

## ***Chinese Dolls: The Spiritual Pain of Chino-Thai Women***

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### **Abstract**

The Chinese tradition is mainly rooted in patriarchal kinship, which regulates the role and status of Chinese women within familial and social aspects of their culture. The goal of this paper is to explain the process of connecting and transferring the feelings, memories, and experiences of Chinese migrant women in Chino-Thai culture through portraiture painting with the form of a Chinese doll. The Chinese traditional motifs' symbols were investigated and classified according to the meaning of each Chinese art element which can represent male and female symbols. This creative research presents the Chinese porcelain doll with a recreated traditional motif crafted through the researcher's imagination. It narrates the meaning of the repression of women under the male-dominated culture.

The researcher integrates her own Teochew (Chinese ethnicity) experiences in this culture (self-narrative), and includes Chino-Thai literature (novels, soap operas) as well as ethnographic research methodology, which includes interviews of Teochew women from three generations: first generation Chinese migrants (over age 70), Chino-Thais (age 69-50), and Thais (under age 49). They were asked to narrate their own aspects and experiences about their upbringing and growing up under Chinese patriarchal culture. The researcher uses the semiotic analysis and interpretation of the interview data to inform the creative language of a series paintings that conveys the feelings, memories, and experiences of Teochew women.

Keywords: Chinese doll, The role and status of Chino-Thai women, Chinese traditional motif

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## Introduction

Over the last two centuries, Chinese male immigrants settled in Thailand and married local women. Their descendants are called Sino-Thai (Williams, 1966). This group makes up approximately 9.4 million, or 14 percent, of the Thai population (Skinner, 1973, p. 25). However, there are a number of Chinese and Sino-Thai people who cannot be accounted for because of their assimilation into the Thai population. There are five Chinese ethnicities and the largest percentage of Chinese immigrants to Thailand are ethnically Teochew. These immigrants come from the Guangdong province, which is located near the sea with easy access to Thailand. This paper and the project focus on the experience of this group.

In Dr. Sakkarin Niyomsilp's research, *The Fourth Wave: Southeast Asia and New Chinese Migrants* (2012), he indicates that the third wave of Chinese migration occurred after the fall of the Ching dynasty in 1911 and the subsequent communist revolution, which resulted in Chinese migration. These migrants mainly moved to South East Asia because of the economic prosperity of the region in the early 20th century.

In the 1930s, following this large wave of Chinese immigrants, the Thai government was concerned about the increasing importance of China on Thai society (Landon, 1941). The Chinese controlled many channels of the Thai economy and trade between the two countries. This concern resulted in the "Anti-Chinese" policy in Thailand in the reign of King Rama IV. This policy's regulations discriminated against the Chinese, and prompted the majority of Chinese immigrants to assimilate into Thai society.

However, some Chinese continued to speak Teochew at home, quietly practiced Chinese customs and mores, and retained their Chinese names. Pattranupravat (2011) found in her research that "Though overseas Chinese migrants moved to a new land, they have still conserved their mores and customs, and passed on these rituals and teachings to their descendants" (p.2). Frena Bloomfield (1990) said that "Chinese migrants would keep their traditions and customs while adjusting to any environment that they lived in" (p.11). These traditions and customs remain norms for Chinese immigrants until today.

One of the strongest characteristics of the norms conserved by these Chinese immigrants is the patriarchal familial relationship structure. The word 'patriarchy' literally means the rule of the father, or the 'patriarch', and originally it was used to describe a specific type of 'male-dominated family. This Chinese social system is one in which males hold primary power and hold the predominant roles in political leadership, moral authority, social privilege and control of property (Napapornpipat, 1991).

Kataphutorn and Chaitawee (2014) state that this system reflects the philosophy of Confucius, which states that the smooth functioning of government and society rests on five key relationships:

## Confucianism: The Five Relationships (五伦)

- Parents and Children (父子)
- Sibling (兄弟)
- Husband and wife (夫妇)
- Company (朋友)
- Chief and subordinate(君臣)

These relationships are patriarchal. According to Confucius's teachings, man is a representative of heaven so a woman must obey her husband and must support him to attain success in his life. For example, there is a common saying in Confucianism that sums up women's roles:

...In her youth she follows her father and elder brother. When in marriage, she follows her husband and when her husband dies, she follows her son. She must not have a second marriage and she must serve her husband's parents as her parents.... (pp. 19-20)

Chinese people were expected to adopt these roles, especially women (Napapornpipat, 1991). Inheritance practices reflect the relative importance of males versus females: the main productive assets, such as estates and family businesses, are passed through the male line, whereas women receive only some moveable goods through inheritance, such as accessories and small amount of money.

