



Thai Literature in Relation to the Diffusion of her Cultures

THAI CULTURE, NEW SERIES No. 9



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THAI LITERATURE IN RELATION TO THE DIFFUSION OF HER CULTURES

BY
PHYA ANUMAN RAJADHON



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A scene from Lakhon Nai, “Inao”.

Preface

Thailand is very rich in precious arts and cultural heritage which represents a long-lasting independence, prosperity and stability of the country. These various fields of heritage have been preserved, accumulated and inherited throughout generations until the present. This legacy brings pride, dignity and prestige to Thai people. Therefore, it should be shared with the world so that Thai wisdom can be appreciated.

The Fine Arts Department is responsible for the preservation, promotion, transmission and dissemination of arts and culture of the Thai nation. As such it has compiled and published a book series of 25 volumes written by experts in their respective fields. Their areas of knowledge include artistic works, architecture, music and dramatic arts as well as language and literature. Each series has been reprinted from time to time. In this publication, there are no alterations to the contents although some illustrations have been added for the benefit of the readers.

The Department hopes that this series of books will be a resource among the international community to help them understand Thailand better through its unique arts and culture.

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D.Litt. (*Honoris Causa*), Chulalongkorn University, was one of the greatest scholars and writers of Thailand. Not to be classified specifically as a historian, an ethnologist, a philologist or an archaeologist, he typified that race of scholars with an unquenchable spirit of enquiry and encyclopedic range that is fast dying out. His writings, mostly under the pseudonym of “Sathira Koses” which has become a household word, amply reflect his catholic tastes and wide interests embracing the whole gamut of the humanities. He had a long and distinguished career of government service

as Assistant Director General of Customs, Director General of the Fine Arts Department and Acting President of the Royal Institute. He taught Philology, Comparative Literature and Thai Customs and Tradition at Chulalongkorn University, and Comparative Religions at Thammasat University. He served as Vice-Chairman of the Thai History Revision Committee, and also heads of the Thai Current Dictionary Committee and head of the Thai National Gazetteer Committee, chief editor of Thai Encyclopedia and chief of the Philosophy Section, the National Research Bureau.





A scene in “Khun Chang Khun Phaen” from the episode of “Khun Phaen Saen Sathan (Courageous Khun Phaen)”.



THAI LITERATURE IN RELATION TO THE DIFFUSION OF HER CULTURES

It was in the year 1283 A.D., memorable for the cultural history of Thailand, that Ramkhamhaeng the Great, the king of Sukhothai Kingdom, invented the Thai alphabet. Prior to this date there was presumably some kind of alphabet used by the intellectual class, especially the clergy and the officials but as to what alphabet was in use during those days, the best speculation is that it was the “Khom” alphabet. Who were the Khoms? They were probably a race of people akin to the Mons

and the Khmer or Cambodians of the present day. The old Mon alphabet and also the old Khmer alphabet were called Khom by the Thai. This type of alphabet derived, scholars tell us, from the Grantha alphabet of the Tamils, a people in Southern India. The sacred writings of the Buddhist religion in Thailand as inscribed on palm leaves in the old days were mostly in the Cambodian script, miscalled by the Thai the Khom alphabet, due to an accident of history in its later development.





A scene in "Manora" from the episode of "Phran Bun presents Manora".



An old style Thai gold lacquered bookcase.

Thai literature proper, as distinguished from purely spiritual writings began in written form with King Ramkhamhaeng's time, as evidenced by his famous stone inscription of the alphabet which he had invented. Dr. Cornelius B. Bradley in his "The Oldest Known Writing of the Thai", (Journal of the Siam Society, vol. 6, pt. 1, Bangkok, 1909), has discussed at some length King Ramkhamhaeng's Thai alphabet.



Old style Thai books.

