she’s confided to me when nobody was about that she gets quite tired out at home. And when I asked about their daily life, her eyes filled with tears and she made some evasive answer. So I gather she’s having a hard time of it because she lost her parents so early on. I can’t help feeling sorry for her.’”²⁰²

Dai Yu tells Bao Chai her troubles, as does Xiang Yun, which is because the concern Bao Chai has for them is from the bottom of her heart, and because Bao Chai is willing and ready to give them spiritual and practical help. However, the most important reason is because Bao Chai is the most reliable sister for them. There are other sisters living in Grand View Garden, but no one is as considerate as Bao Chai. She sees the difficulties of everyone in her eyes, keeps them in her mind, and offers her help at the right time. No wonder Xiang Yun will praise her soulfully.

²⁰² Cao Xue Qin and Gao E, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, English version translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, January 1, 2001, p310.

“I thought it was Miss Lin. So it was Bao Chai.” Xiang Yun sighed, ‘At home every day I often think that of all my cousins Bao Chai is the best. What a pity we aren’t real sisters! If we were, it wouldn’t be so bad being an orphan.’ Her eyes were brimming with tears.”²⁰³

Bao Chai gives her concern to the people who need it, and she does not ask for anything in return. Her concern of everyone is so thoughtful and her manner is so good and harmonious. After Dai Yu complains about her lonely life without parents and siblings, Bao Chai comforts her:

“I was only joking, but it’s quite true. Don’t worry. As long as I’m here I shall keep you company. Just tell me any complaints or troubles you have, and I’ll help as far as I can.”²⁰⁴

When she tries to help Xing Xiuyan, she says:

“If people bully you, just keep your temper and on no account fall ill. Actually you may just as well give them the other tael too, so that they stop pestering you; then you needn’t treat those creatures for nothing. If they make scathing remarks, just pretend not to hear and go about your own business. When you’re short of anything just apply to me. Don’t be finicky. It’s not because you’re engaged now to one of our family that I want you to treat me as your relatives. Didn’t we become friends as soon as you arrived here?”²⁰⁵

²⁰³ Cao Xue Qin and Gao E, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, English version translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, January 1, 2001, p306.

²⁰⁴ Cao Xue Qin and Gao E, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, English version translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, January 1, 2001, p430.

²⁰⁵ Cao Xue Qin and Gao E, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, English version translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, January 1, 2001, p580-581.

Xiang Yun wants to hold a begonia club meeting, but she is not in charge at home. Bao Chai then suggests having a crab lunch in the garden to start their poetry club. She tells Xiang Yun it is only for her, and because they are good sisters and friends.

“I’m only thinking of you,” replied Bao Chai, ‘You mustn’t be touchy or imagine I look down on you, because this is between friends. If you’ve no objection, I’ll tell them to go ahead.’

‘My dear cousin, you’re being touchy instead if you talk like that,’ said Xiang Yun, ‘However scatterbrained I maybe, I know when someone’s being good to me. At least I’ve that much sense. If I didn’t look on you as my own elder sister, I wouldn’t have confided to you last time all the troubles I have at home.’²⁰⁶

Second, the role of marriageable women: Following the command of parents and matchmakers was – the proper way of arranging a marriage in feudal China. From the angle of unmarried women, if they wanted to be freed from the influence of their family, a feudal marriage was the necessary way for them, but eventually their life after marriage was influenced by men (their husband) as before. Before, girls used to be victims of “infant matrimony”. In that period, women were treated as products, and marriage was like commodity trading. Women could only be chosen, but did not have the right to choose a marriage partner by themselves. In this mode of marriage, women were equivalent to the property of the husband’s family.

For a meticulous and intelligent girl such as Bao Chai, she knows that she is going to be the protagonist in the arranged marriage in order to drive away the devil and the

²⁰⁶ Cao Xue Qin and Gao E, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, English version translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, January 1, 2001, p351.

disease from Bao Yu. No matter how sad and unsatisfied she is, when facing her own marriage, she tells her mother:

“The day that Aunt Xue went home having agreed to the match between her and Bao Yu she told her daughter, ‘Though your aunt has proposed it, I’ve not yet given my consent, telling her we’d decide after your brother’s return. But are you willing or not?’

Bao Chai answered gravely, ‘You shouldn’t ask me that, mother. A girl’s marriage is arranged by her parents. As father is dead the decision’s up to you, or you can consult Brother Pan; but you shouldn’t ask me.’”²⁰⁷

Bao Chai understands that she has no right to decide her own marriage. Even if the marriage her mother and the Jia Family arrange for her and Bao Yu is not a happy one, and she has to play the role as “Dai Yu” to make sure that Bao Yu will finish the ceremony. She only feels sad, but never complains to her mother or others.

“The next day Aunt Xue went home and told Bao Chai in detail all these arrangements to which she had agreed. Bao Chai lowered her head in silence, and presently shed tears.”²⁰⁸

“For although Bao Chai knew how things stood and at heart blamed her mother for this injudicious match, it was too late now to protest.”²⁰⁹

Bao Chai knows from the beginning that her move into the Jia Family with her mother and brother is only for one reason, to marry Bao Yu. All the stories about her gold and Bao Yu’s jade are made up by the two families. She knows that Bao Yu is in love

²⁰⁷ Cao Xue Qin and Gao E, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, English version translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, January 1, 2001, p1035.