Teunpit Chaipromprasith (1988) finds that although Chinese-Thai women had more freedom, such as non-arranged marriages and more authority in making family decisions, there were still two points which maintained the patriarchal structure in the Thai-Chinese family. First, the son would inherit most of the property. Second, women must work outside the home and earn an income, as well as doing all of the household chores.

This belief system inspired many artists to create different kinds of art, such as poems, novels, soap operas, and movies, which portray the traditional customs regulating women in conservative families that adopted Confucius's teaching to raise their children. However, there have not been any artistic research studies on the topic of the role and status of Chino-Thai women in this patriarchal family structure.

Painting is an effective kind of art that allows the researcher to depict the feelings and memories of Chino-Thai women, as experienced through their own upbringing in this belief system. The researcher in this paper and paintings utilizes her own personal experience of being female in a conservative Chinese family to examine this topic. She explores her feelings and memories in this context in order to narrate the influence of male-dominated culture in Chinese tradition through a series of paintings. These paintings use Chinese dolls and the reinterpretation of Chinese symbols and motifs to convey the painful feelings, memories, and lack of self-worth associated with this role as a woman in patriarchal Chino-Thai culture.

## **Purpose**

The objectives of this paper are:

- 1) To investigate changes in the role and status of Chinese women throughout three generations of Chinese immigrants and their descendants in Thailand.
- 2) To create a series of contemporary paintings that represent the memories of the role and status of Chinese women in each generation.
- 3) To explain the creative process of the researcher in connecting and transferring the feelings, memories, and experiences of Chinese migrant women in Chino-Thai culture through portraiture painting using the form of Chinese dolls.

## **Research Framework**

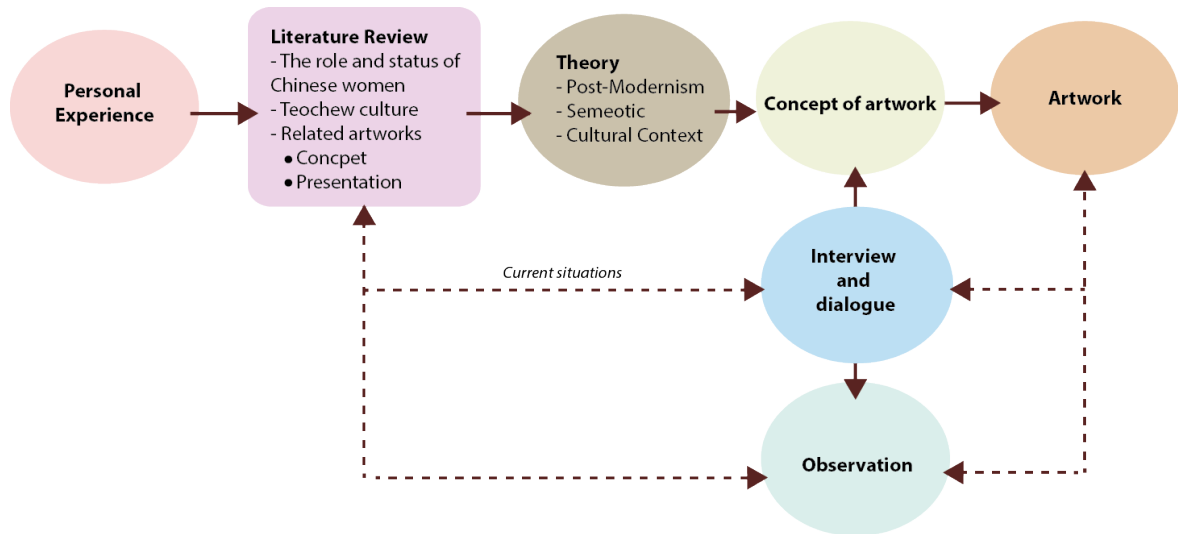
- 1) The researcher conducted her research in the largest Teochew Chinese communities in Thailand: Bangkok Chinatown and Phu-Market, and the Chum-Sang district in the Nakornsawan province.
- 2) Interviews were collected from Chinese women from three generations, including first generation Chinese migrants (over age 70), Chino-Thais (age 69-50), and Thais (under age 49), as well as male Chinese culture experts.
- 3) A series of paintings were produced through a combination of these interviews and the researcher's own experience. The series portrays their experiences through three stages of life - childhood, adulthood, and old age.

