Thailand's Unique Case of Inter-Gender Role Negotiations: Inter-Gender Sibling Rivalry and "Castration" in Thai Novels Depicting Gender Status Renegotiations in Chinese-Thai Families[1]

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Abstract

This article examines inter-gender relations of status and power among Chinese-Thais and how traditional Chinese definitions and customs are being renegotiated in modern Thailand. The research materials are prominent Thai novels. The focus is on relations between male and female siblings. The phenomena are young daughters who confront and/or dethrone elder brothers. This is an extreme case which subverts the tradition of preference for male over female offspring and the priority of the elder over the younger.

In the novels, young daughters achieve the ultimate power in the family, but, on top of that, the elder sons are humiliated and exposed as useless and lacking in any dignity or values. Furthermore, the elder brothers are also humiliated as males and are turned into impotent or are completely dominated and enslaved by aggressive wives.

Theoretically, this can be an overlap between Adlerian psychoanalytic concepts of sibling rivalry order of birth, and Freudian psychoanalytic concepts of castration as part of the Oedipal complex. Here, the desire to castrate is inter-gender

[1] This article is part of the author's PhD dissertation entitled "Ethnic Chinese Women in Thai Novels: The Negotiation of Identity, Gender and Generational Transitions."

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rather than intra-gender, and it derives its motives from a rivalry of siblings, subverting not only traditional male superiority, but also superiority derived from place in the order of birth.

The Background: The Issues and Preliminary Claims

This article is a study of one small chapter of Thai cultural and social history, looking at the issue of gender relations within one important ethnic community, Chinese-Thais. The importance of studying this issue is related both to the pivotal position of Chinese-Thais in modern Thailand, as well as to the fact that Chinese culture has deeply ingrained social and cultural norms of gender hierarchies.[3] These norms were methodically formulated in writing since 2,500 years ago by the Chinese sage Confucius and reproduced again and again.[4] They form an important part of what Chinese consider as their cultural identity. Issues concerning gender relations within ethnic Chinese-descended communities are therefore inextricable from issues of identity. Renegotiating gender relations is thus nothing less than a renegotiation of identity. We should bear in mind that those ethnic diaspora minorities attempting to maintain a cultural identity, especially when relinquishing any wish for a "return" and pledging their full allegiance to their new home (a description that applies well to Chinese-Thais), often tend to be more conservative than those that reside in the "home" state. In the latter case, the very fact of living within a space defined by their ethnicity reduces the need to cling to vestiges of the past as the only possible strategy of identity preservation. However, as we shall see, the fact that the surrounding society, which in our case is Thai society, is so different, can lead to situations in which the counter-reaction of members of the family that are prejudiced against is harsh.

[3] Poceski, *Introducing Chinese religions*, 92.
[4] Wang, *Images of women in Chinese thought and culture*, 162-163 and 327-340.

The novels discussed here portray a harsh reaction in the fictional world which could be reflective of real life cases in whole or in part.

The issue of the negotiation of gender relations, particularly in the case of societies that are founded on stringent gender hierarchies, is not new. Neither is the reflection of such drives of renegotiation in literature. Some of that literature is a review of traditional gender status and roles that existed, and that perhaps still exist, but that are being swept away or diminished. Anthropological studies of the case of Chinese-Thais still show some preservation of these cultural practices,[5] and confirm the relevance of these novels to reality.

But, while today we find Chinese women authors and scholars that attempt to resolve "the tension between being a feminist and being a Chinese",[6] what we find in the Thai novels depicting Chinese-Thai family life is the opposite. The nominal Chinese cultural identity may remain in the background, and there is no objection to that, but the gender prejudices of that culture are not just eliminated to reach equalization; rather, there is a turning upside down of the wheel, a process in which the cherished elder sons are shamed and demoted and daughters, particularly young daughters, are raised to the top, to become the real inheritors. However, a mere turning upside down of the wheel is not enough. The detail about the rising daughters being the young ones adds to the insult, although, as we shall see later, it has sensible roots in the possible fact of their carrying the deepest grievance. Some of the novels create such a grievance, but there is a case where the ascendancy of the youngest seems to be made merely in order to make a point. Furthermore, there is an added edge which subjects the demoted sons to major blows to their manhood. I refer to that as "castration".

Another informative aspect of that comparison relates to the issue of where the renegotiation of gender relations occurs. The main possible arenas are before and after the matrimonial rite of passage. Before, we have the relations of siblings. After, we have the relations of husband to wife. Extra-familial arenas, such as the job market, the professional and business world are related, but out of our scope.