It is a well-known fact that the Thai people are instinctive poets. The unlettered and unsophisticated folk of rural Thailand, who form a great part of the population, have their traditional past-times and recreations at social gatherings, one of which is singing their songs extempore. The words of the song are composed in measured quantities of which rhyming and alliteration form the essential part of the poetry. As the Thai language is fundamentally a tonal one, the rhythm is marked by the selected use of pitched rather than stressed accents. Such songs as sung by the country folk form part of the Thai oral literature. A certain type of Thai written literature developed from this class of folk poetry, but with further elaborations and embellishments.

Thai traditional written literature is in the main religious. Even stories of a romantic nature, which deal with kings and queens, with giants and divine beings, were inspired from Buddhist and Hindu mythology. In fact, such stories are fairy tales in their developed form. At first, these consisted of stories drawn from the well-known Jataka tales or Buddhist Birth Stories. Later, no doubt, indigenous folk tales were incorporated in to this class of literature. They are written in the simple language of the people to be read for the benefit of the unlettered.



A scene in "Rotthasen" from the episode of "Phra Rotthasen fled away from Meri".

During the Buddhist lent period (August- October) when many people attended the wat (Buddhist temple and monastery) to hear sermons preached by the monks, to observe certain religious commandments and to do other merit making, certain literate persons, usually ex-monks, took the opportunity to read from a book of such literature to the congregation during leisured intervals. There were a number of these readers in corners of the corridors and other shaded places within the precinct of the temple, and the way they read was a type of recitation with modulations of the voice. Hence, such compositions of this class are called in Thai, "Klon Suat" or intoned recitation. No doubt, this was a type of teaching, literature being used as a formative influence of Buddhist religion and instruction of folk lores expressed indirectly to unlettered people in the olden days. Such a tradition has survived until modern days in two localities. One is in Nakhon Si Thammarat, the capital city of Southern Area in the great

temple of that city. The other, only a revival, is in Bangkok, the capital of Thailand, at the Royal Chapel of the Emerald Buddha. At the latter temple, only the form of the tradition has been revived, but the literature, as used for recitation, is of a different kind, and in fact, few persons in the congregation have ever taken any notice of it. There are a number of examples of this class of literature in the National Library in Bangkok. They are written by hand in an old style Thai book; some of which have already appeared in printed book form. Most of the Thai folk tales are included in this class of literature. Comparing a random sample of this class of literature with those of Thailand's neighbours, especially the Shans, Laos, Mons and Cambodians, a certain unity of themes of such stories is revealed. There is a book on "Siamese Folk Tales," narrated in English by J. Kasem Sibunruang (Bangkok: Don Bosco Technical School and Orphanage, 1954)

Another class of Thai literature is what is called, for want of a better description romantic tales. These tales have nothing to do directly with religion ; they are tales of the supernatural and romantic adventures. Most feature a semidivine hero and heroine, and are based partly on inspirations from the Indian romantic tales, such as the famous story of Sakuntala and partly on the above described Thai folk tales. They were written in a certain pattern of Thai poetry which the mass of people could understand and appreciate. Many such works have survived due to their high quality as literature.

The well-known Thai traditional dramatic performance known as “lakhon,” draws most of its theme and story from this class of literature. The people in the past loved to listen to such stories read aloud. A young man in love with a girl who could not read, would volunteer to read to her as a step to his love-making. In the absence of such a young man, any small boy who was able to read would take the young man’s place, not voluntarily, of course. Naturally, a boy loves play more than reading. If, by necessity, he had to read the book, he usually demanded a fee for his service. Not only a girl but sometimes a matron or females elder of the house required such services of the boy. Thai women have always been infatuated with such stories, and sometimes the reader absorbed in the wonderful story. That he would demand no further fees for his services. The literature, therefore, had a strong hold on the masses in the past, for it was the only way they could satisfy their imaginative and aesthetic needs which are innate in all people.