²⁰⁸ Cao Xue Qin and Gao E, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, English version translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, January 1, 2001, p1052.

²⁰⁹ Cao Xue Qin and Gao E, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, English version translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, January 1, 2001, p1063.

with Dai Yu, but she understands more that her duty as a daughter is to obey her mother and Lady Dowager in the Jia Family. This is her destiny, to be a good daughter and to marry a man arranged by her parent.

Third, the role of the married women and follow the husband after marriage: Under the constraints of the feudal tradition, the married women must show filial piety and an image of being virtuous. In their own family, a woman's status is not high; fertility and serving her husband is their job which is taken for granted. A married woman's sex life is mainly for the purpose of reproduction. Women are required to maintain their chastity to maintain the purity of the family descent. The family role of married women immediately changes from "following parents or father" to "following the husband". The husband only partly plays the role as a mate; mostly they play the role of "householder" and "the ruler of the family".

In *A Dream of Red Mansions*, Bao Chai's role as a married woman is more like an advisor of her husband, except for managing housework. A good wife is expected to support her husband. Supporting her husband in the feudal society, especially in Bao Chai's period, meant to urge her husband to pursue success in his career; this was a good wife's duty. Even before the marriage, Bao Chai already takes this as her duty, and always reminds Bao Yu to study hard in order to please his father and to achieve success in his studies. In Chapter 32, Xi Ren mentions how Bao Chai reminds Bao Yu, but receives no reply.

*“Last time Miss Bao Chai gave him the same advice he just snorted and walked away without any regard for her feelings.”*²¹⁰

After that, Bao Chai understands that she should not remind Bao Yu directly, but in different ways. In Chapter 34, when Bao Yu is beaten by his father, Bao Chai goes to visit him with some medicine, and says to him:

*“If you’d listened to our advice, this wouldn’t have happened,” she sighed, ‘Now you’ve not only upset the old lady and your mother; when the rest of us see you like this, our hearts ache too...’*²¹¹

After Bao Yu met Zhen Bao Yu, who has a similar look as Bao Yu, but has a different goal in life, Bao Chai reminds him again about his impractical life dream.

*“As this sounded nonsensical to Bao Chai, she said, ‘The way you talk is really laughable! How can you change your look? Besides, he was quite right. A man should establish himself and make a name. Who else is as soft and sentimental as you? Yet instead of admitting your weak character you call other people place seekers.’*²¹²

Bao Chai and Bao Yu have their first serious conversation about their different opinions of Bao Yu’s future in Chapter 118:

“Since we are man and wife, you’re the one I have to rely on all my life; this isn’t a question of my personal feelings. Of course wealth and honour are ‘transient as drifting clouds’ but the sages of old set store by moral character and a firm foundation...

²¹⁰ Cao Xue Qin and Gao E, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, English version translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, January 1, 2001, p307.

²¹¹ Cao Xue Qin and Gao E, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, English version translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, January 1, 2001, p318.

²¹² Cao Xue Qin and Gao E, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, English version translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, January 1, 2001, p1192.

*...Bao Chai went on pleading, 'Since you've run out of arguments, my advice to you is to take a grip on yourself and study hard; because if you can pass the triennial examination, even if you stop at that, you'll be paying back your debt of gratitude for your sovereign's favour and your ancestor's virtue.'*²¹³

The last time Bao Chai talks about Bao Yu's future and examination is in Chapter 119 when Bao Yu decides to take the examination which is the main point the whole family, including Bao Chai, pay great importance to:

"As she waited to see what he would do next, Bao Yu ordered She Yue and Qiu Wen to prepare a quiet room for him, and got out all his collections of the sayings of past sages as well as other famous works and poems written during examinations, which he had put in this room. Then, to Bao Chai's relief, he set to work in good earnest...

*...Bao Chai nodded and answered with a smile, 'Success or failure in examinations is fated, regardless of how soon or late one starts to study. We can only hope that from now on he'll stick to the right path and never be influenced again by those evil spirits!'*²¹⁴

From the descriptions in the novel, we can see that Bao Chai has been sticking to her goal while she knows she is doing something that is impossible. She tries to persuade and lead Bao Yu back to the right way, which is building his future career. From the public opinion at that time, the only right way for Bao Yu is to take the examination and to be a court official. But Bao Yu is trying to break out of the traditional restraints and pursue his own life and dream, which is unreasonable and ridiculous for the society at that time. It is

²¹³ Cao Xue Qin and Gao E, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, English version translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, January 1, 2001, p1216-1217.

²¹⁴ Cao Xue Qin and Gao E, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, English version translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, January 1, 2001, p1218.

the duty of a good wife, such as Bao Chai, to correct her husband and guide him to go back to the right way.

In addition, Bao Chai's good virtue as a good wife is not only reflected by the way she tries to lead her husband with the right suggestions. She is also very considerate when dealing with the situation such that Bao Yu still thinks about Dai Yu after being married. She knows that their marriage is a trick for Bao Yu, but her duty is to obey the family and parents, so what she can do is try to understand Bao Yu's feeling and sorrow, and transfer his love and feeling to her little by little. When Bao Yu first knows that Dai Yu is dead, Bao Chai does not care about what others think about her, but tries to do her best to wait for him to recover from the pain.