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[5] Tong, "Rethinking assimilation and ethnicity", 114.
[6] Rosenlee, *Confucianism and woman*, 159.

The claim of this article is that gender status renegotiation is portrayed, in the Thai novels we review, primarily as sibling rivalry, mirroring, in a sense, the Biblical archetypical narrative of Isaac, Jacob and Esau, but conducted between siblings of opposite genders, which is a novelty. The rivalry is for ascendancy and not for mere attention and affection, as the topic is usually addressed in contemporary psychological literature.

Also, our claim is that the focus on sibling rivalry is a result of the aversion to having daughters, which is how Chinese popular culture translates the formal system of gender hierarchies, and which meant that only in marriage, and then in producing male heirs, could women gain stature and respect.[7] In comparison, Victorian literature focuses on husband-wife power relations because the legal system at that time was completely biased against wives and their status, and marriage automatically cancelled all rights (married women being considered as not being legally a person any more, but rather a subordinate part of their husband's person). But even when that older literature incapacitates a male protagonist, as the case of Rochester in "Jane Eyre", this is not related to his manhood, but is aimed to place him in an inferior position, at least temporarily.

The aversion to having daughters that developed in Chinese popular culture meant that daughters were often accepted as a disappointment, or namely, more of a negative "missed son", than a positive in itself. Even more than that, with the future need to provide dowries, and the very little they could contribute to the household until the prospective matrimonial age, which was young, they represented a burden on the household; a burden that was not compensated by any benefits. The killing of daughters at birth or daughter abortions (a flourishing trade after the introduction of ultra-sound) are the ugly face of this phenomenon, and it is so prevalent that it has affected the demographics of China.

In the three novels that we shall presently review, we will see that:

1) Sibling rivalry is the most prominent arena of gender status renegotiation, namely, it is most prominent in the plot, and involves

[7] Li, *The sage and the second sex*, 7.

critical characters in that generation. Sibling rivalry is, however, not the exclusive arena of gender status renegotiation. We find rivalry in some marriages and some other male-female relationships, including husband and wife, daughter-in-laws to father-in-laws, and sister and brother in laws. Nevertheless, the manifestation of gender rivalry in other dimensions of family and the outside world often have their roots in inferiority complexes that come into being during childhood, and are linked, when relevant, to sibling rivalry. These can be projected on non-siblings later in life.

2) The three novels show a type of sibling rivalry that is not satisfied with reversing the balance in favor of daughters, or women, at the expense of sons or men. In all the novels, first sons are demoted and proven incapable and immoral, particularly towards their parents. Daughters, often young daughters, are portrayed as highly capably and also as caring and helpful to their parents, including a father that in some of the novels was against them.

3) Still beyond the demotion of the sons and the rise of the daughters, just mentioned above, we find in the plots more extreme "punishments" dealt to the sons. These are various kinds of "castration", as we shall elaborate later, which are simply a suppression, if not elimination, of manhood. The question of why this angle is present in all novels is discussed in the analysis.

Theoretical Concepts and Analysis of the Three Novels Based on These Concepts

Theoretical Premises and Considerations

Psychoanalysis revolutionized our way of conceiving the psychology of people by highlighting two childhood complexes that involve parents and children, and which are not naturally self-evident. The fact that they are not self evident is self explanatory: according to Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, these complexes take place at very early childhood, before linguistic tools to define desires are acquired, and when memory is still very tenuous. Not less important, they take place, according to Freud, in the mind of the child. This is a one sided fantasy. Desires towards the parent of the opposite sex, and the resulting drive to "castrate" the parent of the same sex, their rival,

are part of that fantasy. There is no willingness on the side of the child to share the object of desire, as the object of desire is so paramount, and as the concept of self and others is not yet in existence. That object is not even fully an "other" in our sense of the word, although our inherent inability, as adults, to feel the world as a child of these early ages does, erects a barrier of understanding. The myth of Oedipus was so suitable to Freud's hypothesis, in part because the re-enactment of the fantasy in later life cannot trace itself to the original one of early childhood. The adult individual has no clear way to communicate with his early childhood self. In the myth, it is fate which creates an adult age repetition, and that repetition is conducted unknowingly. The Oedipus complex is one that boys go through. The Electra complex, developed by Freud later, applies to girls, and is depicted as less powerful since young children are first attached to their mother before creating differentiation. In fact, Freud's concept of the differences in the relative power of these complexes has interesting results. Freud claims that the power of the Oedipal complex is such that it can be resolved only through the development of a strong super-ego, the rational and purpose-driven part of the self. Boys develop more of that because they need to overcome a more challenging childhood complex. In fact, Freud consigns women to a less rational and purpose-driven adulthood by the very nature of their childhood growth.