## **Methodology**

The concept of this paper initiated from the researcher's personal experiences. The researcher then conducted a literature review in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the origin and formation of the role and status of Chinese women in Teochew culture and trace it back to its roots. The theoretical approach of this research is based on the post-modern movement, semiotics, and an exploration of cultural context through ethnographic research, as laid out by Tony L. Whitehead (2005).<sup>1</sup> Data for the research was collected through observation and interviews. This data was interpreted and synthesized into the initial artwork concept, and then through the resulting series of paintings.

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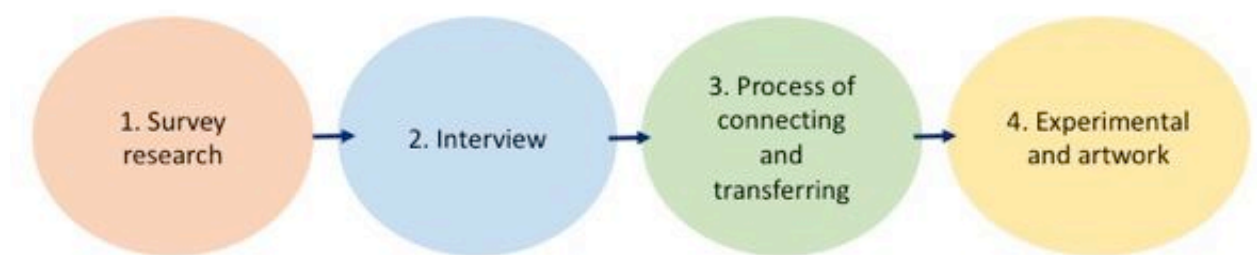
<sup>1</sup> Whitehead used a holistic approach to the study of cultural systems, but defines culture as a "holistic" flexible and non-constant system with continuities between its interrelated components.



**Fig 1.** The creative research methodology

## Method

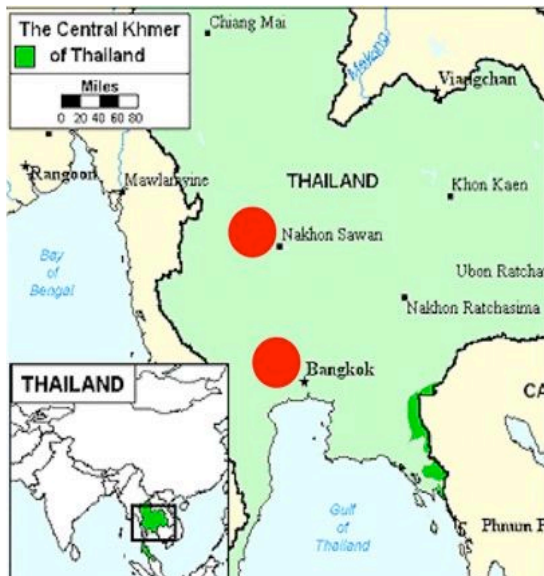
This paper details a four-step method of artwork creation, as detailed in Figure 2:



**Fig 2.** The four-step method

### 1) Survey Research

A majority of ethnically Teochew Chino-Thai people live in Central Bangkok, Bangkok's Chinatown (Phra-Nakorn district), and Phu-market (Thonburi district), as well as in the Nakorn-Sawan province. The people in these areas still strongly hold onto Chinese traditional rituals and culture. Thus, these areas were examined to identify the current way of life as well as some of the common Chinese goods and objects of daily life which come from mainland China and are being used and traded there.



**Fig. 3.** The areas of research study (Google search)

## **2) Interviews with Teochew Women and Experts in Chinese Culture**

The interviews provided insight into the feelings, memories, attitudes, and perspectives of Teochew women over three generations. Interviews were conducted with twenty-three Teochew women in three generations, and included three Chinese migrants, ten Chino-Thai women, and ten Thais of Teochew descent, as well as experts in Chinese culture.