*“She paid no attention to ill-natured gossip, but carefully probed Bao Yu's psychology and quietly needled him for his own good.”*²¹⁵

She does not feel jealous about the feelings between Bao Yu and Dai Yu because she knows that now she is Bao Yu's wife; so being considerate is the best way for both her and Bao Yu, as well as their marriage.

*“‘People feel for each other while on earth,’ she said, ‘But after death they go their separate ways, no longer the same as in life. Even if the one still living remains fond, the one who is dead can't know it. Besides, Miss Lin is said to have become an immortal, so to her all men on earth must be unbearably vulgar and she'd never stoop to coming back. To imagine otherwise is to invite evil spirits to take possession of you.’”*²¹⁶

²¹⁵ Cao Xue Qin and Gao E, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, English version translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, January 1, 2001, p1065.

²¹⁶ Cao Xue Qin and Gao E, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, English version translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, January 1, 2001, p1141.

After all, Bao Chai's attempt receives a response from Bao Yu, and he finally accepts the reality and turns his heart back to Bao Chai.

*“Bao Chai made no attempt to dissuade him, only saying, ‘Don’t go imagining all sorts of things. Didn’t you see how worried your mother was; too worried to speak because you went to the Garden? If you don’t look after your health and the old lady hears of it, she’ll blame us for not taking better care of you.’”*²¹⁷

*“Moreover, Bao Chai’s gentle ways made him gradually transfer to her some of the love he had felt for Dai Yu.”*²¹⁸

Although most traditional Chinese women lack the opportunities to participate in social roles, Bao Chai is able to play a social role in the Jia Family, which is reflected in the way she runs the household. Bao Chai is young and unmarried, but she is also extraordinary intelligent; her capability of running the house is no less than Xi Feng. Compared with Xi Feng's rich experience and cold-blooded ways, Bao Chai is more modest about her skills. When Xi Feng falls sick, Bao Chai and Tan Chun become the housekeepers. Although Tan Chun is appointed to be the main one, Bao Chai is the real advisor for everything. We can see from the suggestions from Bao Chai:

“‘I don’t think accounts need be turned in at all,’ said Bao Chai, ‘Comparisons are so invidious. Better let the woman entrusted with one job be responsible for the expenses of that place. I’ve worked it out and it doesn’t come to much, just what’s needed for hair-oil, rouge, powder, scent and toilet-paper for the young mistresses and their maids, as

²¹⁷ Cao Xue Qin and Gao E, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, English version translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, January 1, 2001, p1142.

²¹⁸ Cao Xue Qin and Gao E, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, English version translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, January 1, 2001, p1066.

well as for brooms, dustpans, dusters and whisks and food for the poultry, pet birds, deer and rabbits. If they take care of these few items, we needn't draw anything from the accountants' office. Think how much we can save that way."²¹⁹

When Bao Chai arranges everything perfectly, her ability also receives a good response from the maids.

"The women were delighted with this proposal, which meant they would neither be controlled by the stewards nor have to settle accounts with Xi Feng. All they needed to do was to pay a few extra strings of cash every year.

'That suits us!' they cried. 'This is better than being squeezed by those stewards outside and having to pay them."²²⁰

Meanwhile, Bao Chai is quite modest and nice to the maids, and tries to use a more gentle way to warn them instead of a harsh way.

"'You nannies needn't deny,' replied Bao Chai with a smile. 'This is as it should be. Just work hard and don't slack or allow any gambling or drinking. This is really none of my business but, as you know, my aunt has urged me repeatedly to help out now that Madam Zhu's so busy and my other cousins are still young. I don't like to add to her worries by refusing. Besides, your Second Mistress has poor health and is busy with family affairs, while I've nothing to do. Why, even a neighbor should help out, not to say a niece like myself when specially asked. So I have to overcome my scruples and not mind if everyone thinks me a nuisance. If all I cared about was my own reputation while other

²¹⁹ Cao Xue Qin and Gao E, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, English version translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, January 1, 2001, p562.

²²⁰ Cao Xue Qin and Gao E, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, English version translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, January 1, 2001, p562-563.

people made trouble drinking or gambling, how could I face my aunt? You'd be sorry too, then, and lose face yourselves.”²²¹

With profound insight of the world, Bao Chai has a thorough understanding of reality. Bao Chai always keeps awake and calm when dealing with secular business; others cannot be comparable to Bao Chai's wisdom. From the details of how she deals with the housekeeping business, we can also see how thoughtful and tolerant she is. In Chapter 56, there is a conversation between Bao Chai and Tan Chun, showing that Bao Chai is running the household business at a higher level than Tan Chun.

“‘Truly spoken like a rich young dandy!’ laughed Bao Chai. ‘Though sheltered young ladies know nothing about such things, in the course of your studies you’ve surely read Zhu Xi’s essay On Not Debasing Oneself?’

‘Of course I have. Just a lot of exhortations and empty talk, I call it. Such things can’t really happen.’

‘So even Zhu Xi’s writings are empty talk, are they?’ retorted Bao Chai, ‘No, every word there is true. After just two days of managing affairs you’ve become so mercenary that you accuse Zhu Xi of empty talk! I suppose if you worked outside, where you’d profit more by cutting down bigger expenses, you’d bring the same accusation against even Confucius!’