There is a large number of examples of this kind of literature. It has gradually been superseded by a new kind of literature, in prose rather than poetry, along the lines of the Western short story and novel. This is of recent date, with roots some time in the latter part of the last century, and is due to the impact of Western literature. Nevertheless, many of the afore-said traditional tales survived to the present day. It is the quality of the language as expressed that counts, Another class of Thai literature is what is called the “Classic.” It is written in a different type of poetic composition. Many “classical” poems are composed in strict metre, thus they are poetry in the full sense of the word. Such a form of poetry often demands the

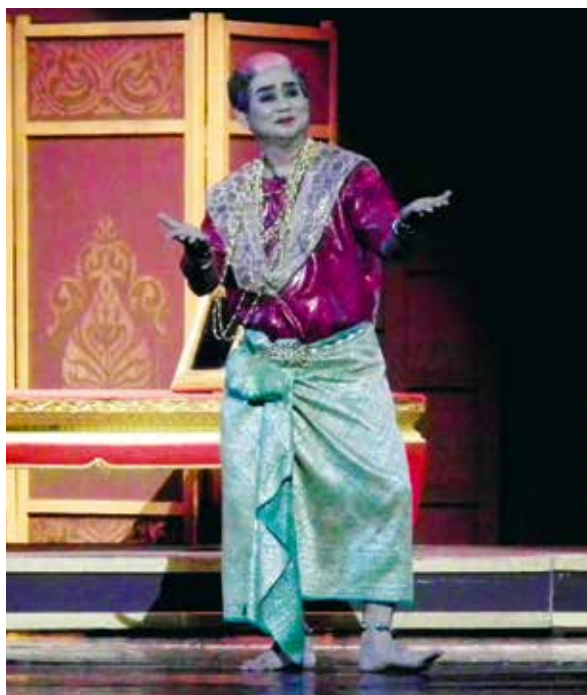


A scene in "Inao" from the episode of "Cutting the flowers".

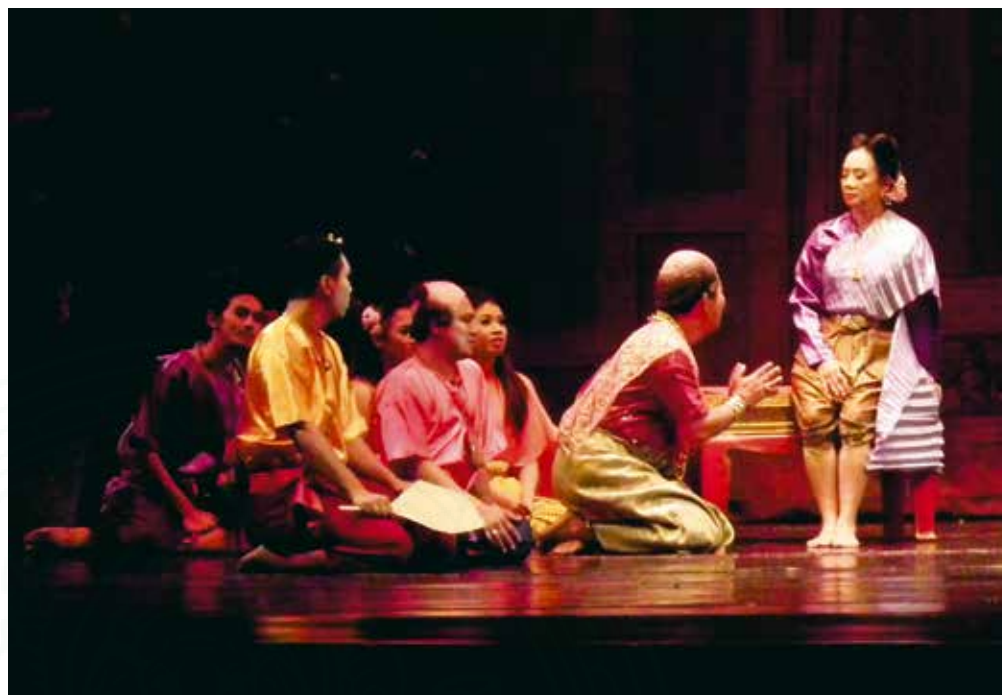
use of words from Pali and Sanskrit, the classical languages of the Thai, in order to command the rhythms as prescribed in the prosody. This could not be done readily with Thai words, which are tonal and mostly monosyllabic. Naturally, such works are intended for the intellectual class; they are comparatively difficult for the masses to understand and appreciate, as they are so highly “literary.” Here a remark in parenthesis is necessary. The division of Thai literature as outlined above is a generalisation. It cannot be divided in its entirety like one cutting a cake, for there are overlappings as are always present in the field of human inventive composition. However, we will, in this instance, confine ourselves to the literature of the masses. There are, as selected for their prominence, seven works which can be considered as representative of cultural influences in relation to the diffusion of Thai culture. They may briefly be commented on as follows:



A scene in “Khun Chang Khun Phaen” from the episode of “Khun Phaen and Saithong”.



An episode from “Khun Chang Khun Phaen”. “Khun Chang” one of a leading role in the Khun Chang Khun Phaen.



An episode from Khun Chang Khun Phaen. Here, Khun Chang meets Thong Pra Si, the mother of Khun Phaen.

1. Khun Chang Khun Phaen. An indigenous tale of love, at times humorous, of the triangular love plot of a beautiful woman with two lovers. The story has been dealt with briefly in English elsewhere (see Thailand Culture Series No. 3). Apart from its high literary value, the story contains a mine of information on old Thai life, of social conceptions, beliefs, traditions and customs. The story of Khun Chang Khun Phaen is certainly one of the great works of Thai literature. It depicts the life of the Thai in a real setting before he had become, in a sense, westernized (and this was inevitable.) In many episodes of the story, the diction is unequalled by anything ever written in the Thai language. The story is written in the style of everyday speech of the people, hence its popularity. It is composed in a style purposely meant for recitation, to be sung by a solo reciter with accompaniment of two pairs of a certain type of castanets made from blocks of hard wood. The castanets were used for keeping time, and were manipulated, one pair in each hand, by the singer. Such a style of solo recitation, interspersed with song at the end of each interval, is called “sebha” (Sépha) in Thai, a word of unknown origin (see H.R.H.

Prince Bidyalongkorn, “Sebha Recitation and the Story of Khun Chang Khun Phan”. Journal of the Siam Society, vol. 33, pt. 1, 1941). Many reciters of the sebha have been known to compose themselves certain episodes of the story which they are recited as their favourites. Hence there have been from time to time elaborations of the story until it has now become a lengthy romance with many versions of different episodes of the story. These were collected and re-edited in their present form by the then Royal Institute, now the Fine Arts Department. The book is widely read by the public, and many excerpts drawn from it serve as the wording of many Thai classical songs. Certain episodes are periodically presented on the stage by the Fine Arts Department of Bangkok. A synopsis of the story has been rendered in English by Prem Chaya*, (Bangkok, the Standard Nos. 1 and 2) and a French translation, in a brief form, by J. Kasem Sibunruang. It is renamed “La Femme, le Héro et le Vilian,” (Musée Guimet Annales, tom LXV, Paris, 1960). I am told there is the story of Khun Chang Khun Phaen in the Mon Language also.

* H.R.H. Prince Prem Phurachatra.





A scene in "Maha Wetsandon"
from the chapter of Chuchok.

2. Mahachat. A story of the Lord Buddha in his last-birth-but-one on earth before he attained his Buddhahood. This birth is called Mahachat or the Great Birth, portraying the story of Prince Wetsandon who fulfilled his last mission on earth as a Bodhisat-a would-be Buddha, thus preparing himself for the enlightenment in his last birth on earth. Hence, the life of Prince Wetsandon is an ideal for the faith. The people like to hear recited the story of his life for the supreme sacrifice of Prince Wetsandon touches their hearts deeply. The Mahachat is, therefore, written for recitation by Buddhist monks who have been trained for such a purpose to be recited at the Mid-year Autumnal Festival of Thailand, or on other occasions as desired. Mahachat is a very well-known story throughout the mainland of South-East Asia wherever Buddhism is predominant. It greatly influences the life of the masses. The story also serves as an inspiration to Thai poets and artists of the old classical art, as the story contains noble sentiments, pathos, humour and beautiful descriptive scenes which give free play to their power of imagination and artistic expression.