The interviewees were:

1. Three Chinese migrants (over the age 70). One interviewee was from the Nakorn-Sawan province and two from Bangkok's Chinatown.
2. Ten Chino-Thai women (age 69-50). Half were from the Nakorn-Sawan province, and the other half were from Bangkok's Chinatown.
3. Ten Thai women who were descendants of Chino-Thai women (under age 49). Three were from the Nakorn-Sawan province and seven were from Bangkok's Chinatown.<sup>2</sup>
4. Three experts Chinese culture experts (all male). One expert was from the Nakorn-Sawan province and two were from Bangkok Chinatown.

In-depth interviews were conducted on a one-on-one basis in order to keep the personal information of interviewees confidential. This way any negative effects to family members from the interviews could be avoided.

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<sup>2</sup> The researcher is also a part of this group

In order to understand the feelings and memories of Chinese women brought up in the male-dominated Chinese culture, interviewees were asked to narrate their stories and experiences, as prompted by the questions shown below:

1. What is the role and status of Chino-Thai women in your family?
2. Would you please tell me about your upbringing as a woman in Chinese culture?
3. How has the role and status of Chino-Thai women changed in the present day?

Follow-up questions depended upon the stories of the interviewees, such as “what was the hardest part of being woman in your family?” and “what were your painful memories?”

### **3) The process of connecting and transferring ideas**

The process of connecting and transferring the results of these interviews and research into the artwork was generated through using three elements: Chinese dolls, traditional Chinese motifs, and reinterpreted motifs.

#### **3.1 Chinese Dolls**

Carter (1993) describes the potential of dolls as a contributing factor for personal identity because the possessor connects their own identity with the doll. Additionally, the doll can be a fruitful metaphor for reflecting cultural stereotypes. The researcher utilized the Chinese doll's potential to represent the characteristics of a human and communicate human feelings connected to these cultural stereotypes. The creative project also used Chinese dolls from different age groups to reflect the different experiences for each age group.

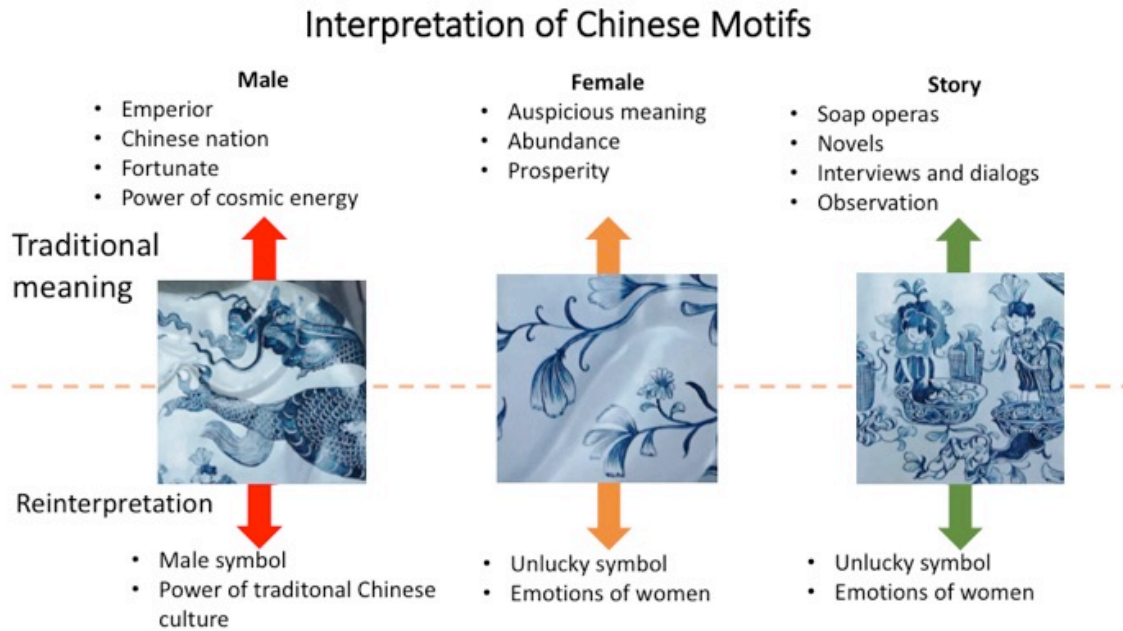
#### **3.2 Traditional Chinese Motifs**

Chinese motifs are mostly symbols, each of which has its own meaning. In *China Journey to the East (2009)*, Chinese motifs are described as having significant meaning in the lives of Chinese. It identifies two kinds of Chinese motifs: the first is a religious form and the second is natural form. Most motifs are based on the religious form, which takes the form of a set of sacred objects of the Chinese gods and goddesses. The dragon and plants, fruits and flowers, were selected to be the elements of this artwork as they are sacred objects related to the meaning of the masculine/Chinese nation and feminine characteristics, respectively.