Sibling rivalry is the other axis within the family unit on which strong passions are played out. It was the center of the work of Alfred Adler, a student of Freud who turned away from Freud's exclusive focus on the Oedipal/Electra complexes in order to focus on the sibling relations issue, which Freud acknowledged, but to which he paid scant attention:

> Adler laid a particular emphasis on birth order as a condition that affects and shapes sibling relations. He likewise suggested that the most important single factor in personality development is the relative presence of the inferiority complex...This feeling of inferiority forms the background for all our studies....It ultimately becomes the stimulus among all individuals, whether children or

> adults, to establish their actions in such a way that they will arrive at a goal of superiority.[8]

The portrayal of sibling rivalry, often referred to as the Romulus and Remus complex (after the brothers who founded Rome), does not dwell on gender differentiation. While the Freudian Oedipal complex includes the concept of "penis envy" as a central principle, Adler's sibling rivalry focuses on the genders in separation. This is a point which, in my opinion, is worth further examination. While the European society in which both Freud and Adler grew was male dominated, that domination centered on power at adulthood, and even there, there were already the first signs of women gaining stature, as Freud's own daughter, Anna, gained stature as a leading psychoanalyst, in fact his successor. Also, Austria and continental Europe in general were different than Victorian Britain, and its code of chastity and female repression that became so widely known. Daughters were dearly loved even if they did not represent a full "heir". Gender discrimination at childhood was not the norm.

This state of affairs stands in sharp contrast to the extreme prejudice against women, and particularly against having daughters, which prevailed in China and among ethnic Chinese overseas. As mentioned earlier, having daughters was a disappointment unless the family already had a son, preferably more than one. Women were not appreciated for having daughters in any case. Even though Chinese society went through changes in its long history, and there were eras were women were more highly appreciated, this kinship structure has been a basic building block of society for millennia.

The concept of "penis envy" which was part of Freud's Oedipus complex did not translate well into the arena of sibling rivalry in his society, but one can theorize if it could apply to traditional Chinese society where gender prejudice starts at birth. The concept "castration", which is strongly linked to "penis envy", is therefore more relevant in a society where the principle of "Order of Birth", to which Adler devoted much attention, is rivaled, if not superseded, by a principle of "Gender

[8] Hoffman, *The drive for self*, 207.

Hierarchy of the Child". Since the principle of "Order of Birth" creates sibling rivalry by creating discrimination, then discrimination created by other principles should generate its own version of sibling rivalry, and that version should have gender related primal feelings as an important feature.

Obviously, the Chinese kinship system is so male oriented in its totality that girls or women have no social space to express or act upon feelings of sibling rivalry, or their inferiority complexes, and these, most probably, are suppressed from early childhood. Living with such drives is dangerous to one's own existence. But, when the surrounding society allows that, and is no longer dominated exclusively by that culture, then there is a possibility that an infantile jealousy that was suppressed will surface.

The reason I selected the three novels, all highly popular as novels, and also often as televisions series, is because they represent an intersection of sibling rivalry with gender relations of competition. Moreover, gender competition here has features that are highly reminiscent of the primal drives which Freud highlighted in the context of the Oedipal and Electra complexes, and these are castration.

Discussion and Analysis of the Novels in Light of the Theoretical Concepts

The novels reviewed present plots in which female characters increased their relative power as compared to male characters throughout the narratives. The settings are similar, that is, they are Chinese-Thai households, although in different eras and of different socio-economic groups. While the basic setting is always maintained, variations between the narratives consist largely in the set of characters, their complexity and composition. Almost invariably, complexity of character-set comes at the expense of depth of characterization. Thus, in both "The Last Petal of the Peony" and "Through the Scales of the Dragon", particularly the latter, there is a sprawl of characters and a few sub-plots, but there is a lack of concentration in the interiority of the characters, which we come to know mostly through their actions and general descriptions. These two are plot driven novels. In "Letters from Thailand", on the other hand, the number of characters is smaller, the

plot is far simpler, but the main characters are explored at much greater depth. Both dialogue and the epistolary first narration of the main character allow a view of the main characters' interiority.