‘Well-read as you are,’ countered Tan Chun, ‘haven’t you read Jizi? Jizi said, ‘Those in a position to seek profit and emolument, or responsible for planning and calculating, may talk like Yao and Shun but disobey their precepts of Confucius and Mencius.’

²²¹ Cao Xue Qin and Gao E, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, English version translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, January 1, 2001, p563.

Bao Chai smiled as Tan Chun broke off and urged, 'Go on.'

'That's all I want to quote. Why should I go on to make fun of myself?'

'There's nothing useless in this world, and when something has a use it's worth money. I'd have thought where a serious matter like this is concerned, you had sense enough to grasp such a self-evident truth.'

'You call us here,' put in Li Wan, 'but instead of talking business the two of you just carry on an academic discussion.'

*'This academic discussion has a bearing on our business,' replied Bao Chai, 'If our small tasks aren't guided by principles, they'll get out of hand and sink to the vulgar level of the market-place.'*²²²

This is just the fundamental principle to deal with housekeeping business of Bao Chai, this is the reason why Bao Chai advocates that reading is for being reasonable and sensible. The reason for reading is to use the principle from the books in real life, and this is the supreme part of Bao Chai.

From the above, we can see from the two novels that the traditional role of Thai and Chinese women was the family role. This was the requirement and standard the society set for "ideal" women in that period; to be an obedient daughter, good wife and mother, and at the same time, a good housekeeper with her special female intelligence and wisdom. After entering modern society, the roles of Thai and Chinese women have changed a lot. In the past, a woman simply lived a family-centered life; husbands and

²²² Cao Xue Qin and Gao E, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, English version translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, January 1, 2001, p558.

children were their whole life focus. But nowadays, with the development of the society and people's attitudes, women have begun to participate in the society and work in all areas of the society. Their family role and social role start to be in a conflict and in opposite situations.

*“However, this final achievement of their status somehow caused new conflicts in their life they had never before experienced. Women feel they are now burdened with two full-time jobs: their own career and their roles as wife or mother or both.”*²²³

With similar traditional culture, Thai and Chinese women seem to have only one choice under this situation, which is choose to go back to their families and tradition. However, the life choice of women in the two countries has also changed because of the improvement of women status and the self-consciousness of women themselves. In addition to choosing to go back to family and tradition as a traditional woman, they can also choose to take better responsibility of their families by using their social experiences and social capabilities, which we can call a socialized family role. There are some women who simply choose to give up the family role and pursue a self-independent living.

²²³ Panit Boonyavatana, The Making of a Thai Woman, “Gendered Past, Presents and Futures”, 7th International Conference on Thai Studies, Amsterdam, 4-8 July, 1999.

Conclusion and Discussion

The practical significance of the concept of the “ideal” woman for modern females in Thailand and China

Four Reigns and *A Dream of Red Mansions* establish the standard of the image of the “ideal” woman from Thai and Chinese traditional cultural values, along with their different historical and cultural backgrounds, which includes the standard of appearance, the standard of personality and the standard of morality. From the above analysis, we can draw the conclusion that the standard of the “ideal” woman according to Thai and Chinese tradition is similar, which is one with a beautiful appearance, gentle, thoughtful, generous, tolerant, a filial and obedient personality, which will all come down to a “lovely daughter, good wife and loving mother”.

Traditional culture is both the inertia force of history and the driving force of history. The value or concept of women in any period is always closely connected to the culture in that period, which includes the traditional culture. Contemporary Thai and Chinese women are living in different social systems and cultural environments; the cultural environment of the two countries consists of the inheritance and continuity of their own traditional culture. This particular cultural atmosphere undoubtedly has had profound impact on the value orientation and the role transformation of women in Thailand and China. In this chapter, we will summarize the similarities and differences of the image of “ideal” woman in the two countries and the practical significance of the concept of “ideal” woman in modern society.

5.1 The similarities and differences of the image of “ideal” woman in Thailand and China.

5.1.1 The similarities:

Thailand and China are both Asian countries, no matter from the social value or the traditional culture, they share certain similarities on the standard of the “ideal” woman. First, the basic good virtues required for the “ideal” woman in Thai and Chinese society are similar, such as “beauty, generosity, consideration, kindness, the morality of being diligent and thrifty, sincere and modest, and with fraternal unity”. Second, the social and family role that the “ideal” women are expected to take in Thailand and China are similar, which is the role as a good wife and loving mother.

From *Four Reigns* and *A Dream of Red Mansions*, the two main female characters are the typical representatives of these good virtues and take the family role as expected. Phloi and Bao Chai were both born in high class families; they are the most beautiful women in the family; they are general, kind-hearted, considerate; they respect the elders, love their friends, sisters and brothers; they show the loyalty to their lovers or husbands; they even treat the servants very well. Phloi takes good care of her children, and Bao Chai does not have a child yet in her life, but according to her personality, she will also be a good mother as expected.

5.1.1.1 The good virtues of the “ideal” woman in Thailand and China:

In Thailand, Theravada Buddhism is the main religion; Thai culture and social values are widely influenced by Theravada Buddhism, as we can see from the Buddhist literature *Traibhumikatha*: such as the “*perfect woman*” has “*unsurpassed beauty*,

*possess immortal youth and unmarred happiness;*²²⁴ or the “*women of Uttarakuru*” is perfectly beautiful and “*it please all the men.*”²²⁵ This is the description of their beauty, which is a very important part of the standard of the “ideal” woman. From the description of the “*gem woman*” we can see that “*she does not remain seated, but generally gets up to greet the king...and she massages his feet and hands, and sits in a lower place.*”²²⁶ This is the description of how obedient she is; this is also the social standard for women as an obedient daughter and wife. In addition, similar good virtues for Thai women can also be found in many Thai proverbs and sayings.