The original story of Prince Wetsandon was written in Pali, the sacred language of the Southern School Buddhist. There are many Thai versions and many styles of composition. The preferred version, selected by a committee of experts, is in the style "Kham Thet" or preaching-language. It is divided into 13 cantos and is, therefore, somewhat bulky in size. Many Thai poets at different times composed either one or more cantos of Mahachat. Only the best of the cantos are selected and formed into one whole story. The style of composition is that of an elaborate prose-poem replete with beautiful and emotive words. It is a story which appeals to most Thai, and it is one of the books that no youth ever missed in school. There is an account in English on the origin of the recitation of the Mahachat with a description of the ceremony of the preaching festival by G.E. Gerini in his book, "Thet Mahach'at" Bangkok, 1892: and "Thet Mahā Chāt"* by Phya Anuman Rajadon.

* cf. No. 21 in the series.



A scene in "Maha Wetsandon" from the chapter of Chuchok.



A scene in "Phra Nemirat" (Determination).



A scene of “the Battle Episode” of “Ramakien”.

3. Ramakien. This is a story based on the famous Indian epic, the Ramayana. The Ramakien is unique in that it contains many exotic episodes and details which are not found in the original epic but identical to a certain extent with the various versions of the Indian epic, especially the Tamil and Bengali versions. The well-known “Khon” or dramatic masked performance in Thailand and the “Nang” or shadow play both of the Thai, the Malays and the Indonesians are also based upon the story of the Ramayana. (See the Khon-Masked Play by H.H. Prince Dhaninivat Kromamün Bidyalabh Bridhyākorn and Dhanit Yupho, Thailand Culture Series No. 6, and the Nang-Shadow Play by the said Prince Dhani, Thai Culture, New Series, No. 3).

As revealed from certain episodes of the story as narrated by the Malay manipulators of the shadow play in Southern Thailand, the Ramayana or the story of Rama, seems to be originally an oral work. Each troupe of the Malay shadow players knows one or more limited episodes of the story which they are able to recite. No wonder such episodes in time past contained interpolations and elaborations. New episodes of an indigenous origin were probably added. When the whole story of Rama was put into book form, it became a story quite distinctively its own. What is probably true of the Malay versions of the Ramayana, is undoubtedly true of the Ramakien, the Thai version of the Ramayana.

Rama I, the first king of the present dynasty of Thailand, wrote and edited the Ramakien. His chief aim, no doubt, was to include within the story state ceremonies and traditions as they pertained to the royal palace, of which, for the most part, nothing in book form had survived since the devastating war with Burma. Such treatises on state ceremonies and tradition undoubtedly survived only orally. These, as conjectured, were collected, verified and included in the Ramakien. Hence, the Ramakien of King Rama I runs into many volumes which are the source of information on the function of Thai court life in its medieval period. Later, his son, King Rama II, produced another version of the Ramakien in an abridged form which was meant exclusively for the masked play. This latter version of the Ramakien has a high literary value, for King Rama II, the



Lakshman Versus Tosakanth

author of this version was in his own right, one of the foremost Thai poets. However, the people appreciate the former, not on aesthetic grounds but for its comprehensive story. Certain episodes of the Ramakien have been drawn from time to time by many Thai poets and put in many of the Thai styles of composition. References to certain characters and sayings in the Ramakien are to be found randomly sited as allusions in many poetic pieced of Thai literature. In fact, in everyday speaking, some writings from the Ramakien are frequently quoted. To appreciate Thai literature and to know the Thai language at its best, therefore, is to know something of the Ramakien.