However, it is only in "The Last Petal of the Peony" that the topic of gender relations and positions is explicitly declared as the central concern of the novel. In the other two novels, the central concern is ethnicity and assimilation, and the pictures presented appear at first sight to be completely contradictory. In "Letters from Thailand", the maintenance of Chinese ethnicity in Thailand is portrayed as anachronistic, an act of irrational stubbornness. In "Through the Scales of the Dragon", the maintenance of Chinese identity, or at least its core values, is portrayed as necessary to success in Thailand. Behind the contrariness, however, both end in a way that indicates that neither total adherence to Chinese values, nor the complete renunciation of these are of any necessity.

Hard work, persistence and frugality are positively looked at in both novels, as the Thai male protagonist of "Letters from Thailand", Winyu, affirms, and as the Chinese-Thai female character of Anongpangna demonstrates. What is eliminated at the end of both novels, however, is the primacy of the continuity of the patrilineal line. In both novels, the real inheritor is a daughter, and to make sure that no false appearances of a Chinese continuity appear, none of them is married to a Chinese-Thai man. In "Letters from Thailand", Meng-Ju is married to a Thai man, Winyu, while in "Through the Scales of the Dragon", Anongpangna is a single mother, sharing a life with a man older than her by ten years who worked for her father as an architect. While she admires him for his sagacity, patience and warmth, she is clearly his superior in worldly affairs. Not being married, she keeps her family name, which her son will carry forward, but its transmission is not restricted to males anymore. Meng-Ju will lose her family name, but this is not something that bothers her in the least.

In both these novels, therefore, gender does not appear as the central topic, and the novels did not gain recognition on account of this topic. "Letters from Thailand" became internationally acclaimed for its portrayal, uniquely in first person narration, of the travails of adjustment and assimilation of an immigrant, even transcending the specific

ethnicities featured in the novel. "Through the Scales of the Dragon", which has not been translated into English, has been reprinted over 40 times in Thailand, becoming also a popular television series, its popularity is derived from granting Chinese-Thais the respect which was withheld from them for decades. The novel clearly proclaims their triumphs, without any need for concealment or discretion.

Unlike the above two novels, "The Last Petal of the Peony" explores the issues of gender explicitly as its main topic. The novel, which was published in 2007, is the latest of the three. The period of publication is one in which the ethnic issues around which the previous novels are centered, explicitly or implicitly, are considered to have been resolved or to have been settled in a satisfactory manner. That kind of atmosphere is more conducive to a declared investigation, by means of a fictional narrative, of gender issues. Indeed, the protagonist of the novels makes it clear at an early stage that his goal in an inquiry into the relative merits of having sons versus having daughters in a Chinese-Thai family. Since he grew in a sons-only family, and he witnessed its failure, as well as the dismissive way he is treated as the youngest, he looks for a Chinese-Thai family that is a mirror image of his, namely, a daughters-only family. The story of the daughters-only family that he discovers, by pure chance, and his involvement with this family, as an "investigator" disguised as a member of the staff, constitutes the bulk of the narrative. At the same time, his on-going involvement with his own family supplies the comparative background. The narrator juggles two plots until they unite in the end when the two families are brought together.

In the novels we reviewed, sibling rivalry between the two opposite sexes is a central motif, and except for "Through the Scales of the Dragon", they are explicitly traced to inferiority complexes derived from the skewed gender of the parents, particularly the father. "Through the Scales of the Dragon" also avoids a direct confrontation and the rise of the youngest daughter vis-à-vis the first son and first grandson, who is closer to her in age, take place independently of each other.

In "Letters from Thailand", the youngest daughter Meng-Ju hears and feels that she is unwanted from birth onwards, particularly by the father. In "The Last Petal of the Peony", it is also traced to early

childhood for the case of the male protagonist, Tiradet. While Tiradet is a male, he is treated for all purposes as a female. It is perhaps this which drives him to attempt to investigate male descendants' families and female descendants' families. That Tiradet is a "surrogate" female is also evidenced, as the story progresses, by his attraction to Tanayong, the youngest of the "daughters" family, who displays behavioral traits that are normally considered as man-like, and who is attracted to manly occupations, such as mechanics, and dreams to open a garage. Tanayong also behaves aggressively, more like a boy.[9] The two end up marrying after a long period of a relationship that mixes confrontation with silent endearment. Interestingly, Tanayong had deep suspicions about Tiradet's true identity from early on. She is the one that breaks the box that contains his journalistic writings and exposes his real identity. Even though he explains himself satisfactorily and is not banished, there is something in Tanayong's figurative "undressing" of him which also hints at a certain true, but unrevealed gender identity. In cultures in which men dominate, it is men who are expected to "undress" women, not the opposite.