In China, Confucianism is the core of traditional Chinese culture, and is in a dominate position in the entire traditional cultural system from the historical perspective. There are many outstanding spiritual values in Confucian culture, for example, the spirit of “*making himself strong and untiring, and having breadth of character carries the outer world;*”²²⁷ the social responsibility as “*being the first to show concern and the last to enjoy oneself*”²²⁸ and “*every man has a share of responsibility for the fate of his country;*”²²⁹ the personality and self-cultivation as “*if poor, they attended to their own virtue in solitude, if advanced to dignity, they made the whole kingdom virtuous as well;*”²³⁰ the philosophy of life as “*not to do to others as you would not wish done to yourself*”²³¹ and

²²⁴ Published by The National Identity Board, Office of the Prime Minister, Women in Thai Literature, Bangkok, Thailand, 1992, p22.

²²⁵ Three Worlds According to King Ruang – A Thai Buddhist Cosmology, translation with introduction and notes by Frank E. Reynolds & Mani B. Reynolds, Asian Humanities Press, 1982, p128

²²⁶ Three Worlds According to King Ruang – A Thai Buddhist Cosmology, translation with introduction and notes by Frank E. Reynolds & Mani B. Reynolds, Asian Humanities Press, 1982, p166

²²⁷ I Ching or Book of Change, English translated by Tr. Wilhelm [Online], Source

<http://wengu.tartarie.com/wg/wengu.php?l=Yijing&no=1> , <http://wengu.tartarie.com/wg/wengu.php?l=Yijing&no=2>.

²²⁸ Fan Zhongyan (Northern Song Dynasty), Renovation of the Yueyang Building.

²²⁹ Gu Yan Wu (1613-1682), Record of Daily.

²³⁰ Meng Zi (372-289 BCE), Meng Zi, English translated by James Legge [Online], Source <http://ctext.org/mengzi/jin-xin-i>.

²³¹ Confucius (551-479 BCE), The Analects-Yan Yuan, English translated by James Legge [Online], Source <http://ctext.org/analects/yan-yuan>

“*how a man without truthfulness is to get on;*”²³² as well as the ethnic morality of being diligent and thrifty, sincere and modest, and with fraternal unity. Contemporary Chinese women have given a positive identification and evaluation to those moralities; they have inherited these traditional virtues, carried them forward and given them a new and rich connotation in the new era.

5.1.1.2 The family role of the “ideal” woman in Thailand and China:

In traditional Thailand society, the most important role for woman is the family role, or the role as a mother and wife, as we discussed in the previous chapters. A literary work called “*Exhortations to Women*” (*Suphasit Son Ying*) by Sunthorn Phu, a famous Thai poet who was designated by the UNESCO a classic poet of the world in 1986, describes the duties of a good wife which reads in the part:

*“A wife should show her respect to her husband everyday. When the sun sets, she will not go anywhere but prepare the bed for her husband. When the husband goes to bed, she ‘wai’ him at his feet (by raising the hands pressed together at her chest and prostrating herself at the husband’s feet as a Thai way to show her high respect). In the morning, she wakes up before him to cook food and prepare all things for him. When he has breakfast, she sits beside him to see whether he wants anything that she can bring to him. A good wife will not eat before her husband.”*²³³

In addition, Thailand has a traditional culture with men taking responsibility outside family, expecting women to concentrate on their reproductive roles. A consequence of this was the sexual division of labor, which could be clearly seen among the ruling class.

²³² Confucius (551-479 BCE), The Analects-Wei Zheng, English translated by James Legge [Online], Source <http://ctext.org/analects/wei-zheng>

²³³ Sarutta, Women’s statues in Thai Society, Thaiways Magazine, 10 Sep 2002, Vol.19 No.11.

*“While men pursued their prosperity by undertaking various kinds of administrative work, women stayed at home and fulfilled their domestic roles such as rearing children, doing housework and satisfying men’s sexual desires.”*²³⁴

This could be found in various social institutions that had considerable influence on the ways of life and attitudes of the people.

*“Meanwhile, various kinds of subtle mechanisms such as Thai Buddhism, education, literature and language defined the ideology of motherhood and wives’ roles, created “proper” conduct of women, and emphasized the importance of male protection. Through the discourses of such social institutions, women were convinced of their subordinate status and roles, and thus contentedly submitted themselves to male dominance as well as accepted society’s expectations of their reproductive roles.”*²³⁵

In Chinese feudal society, which lasted for thousands of years, the country was established on a patriarchal clan system with feudal autocratic centralization. The patriarchal clan system originated from the primitive patriarchal society.