#### **3.3 Reinterpretation of the Motif using Narratives**

From the experiences of the researcher and three generations of Teochew women, the researcher was inspired to recreate the Chinese traditional motif style in her artwork. This style was used to depict the role and status of women in the family by portraying their lives doing household chores isolated in their houses combined with a floral

pattern that is representative of the female gender both in Thai and Chinese culture. However, in the new motif, the floral pattern is created with decayed floral images.



**Fig. 4:** Analysis of Chinese Motif

## 4) Experiments and Artwork

### First Experiment

This first attempt at experimentation was centered on the environment of a doll, which was made by soaking it in a transparent box filled with water. The resulting effects were image distortion of the doll combined with the look of drowning. Another early attempt at experimentation was to use a forward-facing doll with household objects onto its head. The forward-facing position powerfully illustrates the main pose used in each painting in future experiments.





**Fig. 5.** Finished paintings of first experiment

### **Second experiment: Composition study**

#### **Photo and statue**

Old photos of Teochew women, provided by the interviewees were utilized as sources for composition, which was transferred into the artworks.



**Fig. 5:** From left to to right, the photo and the two statues are the basis for the composition and style of the fourth picture, which is the researcher's own computer-generated sketch.

### **Third experiment**

Both Western medieval art and Chinese traditional art have hierarchical composition elements. These motifs were used to create a series of 10 paintings depicting the three generations of Teochew women. The third experiment is a painting that reflects these traditions by the positioning of motifs to show the hierarchy of gender roles. (See

Figure 6.) In the researcher's painting, the composition of the elements reflects the gender hierarchy. The dragon (1) represents the male gender and the Chinese nation, which is at the top of the hierarchy. This is followed by the motif of memories and feelings of Teochew women through their lives doing household chores (2). The bottom is a decayed floral pattern that conveys the underlying feelings of desperation of Teochew women (3).

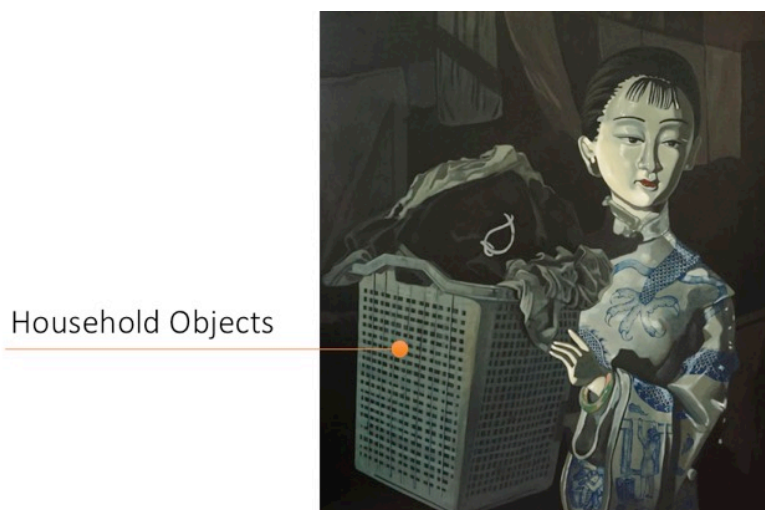


**Fig. 6:** The positioning of motifs showing the hierarchy of gender roles

#### **Fourth experiment**

##### **Modern objects**

In order to describe current ideas of the role and status of Teochew women, modern household objects were included into a series of paintings both as objects interacting with the dolls and as reinterpretation motifs.



**Fig. 8:** The artwork shows a Chinese doll carrying a plastic laundry basket, which is a modern household object.

## **Results**

The key findings from the interviews revealed differences in perspective by generation.