Assuming that Tiradet is a female in disguise aligns the novel with "Letters from Thailand" as pointing to a sense of grievance that starts from a very early age. The three sisters in the "daughters" family are not treated badly, and there are also no real sons in comparison to whom they can be discriminated. The opposite is true; the only son is an adopted son who was left as an infant at their door. He is adopted and treated kindly as a member of the family, but the symbolism is striking. He would be dead without their family's largesse. He is thus invariably inferior as a sibling. As he grows up, he desperately falls in love with the middle daughter, Panaan, and marries her in the end. But, in this marriage it can be expected that he will look up to her.

The father, Ah-Chang, unlike the grumpy Suang-U and the admirable but more distant, business-minded Liang, is genuinely cordial and warm. He keeps on grumbling continuously about the fact that he has no real blood sons, and his daughters know that, theoretically, they are not what he would rather have, or have alone. But, the grumbling

[9] Kantima, *The Last Petal of the Peony*, 207, 202.

comes across as existing on the surface only; a product of what he must have been taught, but that he is a happy men who loves his family, and that deep inside he probably would not change for any unknown.

"Through the Scales of the Dragon" contains the same motif, as it contrasts the first grandson, Chaichan, son of the second, but "primary" son of the China wife, with the youngest of Liang's daughters. Anongpangna is the daughter of the third wife, the lowest ranked one, who is Thai, coming from a provincial area to serve Tian as a comfort wife. The contrast could not be bigger. The point of contrast is brought into sharp focus in this novel because of the size of the family, and the hierarchy of three wives. The two "opposite" poles of "first male" versus "last female" siblings is almost visually far apart. This speaks volumes, but the novel avoids any direct personal interaction. Due to the closeness in age – Anongpangna is the youngest daughter of the third wife, Chaichan is the first grandson of the first wife – an interaction could be built into the plot. The sibling rivalry is therefore an indirect one; there are no confrontations, and the ascendancy of the female is plotted in a way in which the male vacates his place and the vacancy is filled by the female. Also, there are no elaborations on any direct or indirect discrimination that Anongpangna is exposed to. Liang never laments the fact that it is his youngest granddaughter, rather than his eldest grandson, who takes the helm. He is very proud of that accomplished daughter, but he is still falling apart as a result of the disappointments dealt to him by the first son and first grandson. Anongpangna's success cannot cover for that. In any case, the novel is not psychologically oriented, and there are no expositions of childhoods.

In contrast, the family of Suang-U, "In Letters from Thailand", is a small family with an eldest child who is a son with three younger daughters, the youngest of which is Meng-Ju, his rival. The higher degree of intimacy allows for the competition to be personal and direct, and it allows for a deeper level of characterization. Suang-U's initial hatred of Meng-Ju as a "son blocker" (her mother could no longer bear children after her difficult birth), and his discrimination against her later on when she marries Winyu, cannot cover periods of high appreciation of her intelligence. Intelligence and scholarly background is what

enabled his success, and she is the only one of his children to possess these and therefore be his true inheritor. Meng-Ju is dealt enough discrimination to foster a strong inferiority complex and the resulting drive to attain supremacy. This novel illustrates the point most vividly and intimately.

"The Last Petal of the Peony" complicates the plot by intertwining two families, that of the "sons", to which Tiradet belongs, and that of the "daughters", and by having the protagonist/narrator fill an ambiguous role that positions him as a "youngest daughter" in the "sons" family, at least as judged by the way he is treated by his parents. The contrasts here are therefore triple: The first is the contrast between Tiradet and his two elder brothers. The second contrast is between the two elder brothers and the three daughters of the "daughters" family. The third is the contrast between the families as units, with the "daughters" family proving to be far more harmonious and united than the "sons" family. The daughters in the "daughters" family also maintain traditional family values of gratitude and loyalty towards the parents. They have their opinions, and they will argue them, but they are dedicated wholeheartedly to their parents. The only case in which they reject parental instructions is the episode where the father plans to overhaul the family's opera by taking a loan from a rich and sneaky Chinese-Thai tycoon, an admirer of Panaan, the pretty middle daughter, pledging Panaan's hand in marriage as repayment. In case he cannot deliver the daughter, the deal says that repayment in money will entail murderous interest. All this is done without Panaan's agreement and by avoiding checking the tycoon's status. The tycoon is in fact married, which means that Panaan is conceived as a second wife, or even a third, as the daughters discover later. In this exceptional case, the daughters are right and the daughters prevail. But, there is little bitterness from their side towards the father, his plight is understood, as the overhaul is needed to revive the declining opera, but his methods are flatly rejected. They all unite to work to achieve that goal through other means.