*“The patriarchal clan system is a hierarchy system, but more than a hierarchy system, it’s the unity of both the hierarchy system and the relation of human ethics and blood.”*²³⁶

Under this system, there was a set of requirements and conduct designed to make the words and actions of each person to be up to the standard of the prescribed interpersonal ethical relationships. The typical family role of women in traditional Chinese society is “assisting her husband and teaching her children.” The feudal society restrained the

²³⁴ Suwadee T. Patana, Gender Relations in Thai Society: A Historical Perspective, Women’s Studies in Thailand: Power, Knowledge and Justice, Asian Center for Women’s Studies, 2004, p42.

²³⁵ Suwadee T. Patana, Gender Relations in Thai Society: A Historical Perspective, Women’s Studies in Thailand: Power, Knowledge and Justice, Asian Center for Women’s Studies, 2004, p65-66.

²³⁶ Zheng Bi Jun, Chinese Society and Chinese women, Introduction of Modern Female, Peking University Press, 2003, p224-225.

female role to that of the “house keeper”; thus “assisting the husband and teaching the children” became the natural duty for women, which advocated that the female (wife and mother) function and role was evaluated and measured through the husband and son’s social status and values. However, this concept has changed with the development of society and the change of female status in modern society. Because this concept can also remind wives to pay more attention to husbands and remind mothers to care more about children’s education. The “good wife and loving mother” or housewife role of women has an important significance in promoting social progress and maintaining the stability of the family nowadays.

5.1.2 The differences:

The differences between the standard of the image of “ideal” woman between the two countries are mainly due to the religious influence. In Thailand, Theravada Buddhism is the dominated religious ideology; the standard of “ideal” woman, the social moral value about woman, as well as the way how the society look at woman are deeply influenced by Theravada Buddhism. But in China, Confucianism is the core of traditional Chinese culture, and is in a dominate position in the entire traditional cultural system from the historical perspective. Traditional Confucianism has an unmatched role and influence over other doctrines in China and over the people.

5.2 The practical significance of the concept of the “ideal” woman in modern society.

In modern society, women’s economic and social status has improved a lot, and many women can be self-reliant, with some even very successful in their careers. However, with the influence of the traditional ideology, the family is still the most important thing for women, and they are still quite dependent on men. Therefore, a more reasonable mode for the female role and status in the consumer society should be like this:

5.2.1 Women should have their own economic sources to live their own lives, and stop being the accessories of men. Women should try to fight for their own discourse and independent right in both the family and at work.

5.2.2 Under the environment of the consumer society, women are both the main consumer and the consumer enthusiasts. They should pursue the material wealth legitimately and reasonably, as long as it does not go beyond the bottom line of social morality.

5.2.3 Women may see their bodies as a kind of advantage, because in a male-dominated society, men will tirelessly pursue women’s beautiful appearance. But as women, they should not be willing to accept this phenomenon; rather than pay attention only to appearance, women should continue to enrich their spiritual world, and make themselves more confident, elegant, content and independent. This is the only way for women to fight for their own discourse in the male-dominated society.

Considering their physical conditions, personality traits, historical and cultural tradition and other factors, the connotations given to women are much richer than men. The definition of the image of the “ideal” woman should be based on consideration of the

traditional culture, modern thought and social values, and be based on the fact that women can pursue and liberate their own rights and status, while men can balance and adjust the standard for women with appreciation, understanding and objective and equal vision. We should notice that the word “idealization” has its objective meaning, but in the modern society, this word has been given a more diverse subjective meaning. The image of the “ideal” woman should embody a value and point of view which includes different opinions and standards, which is neither the fake “ideal woman” imposed on women by patriarchy, nor the radical “ideal woman” proclaimed by feminists.

5.3 The “ideal” woman shaped by male writers: the integration of male chauvinism and feminist consciousness.

It is said that art comes from life, but at the same time, another point that art guides life cannot be ignored. The guiding role of art with respect to life can be in shaping life, standardizing life or repressing life. Art inspires some of the possibilities inside our hearts, but also suppress some other possibilities. The artistic imagination of women by male writers, widely accepted by readers, can possibly become a strong cultural norm shaping the males and females who are the readers. Thus, the female character created by a male writer is the artistic imagination of the female by the male. The female character created by a male writer reflects the status of women in real life. However, after the artistic treatment by the writer, they bring the subjective feeling into the female character and image. Phloi, Choi and Khun Un in *Four Reigns* are different imaginations of women by M.R. Kukrit Pramoj; as well, Bao Chai, Dai Yu and Xi Feng in *A Dream of Red*

Mansions, are the different imaginations of women by Cao Xue Qin. Here we can discuss whether the imagination of women by a male writer is reasonable or not, and whether such imagination reflects the real needs and ideas of women, as well as the prejudices and misleading aspects of women under the male chauvinism exhibited in their works.

5.3.1 Female characters: the integration of male chauvinism and feminist consciousness.

Male aesthetes create the beautiful female image according to their own ideals and needs. The female beauty in the male ideal imagination includes two aspects: a beautiful external appearance to please men, and a good internal quality to service men, which can be summarized with the usual words in a male-dominated society: “female appearance” and “female virtue”.

In traditional Chinese patriarchal society, appearance becomes a very important value for women. *“To enjoy food and delight in color is nature.”*²³⁷ According to the interpretation of Chinese scholars, what Meng Zi or Mencius means is that beauty is as important as food, which is the nature of humans, and reveals the nature of physiological desire by humans (here referring only to men).