A scene in “Ramakien” from the episode of “Phali teaches his brother”.

Further, the Ramakien in its entirety, is the theme of the mural painting along the length of the corridors of the Royal Chapel of the Emerald Buddha in Bangkok. It serves as a means for people both young and old to learn something in pictures of the Ramakien, of its marvellous and supernatural tales which are the delight of the simple folk and children. In Thai painting and sculpture and decorative arts, references to certain episodes of the Ramakien are found frequently. Here one has to bear in mind that the Ramakien, though derived from the Ramayana, the sacred book of the Hindus, has no sanctity as such to the Thai. The Ramakien to the Thai has more of a profane nature rather than a religious one, as evidenced by the concluding remark of King Rama I who stated that it is written only for entertainment of the people rather than for belief.

There is an epitome of the Ramakien by Swami Satyananda Puri and Charoen Sarahiran in “The Ramakirti (Ramakien) or the Thai Version of the Ramayana” (Bangkok, 1940).



A scene of “the Battle Episode” of “Ramakien”.



A scene from "Inao" when
Thao Kamang Kuning is in the
battle with Inao.

4. Inao. This is a romantic tale from the well-known romance about the adventures of Pandji, the national hero king of Java who flourished in history sometime in the 13th century A.D. During that period, Hinduism was the religion of the island. Tradition says the story was told to two sister princesses of the latter part of the Ayudhya period (18th century A.D.) by their two maids of Malayan extraction. The story was first put into poem form by the two princesses in two versions, each with a different story but with the same hero. They are known as "Dalang" and "Inao," another name for the hero king Pandji. These two versions of the Pandji-cycle tales by the two Ayudhya princesses did not survive, but the two versions were put in book form by, again, King Rama I. Later on his son, King Rama II, wrote another version of the Inao for dramatic performance. It is the latter version that is very well-known for its refinement and perfect style in the Thai language. Excerpts from this famous version are sung by many musicians who are heard frequently on Thai radio broadcasts. Words of Javanese

origin are to be found in the Thai literary language: no doubt due to the introduction of this popular story. Most of these Javanese words are understood by the people even though they are words of a literary language. Obviously, they are due to the dramatic performances of the Inao from the great work of the great poet-king, Rama II. Dramatic performances called lakhon in Thai are of two kinds: one called "lakhon nok" or lakhon for the outsiders and the other "lakhon nai" or lakhon for the insiders, i.e. in the Grand Palace. The latter has a refinement in acting, singing and music as a contrast to the former which is meant for the common people who desire quick action and the common parlance of the language. The performance of the lakhon nai, draws its story and wording exclusively from a class of literary works, chief among which is the Inao. Thai versions of the Inao are to be found in English in the article "Siamese Versions of the Pandji Romance by H.H. Prince Dhani." (India Antiqua, E.J. Brill, Leydon, 1957).



An episode from Inao.



A Scene in "Sam Kok" from the episode of "Love of Lao Pi".



"Lao Pi"

5.Sam Kok. This is a Thai translation of a most popular Chinese historical romance, the San Kuo Chi. It deals with the Chinese period of history (A.D. 168 to 265) during the latter part of the Han dynasty. Unlike the four preceding works, it is written in prose. So popular was the book with the Thai in the last generation that other translations of its kind followed. It was this class of literature, apart from what has already been said, that the people in the last century enjoyed reading. Most of these works were first printed in book form by Dr. D.B. Bradley on the missionary printing press, a pioneer of its kind, in the latter part of the 19th century, A.D. The merit of the book, Sam Kok, apart from its highly interesting accounts of war and intrigue, is in its prose writing which exhibits a perfection of style in the art of writing in this medium. One of

the four translators, or rather editors, of the Sam Kok was the famous Thai poet, Chao Phya Phra Klang-Hon, who flourished in the 18th Century, A.D. So strong is the influence of this work that the Thai have indirectly come to know and understand with appreciation something of Chinese history and culture. There was, in the past, a great demand for this class of book by the reading public, but it has gradually been replaced by the "Western" and the novels in the present generation. Nevertheless, a few of the Chinese historical romances survived, due to their high literary value in the Thai language. Chief among these few is Sam Kok. An excerpt from the Sam Kok forms part of a Thai literature series of selected texts used in schools. The others in this series include also Nos. 3, 4 and 6 of this pamphlet.