There is a high level of uniformity between all the novels in the way the opposing sides, brothers and sisters, are characterized. The characterization of the successful young daughters is straightforward and is drawn from the model of what a first son should be. After all, it is

a first son that they supplant. They are all clever, brave and decisive; they have strong characters and leadership capabilities. These are what first sons should be like. What they all add as women is an angle of compassion, although that angle is hinted at rather than strongly emphasized. Too much "softness" will compromise their leadership roles.

The young daughters in the three novels are also loyal to their father's needs. In "Through the Scales of the Dragon", the father's needs and wants are not divergent and Anongpangna's adoption of modern business techniques is what he really wants. He wants her to be married properly to a scion of a family that will contribute to the family's network of power contacts. He offers her two "options", and a promising military officer is her favorite. She is not rejecting the arranged marriage in principle. But the plans are cancelled because of the prospective husband's faction fall from power in the military and his demotion by a transfer to a remote area. Cancellation is therefore occasioned by uncontrollable circumstances. The father does not persist with more offers.

In the cases of the two other novels, the parents' needs and wants are far apart, the gap being a result of ignorance and prejudice. The daughters are loyal to the needs and are ready to risk their positions for that, as Meng-Ju does. But, there is no compromise of achieving favors by catering to misguided wants. Meng-Ju and Tiradet prevail in the end against their highly prejudiced and practically blind parents. Tiradet's father refuses to see how their beloved two elder sons are cheating them, taking advantage of them, and ignoring them because of indifference and shame at their lowly socio-economic status. The three sisters in the "daughters" family prevail in the instances that such gaps between needs and wants appear, but are willing to sacrifice themselves for parental needs they feel as genuine, as in the case where Dara, the eldest daughter, marries the son of the conglomerate owner, Jao-Sua Kamjorn, who supported her parents from the minute of their arrival to Thailand. They requested the hand of his first daughter to be for their son, and she complied with that tryst when she grows up. Even though the tryst ends in disaster as she catches her husband engaged in a deep romantic and sexual relationship with an old friend who is a male, a

horrible shame for a traditional Chinese family, she stays by her in-laws side. She is also acknowledged as the substitute for their son. Her particular situation offers another case of female-male conflict, this time husband and wife, in which the female triumphs and take his place as the inheritor. There are therefore more ways to supplant first sons than usurpations by younger sisters. Wives can do that too.

The elder sons, or grandsons, have no traditional role model that they can fit or rather fall down into. They cannot substitute as "young daughters". Younger daughters are simply unimportant. Moreover, in the case of families that are "blessed" with a few male offspring who are successful, a young daughter can be pampered as a lovely pet. She is resented only when she comes "instead" of a wanted son, or, worse than that, when complications during her birth lead to the mother losing the ability to give birth to more children in the future. In the absence of a fixed model into which demoted first sons can be fit, the model used is simply a negation of all the positive characteristics.

The list of negations of the good characteristics of the sons is one of great interest, as it goes to extreme measures. The negations relate to three aspects: the first is the negation of their morality; the second is the negation of their capabilities; the third, which is more unusual, but is the point I wish to highlight in this study, is the negation of their manhood. It is this aspect which I refer to, in the title of the article, as "castration". Castration in this context is unusual because the context is sibling rivalry. Let us look at the details:

Morality

Sons in general, and especially sons that are the inheritors, are the upholders of the ethical cannon in the household. They are expected to be upright, to set an example and to promote the unity, strength and continuity of the family into the following generations. Gratitude to their parents is an obvious manner of behavior, but it is not only a recommended good behavior trait, it is the foundation of the entire edifice of the family chain. Without gratitude, the continuation of the chain is endangered. An attitude of "every one for himself" subverts everything.