*“But unfortunately, Mencius only says that from men’s point of view, the ‘human’ he mentions doesn’t include women, he even sees women as the objects only for meeting the physical desires of men.”*²³⁸

²³⁷ *Meng Zi or Mencius*, Meng Zi (372-289 BCE), English translated by James Legge, <http://ctext.org/mengzi/gaozi-i>

²³⁸ *Female, Aesthetic, Culture – The Song Dynasty Female Literary Studies*, Shu Hong Xia, People’s Publishing House, Beijing, 2004, p222

In *Meng Zi* or *Mencius*, the “delight in color” includes woman or beautiful woman. He does not treat woman as real “humans”, but treats woman as an object for the needs of men. In a patriarchal society, a woman’s “ability” has to combine with “beauty”, and then they will have great charm and social effect, attracting widespread recognition and love from men. For example, in the Jin Dynasty of China, there was a talented woman named Zuo Fen. She was brought to the palace because of her knowledge and virtues. Even though the emperor appreciated her talent and always talked about poetry with her, she was never loved by the emperor because of her ugly appearance.

5.3.2 Female characters shaped in *Four Reigns* and *A Dream of Red Mansions*.

In *Four Reigns* or *A Dream of Red Mansions*, Thai and Chinese literary critics give a very high evaluation to the female characters shaped in the two novels, especially the main characters: Phloi and Bao Chai. Most agree that these two characters represent the image of the “ideal” woman in Thailand and China. However, from the critical feminist perspective, “*it is morally questionable to let the oppressed people tell the oppression to the people who oppress them.*”²³⁹ Therefore, even if M.R. Kukrit Pramoj and Cao Xue Qin created a better world for Phloi and Bao Chai in their novels, as men and “oppressors”, the world created by them still must withstand a strict examination and test from the feminist angle. Here only the image of the “ideal” woman in literary works will be discussed, It can be seen that the “beautiful”, “gentle” and “ideal” images, such as for

²³⁹ Li Zhi Ding, *A Dream of Red Mansions: The Female World Dominated by Male Imagination*, Social Science Front, 1995 (6).

Phloi and Bao Chai, are not only created to respect and appreciate women, they are created by male writers according to their own needs as well.

Four Reigns:

We can see that Phloi in *Four Reigns* can be classified as the beautiful and acceptable female type in the works of male writers. She represents the female type who is pure, beautiful, gentle, chaste and generous. She loves men (father, husband, son); she is the mixture of “beautiful woman” and “loving mother”; she is an angel with beauty and love.

Phloi is the “ideal” woman in the imagination or fantasy of Thai male writers; as M.R. Kukrit Pramoj said, “*No matter how, Phloi is still Phloi herself, I put all of the good virtues in this character, and for me, this is the ‘ideal’ woman image example in this society.*”²⁴⁰

In addition to Phloi, M.R. Kukrit Pramoj also created some other female characters in this novel who show different personalities and different destinies for women who are not set up to be the “ideal” woman. For example, Phloi’s best friend Choi is a naughty girl, with an inappropriate personality for the court at that time.

“*A naughty unruly child to most grownups, a terror to some of the children her own age, Choi was also one of the kindest human beings Phloi had known in her short life...*”²⁴¹

Another completely different type of woman is Phloi’s cousin Choei. She is even much braver than Choi. Choi is a girl with her own ideas, she does not want to pursue the happiness defined by the male-dominant culture in that society, but still lacks an

²⁴⁰ มจร.ศึกฤทธิ์ ปราโมช, แม่พลอยมีตัวจริง? , *พิเคราะห์ศึกฤทธิ์ พิณจี่แผ่นดิน*, บรรณาธิการโดย สุวิทย์ ว่องวิริยะ, สำนักพิมพ์ดอกหญ้า (1988), หน้า10.

²⁴¹ MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p45.

independent awareness. Choi does not really have her own life. But Choei is different; she has her own independent thinking and she is brave to take actions in order to pursue her happiness, even if the happiness is considered to be an unworthy poor life. These two female characters, especially the portrait of Choei reflects the advanced feminist thinking of the writer. Even from Phloi's inner description, we can see the advanced thinking of the writer:

*“Phloi felt if keenly. If the queen could become ruler like the king, it followed then that women as human beings were on the same level as men and could step into positions usually held by men if given the opportunity. That men were lords of their households and women more or less their dependents might be the prevailing situation but by no means as unalterable one.”*²⁴²

In *Four Reigns*, the purpose probably was not to discriminate against women, but to advocate the female role as a good mother and good wife under the male-dominated society. The character of Phloi is an “ideal” image of a woman, she is beautiful, gentle, and generous; she brings happiness and love to her family. This image also shows that a good woman's most important job is to stay home and be a good housekeeper, to manage the relationship with everyone at home, treat servants well, and support her husband and teach her children. M.R. Kukrit Pramoj also expresses the value that whether a society is good or not depends on whether the women can play their role properly or not.

“Paternalism in this novel is reflected from the description of how woman start to have the importance. For example, the love Khun Prem has for Phloi is single-minded, he

²⁴² MR Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns*, English version translated by Tulachandra, Silkworm Books, 2007, p107.

does not want to have a minor wife after getting married to Phloi, even if it is acceptable in the society at that time. As well, the love Phloi's children have for her. It actually reveals that Phloi's children can be so faithful because she is a good mother.”