### **The first generation – Overseas Chinese Women**

Explicitly, this group holds intensely onto the belief systems and conservative values in Chinese culture. Teochew women were subjected to the regulation of men, especially the husband's parents and husband. They had to accept these social traditions and followed them without doubting them. They also had to be patient and to honor their husband and husband's family. They must show their tolerance and honesty to their husband. Moreover, having a son was essential duty of a highly-valued wife. One of the women interviewed said "I am glad to have a son for my husband's family, and my sons now look after me. Besides, my daughters, if they married, would have to take care of their husbands' families. Also, at this moment, my daughter-in-law is pregnant, and I am expected to have a grandson to carry on our family name" (interview: January, 2017).

### **The second generation – Chino-Thai women**

A significant portion of these interviewees had the opportunity for a better education than the first generation. But they were all still suffering the unfair gender norms in their families. One of the interviewees from the second generation stated, "I believe that I need to follow these values, and you have to believe it without doubt. It is my destiny, which I am not able to deny. Sometimes I cannot stand the feelings of unfairness and dehumanization as I do not have right to be autonomous and free." This was the reason given by the interviewee for attempting to support her daughter's higher education, under the expectation that this would free them from the improper status in their life. (interview: September, 2016).

### **The third generation – Thais**

There was a dilution little by little of the strong belief in Chino-Thai culture as women became more highly educated under the strong driving force of the need for higher income for the family. This forced the women to bear work roles both inside and outside the house.

One of the third generation interviewees said, "There is equality and independence of gender in present day roles. But women not only do household chores and take care of children, they also need to earn income to pay bills with their husbands. Even though they are required to work more, they are satisfied with the independence and freedom to stay outside the home socializing with friends and colleagues." (Interview: April, 2016)

## **The Chinese culture experts**

According to the male experts, the structure system of role and relationship among Chinese family members respects the eldest son as the leader of their family after the father, like “a lamp light leads everyone’s life” (Interview: February, 2016). The mores of role and status of Teochew women must account for household chores and serve all members in the family, and she keeps in mind that she must be the last one who goes to bed late at night and the first one to wake up in the morning. Once she gets married, it means she is fortunate to have someone who has adopted her to be a servant in their home. In ancient times in China, Chinese people would purchase other daughters to be a servant, and they would become a housewife at the end. One of the Chinese experts stated that “Being born as a female in the context of Chinese norms means she hardly has rights and dignity.”

## **The finding of the language of the paintings**

The three main elements utilized in all artworks were:

1. The porcelain Chinese dolls, which represented Chinese women and their deep feeling of enduring strength and an expression of unyielding persistence;
2. The modified Chinese motifs as patterns that communicate the true messages, the memories and feelings as the narratives unfold, and the voices of these dolls are heard through them; and
3. The backgrounds, depicting life in the houses that indicate life bound within the house, like a chain, tying women to an invisible prison of traditions.

## **The series of paintings**

This creative research resulted in ten artworks which were divided into three generations. The first four depict life during childhood, which relates to household chores in different kinds of working activities, mostly in the house. The next four depict adulthood through portraying the responsibility of mother and wife in her family. The last two illustrate elderly life as a grandmother expecting to be looked after by her son.

## **Conclusion**

The overall role and status of Teochew women has changed due to the influence of Thai and Western culture. This has led to the decrease of conservative thought relating to traditional Chinese attitudes and mores in gender roles. However, Teochew women still have endured and struggled in the circle of new norms that force women to take more responsibility both inside and outside the home. Women are oppressed through having to work together with the husband and male family members as an expectation of family members and social norms.

The inspiration for the artwork includes the interviews in order to get other experiences and perspectives from over 80 years and three generations of change. In addition, the memories and feelings of Teochew women as well as the researcher's childhood experiences raise a question about gender. Specifically, why are Chinese women not able to overcome the conservative tradition that is deeply rooted in their society, and how can they escape from that mindset? The researcher uses a personal direct appreciation of these narratives to create in each painting a story that conveys the researcher's feelings and memories of her life and others who have similar stories.

The artworks portray the current situations of Teochew women in three generations by utilizing Chinese dolls as a representative of women, and traditional Chinese motifs that can be manipulated to represent gender roles. The interviews further provided the language with which to create metaphorical motifs of these experiences and perspectives, which liberates imagination and spirit, and illustrates women's lives in both Chinese and Thai culture.

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