In the three novels, the sons lack gratitude towards their parent, or

grandparent in "Through the Scales of the Dragon". Moreover, they all use their privilege to take advantage of parental largesse and trust by doing their utmost to take money from their parents and to use it either foolishly, as in the case of "Through the Scales of the Dragon" where Chaiachan disgraces his family, competes with it, or use it selfishly with no intention to ever use the position acquired, in "The Last Petal of the Peony", or the business that is continued and grown, to help the parents when they become old and need help. In both these latter cases, a parent becomes either seriously ill, or has his house burnt. The inheritors that take the bulk of the inheritance refuse to lend a hand and even ask for more when the parent gets over the crisis and reveals that he still has more stashed away, as the famous scene at the end of "Letters from Thailand" displays. They are all part of the agony that stands, directly or indirectly, behind their parents' difficulties. Suang U moves to become a practical hermit in a humble wooden house driven by disappointment in his son. Tian dies as a result of grief at seeing how his first son Andy (second in birth, but winner of the primacy, like the biblical Jacob) and his son Chaiachan abuse the privileges given to them. While Chiachan forms the focus of grief, his father Andy offers a hint by trying to take over his father's political exile in Hong-Kong. Andy's wife, XXX, the daughter of Tian's good friend, a shipping tycoon, does all she can to support her son against his family. She is an iron lady, and Andy is under her thumb. She acts as the perfect negation not only of how a traditional Chinese daughter-in-law is conceived, but also of how any simply decent daughter-in-law would be conceived. The sons of Ah-Chang in "The Last Petals of the Peony" do not even inform or invite their parents to their weddings. The parental support which allowed them to acquire academic degrees and positions in prestigious institutions, such as banks, raises them to the ranks of the professional middle class and they see their parents, operators of a traditional Chinese lowbrow restaurant/kitchen as a disgrace and as something they will do everything to conceal from their wives and new in-laws. In "Letters from Thailand", the lack of gratitude is also promoted by the son's wife, a daughter of Suang U's closest friend, a friend who came with him from the same village in China and travelled with him on the same boat. The wife, Rose, will not forgive Suang U the fact that he allowed the prostitute Phani to live in their house

after his son got infatuated with her and would not return home under any other conditions. The fathers being so close, Suang U and Rose's father, Gin, agreed to an arranged marriage between the two. As in "Though the Scales of the Dragon", the resentful wife rules over the son ruthlessly. There is no hint of any character trying to explain to Rose that Phani was invited into the house in great part as a way to have Wang Kim witness her dissolute ways closely and decide on a separation on his own. Rose drives Wang Kim to see his father as a mere source of funds. Without such funds, he is not of interest. Here again we have the complete opposite of what a daughter-in-law should be like. We will get to that point for further elaboration later.

Success and Accomplishment

Sons, to be successors, also need to be capable and accomplished. This is also a natural premise that results from the enormous responsibility they have towards their ancestors of continuing the family line to the future. Parents can easily err in their evaluations here, but as we see in "Through the Scales of the Dragon", the patriarch Liang does not hesitate to raise his second son Andy to primacy after witnessing events that convince him that Andy, rather than the first son, Tian, is the natural leader.

The elder sons in the three novels are also complete failures, or very limited. Chaiachan's reckless business collapse, Tiradej's brothers lose what they have and only Wang-Kim, in "Letters from Thailand" which is a more nuanced novel, survives, although he does not thrive . The author most probably considered Wang-Kim's pathetic existence under the shadow of his vicious wife as punishment enough. None of the sons is a leader. They are all led either by domineering wives, or misguided notions. We have no details of the lives of the two elder brothers of Tiradej, but their coming into marriages with a shame of their parents and where they come from can only hint at a situation in which they also look up to their wives. The fact is that they are dumped, but we can only guess at the reasons for that.

There is however one more aspect of the demotion of sons which is apparent in the novels, and which transcends a mere reduction in power and rank.

Castration

Castration is what surprises in the Thai novels as a means by which a female protagonist gets at her male rival. Castration is not literal as the cutting of the male genitalia. It is conceived here as figurative, and consists of denying men their manhood. This is achieved by various techniques:

a) Placing the male in a marriage or other intimate involvement with a woman where he is completely dominated by the woman, is servile and a follower. This is accentuated by the woman being not merely a leader in the household, but by her being aggressive, nasty, and even violent. Still more, in case of marriage, the woman's spite can still be enhanced by being disrespectful or vicious towards her husband's father. This is of particular importance in a kinship system, such as the Chinese one, which elevates the patrilineal succession above all other aspects of the family. Insulting the father is insulting the entire ancestry, and whether the humiliated husband can still sire offspring or not becomes irrelevant. We find this in the case of Weng-Kim in "Letters from Thailand" and Andy in "Through the Scales of the Dragon".

b) Denying offspring to the male, particularly sons. This is castration as focused on the only meaningful result of the man's sexual role. Castration and impotence are intimately linked. We find this in the case of Chaichan in "Through the Scales of the Dragon", and also in the case of his uncle, Anon, who starts as a promising executive in the family's conglomerate, but ends up devoted to a flirtatious secretary in competition with a married brother, a relationship that leads nowhere.

c) Finding the male to have no real inclinations towards women, with the marriage having been a sham. We find this in the case of Dara's husband in "The Last Petal of the Peony".