(“ปิตริปไตยในเรื่องนี้เป็นลักษณะประนีประนอมให้สตรีสายวัฒนธรรมได้ก้าวเข้ามามีบทบาท ดังเช่นความรักที่มั่นคงของคุณเปรมที่มีต่อพลอย โดยไม่ยอมมีหญิงอื่นหลังแต่งงานแล้วทั้งที่สังคมเอื้อต่อการที่ชายสามารถมีเมียได้หลายคน รวมทั้งความรักที่ลูกทุกคนมีต่อแม่พลอยอย่างแนบแน่น มีเสื่อกคล้าย ก็เหมือนจะบอกว่าเพราะมีแม่ตัวอย่างนี้เอง ลูกจึงรักศรัทธา ถ้ามองในมุมของชาย ผู้หญิงเช่นพลอยสนองความต้องการของชาย แนวคิดแบบปิตริปไตยในเรื่องนี้จึงยังดำรงอยู่เหนือสตรีนิยมเช่นเดิม”)²⁴³

A Dream of Red Mansions:

As a male writer with the historical and cultural spiritual burden from the patriarchal system for thousands of years, Cao Xue Qin indeed unconsciously showed too much patriarchy and male-dominant psychological awareness when creating *A Dream of Red Mansions*. However, as a writer who had a thorough insight, strong critical spirit and subversive consciousness in Chinese history and culture, he also criticized the patriarchy and male-dominance from the spiritual level.

As an ancient male writer with historical and cultural restrictions, Cao Xue Qin was placed in an ideological system of language and culture, and he could not escape from that system. For an individual, the “unconscious influence” was like the congenital blood in his body and formed the stable knowledge, emotional, psychological and spiritual

²⁴³ สุวรรณธาดา พงสวรรณ, แม่พลอยกับเฟมินิสม์, *มนุษยศาสตร์ สังคมศาสตร์* 28 (3) ก.ย.- ธ.ค. 54, p72.

structure. Although Cao Xue Qin was a writer with a strong rebellious consciousness, he still lived in a period with Chinese tradition; there is no other space for him to speak. If he could have spoken out with a “different” voice, it would still have been inside the framework of male discourse.

“That means, when Cao Xue Qin writes A Dream of Red Mansions, he can only write with “male language”, even if he really wants to speak for women, but he cannot use a “female language” or “non-male language”, because it does not exist, and Cao Xue Qin himself cannot create a new language system to replace the old language system.”²⁴⁴

Language is a representative of the culture, and a symbol of power. “Male language” will naturally show male consciousness such as patriarchy, male-dominance and male-centered positions. But for Cao Xue Qin, using “male language” and showing the male consciousness is only the external meaning, not the deep significant and ultimate meaning. The deep, hard to be understood and unacceptable meaning is hidden behind the language traditions and external meaning, but is shown in the criticism and subversion of the historical and cultural tradition of Cao Xue Qin; is shown in his high recognition and appreciation for female values; is shown in his effort to build a “Utopian” aesthetic and ethical world; and is shown in his self-criticism and “atonement” awareness for the male-dominated culture.

Men’s mentality of loving both good virtues and a good appearance of women leads to the fact that the “ideal” woman for them must be beautiful, meet their emotional needs, and must be intelligent, to meet their spiritual needs. A woman’s emotions should be

²⁴⁴ Rao Dao Qing, A Dream of Red Mansions and Feminist Literary Criticism, Journal of Wenzhou Normal College, Jun, 2005, Vol. 26 No.3, p36.

quiet and suppressed, rather than too passionate; her virtue should be chaste, rather than indulgent and uninhibited, which poses no threat or challenge to the patriarchal norms. This is just the image of Bao Chai created by Cao Xue Qin. But this image of the “ideal” woman is completely created in accordance with the psychological needs of men.

In brief, in the modern society, male-dominated discourse and aesthetic values are still the mainstream of the society in many countries. Under this cultural influence, female character created by male writers usually cannot represent females in real life, but reflect the expectation for women according to the traditional aesthetic standard from that society. Although M.R. Kukrit Pramoj and Cao Xue Qin are male writers with relatively more objective views of women in their time, and they both show deeper concern, sympathy and respect for women than other male writers, they still cannot get rid of the shackles of male consciousness, and the female characters they create will still be penetrated with the subjective consciousness and prejudices of men.

On the other hand, women are the same as men, both are human beings with “divine and devil nature”; they both have their own rationality and humanity defects. In this way, we cannot say that all of the praise and criticism of women from men is wrong, but we have to consider the position they hold, which means the praise and criticism should be based on the fact of respecting women. If male writers are holding the position of understanding women, respecting women and inspiring women, then their works are worthy to advocate.

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BIOGRAPHY

Qian Ren was born and raised in Jiang Xi province, People's Republic of China. Her father and mother are both teachers in the middle school. Qian Ren studied in The Faculty of Asian Language and Cultures, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, China. Her major was Thai language and culture. During July – October, 2002, she studied at Srinakharinwirot University as an international exchange student.

After her graduation in 2004, Qian Ren started to work in Thai Service, China Radio International in Beijing as a translator and reporter. In order to improve her Thai and English language, and to deepen her understanding of Thailand and Southeast Asia, she started to work in Bangkok Bureau of China Radio International from July, 2009 until the present. As a journalist, Qian Ren covers news and events about the relationship between Thailand and China, as well as the important news happening in Thailand.