d) Involving the male in a highly tabooed relationship which cannot be a source of an offspring, but only of shame, humiliation and pain. We find this in the case of Chaichan in "Through the Scales of the Dragon"

e) Being dumped by wives who represent upward mobility. We find this in the case of the elder brother of Tiradet in "The Last Petal of the Peony"

This point directly relates to our discussion of psychoanalysis. Castration is discussed in Freudian psychoanalysis as part of the Oedipal drama that takes place between a parent and a child of the same sex. It is the fantasy of the helpless child in his imagined competition with the same sex parent, especially in the case of boys, as a way to get back at the competitor. The transfer of this motif to the area of sibling rivalry, as depicted in the novels, can be linked to the existence of strong, all-important gender prejudices in the ways siblings are treated.

Conclusion

What we can see in the three novels is that the renegotiation of gender roles as depicted in Chinese-Thai families, and issues relating to an enduring Chinese identity and tradition in modern Thailand, is that the rise of women's status and role is achieved primarily in the context of sibling rivalry. The "triumph of women" is achieved as a provocative triumph of youngest daughters over eldest sons; provocative because it stands in diametrical opposition to ancient Chinese conventions of family structure norms. It is provocative because it does not limit itself to sibling rivalry where an eldest daughter would take the place of an eldest son; that would also achieve the same type of gender status rearrangement without the provocation.

Moreover, gender renegotiation in these novels is not only provocative, but it also verges on the violent. By violence, I do not refer to "physical violence", but to the fact that the superseded first sons are not merely superseded, but are demoted, humiliated, destroyed, or "castrated" to use the term often deployed to encapsulate the situation.

Since mere gender status rearrangement could be achieved, as we mentioned, by any female offspring, not necessarily the youngest, and could also involve mere elevation of female siblings above the males, without the violent "castrations" and degradations of the males, I conclude that knowingly or unknowingly, the authors portray narratives of gender revenge. All these points make these narratives, in my opinion, extremely interesting in the social and cultural messages which they contain and convey.

Last, to put these novels and messages in context, I would like to point out that reading about diaspora ethnic Chinese outside Thailand, I

did not find a comparable case. Maxine Hong Kingston's "The Woman Warrior" contains scenes of gender revenge, but they remain strictly in the fantasy world of the main protagonist.[10] In her semi-documentary "Chinese Men", Kingston extols the virtues of Chinese men in America, cognizant of the troubles they went through,[11] and the fact that they were humiliated, and, in the words of some American-Chinese male authors, "castrated", enough at the hand of white males.[12] Other novels I surveyed were not about vengeance or usurpation, but about elevation of ethnic Chinese women, mother, sisters and daughters – Amy Tan's novels stands here as the archetypical narratives – and not primarily through the mechanisms of worldly success. The only novel I found which emerged from a diaspora of a culture that is highly patriarchal, is Indian – "Jasmine" by Bharati Mukherjee. Abounding with inter-gender narrative violence where husbands die or are being dominated, it is still the battleground of husbands and a wife, not siblings. This novel definitely links with Indian deities such as Kali or Durga, which are aggressive or domineering towards men. Such deities are not a part of the Chinese mythology. The similarities to some scenes I read in the Thai novels make me wonder whether the well documented Indian and Brahaminic influence on Thai culture is not stealthily linked here to modern gender issues.

Possible explanations lie in psychoanalytic theory and a combination of elements of Adlerian psychoanalysis which emphasizes sibling rivalry and birth order, but which is relatively disinterested in gender, and Freudian psychoanalysis and Oedipus/Electra complexes which revolve around gender relations, and which contain "castration" as a fantasy experienced by a child against the same sex parent, his imagined rival.

These theories were developed in European society which, although male dominated, had nothing of the deep prejudice against daughters which Chinese kinship traditions carry. It is a possibility that these traditions create inferiority complexes that lead to the perception of elder, dominant brothers as bitter rivals. Such fantasies can lead to

[10] Kingston, *The woman warrior*: 43.
[11] Kim, *Asian American Literature*, 212-213.
[12] Kim, *Asian American Literature*: 177-179.

realization only in a social environment that does not adhere to the Confucian values, and Thai society, which also has matriarchal roots, is a fitting place for that.

This article only offers suggestions that need much more in-depth research. The proposition about a possible genderized variant of sibling rivalry in a deeply gender-prejudiced culture, such as the Chinese one, has deep implications. The proposition that Thailand offers a fitting ground for such deeply suppressed grievances to be released is also of great interest, and might be conducted in a wider scope than that of the Chinese-Thai community and its specific culture.

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