A scene in “Rajadhirat” from the episode of “Saming Phraram Asa” (Saming Phraram Volunteers).

6. Rajadhirat. This is a Thai translation of Mon history which deals in a large part with the war between the Mon King Rajadhirat (Razadarit in Burmese) and the probably Burmanized Shan King of Burma, Farang Manggong (Minhkaung in Burmese), in their struggle for predominance over the Mons and the Burmese. The value of the book, Rajadhirat, is not in its historical facts (as it reads like a historical romance) but in its perfect style of Thai writing. Here again, like the former book Sam Kok, it is written in prose and its writer was none other than the famous Thai poet who edited the Sam Kok.

7. Phra Abhai Mani. We now come to the last of the 7 great works of Thai literature selected as representative of Thai culture in its homogeneity. Phra Abhai Mani or Phra Abhai for short is a creative work of a Thai famous poet, popularly known as Sunthorn Bhu, who flourished in the second and third reigns of the present dynasty. He wrote a vast number of books in a certain type of Thai poetry which has hardly been equalled.

Written in the everyday speech of the people, his works are household words in nearly every Thai home.

Phra Abhai is a romantic tale of love and adventure common to many such tales of a king’s son who left his father’s court in order to acquire certain magical arts from a hermit in the forest, thus fitting himself for membership in the military caste. After gaining the desired acquirements he took leave of the hermit, and, after some adventures, met a beautiful maiden, (usually a daughter of a powerful giant). He married her, of course, without the consent of the giant, the maiden’s father. Subsequently, the giant was slain in a fight with his human son-in-law. There are, of course, variations in the details of such stories, but, in essence, the main theme of the story is similar. No doubt, such Thai romantic tales were inspired by the many stories to be found in the “Jatakas” or Buddhist Birth Stories, and also those of the Indian romances.





An episode from Phra Abhai Mani, Chi Pleuy, a wicked man, wearing no clothes ; took a mythical horse, “Nil Mangkorn” from Sudsakhon.

The Story of Phra Abhai, though adhering to such a tradition, departs somewhat from the general run of such trite tales. Instead of adventures mainly on lands and forests, the story of Phra Abhai deals with adventures on the seas, the then known world of the poet, both real and imaginary. The poet author introduced certain principal characters into his story, such as a malevolent giantess of the sea and a mermaid who both married the hero, Phra Abhai, each having a son by him. The mermaid is an interesting figure of recent introduction in the realm of Thai mythological stories. There are included, also, a monster half-dragon half-horse, a magical flying boat made of straw and a naked ascetic, probably an echo of a Jain recluse. Also included in the story are the “Khaek, Farang,



Sudsakhon is seen mounting on his mythical horse “Nil Mangkorn” to search for his father “Phra Abhai Mani”.

Angrit”. Khaek are the Mohamedans, in particular, the Malays and Javanese as known at that time as sea-farers: Farang are, of course, the Europeans and Angrit are the English. The most interesting characters in the story of Phra Abhai are, therefore, the Farang and the Angrit. There appears a Farang pirate with his enormous ship in which there was a garden of trees; there was an English queen, young and beautiful, with her Roman Catholic prelate as her adviser, who ruled an island kingdom named Langka or Ceylon. Of course, the English queen in a long war with Phra Abhai, married him and had a son, who, in a war with his Thai father, sided with his mother’s prelate, the Roman Catholic Father.

We need not go further into the story for it is a long one running into many volumes. In it, one gains some glimpses of conceptions of the Thai in the past century relating to people in foreign lands beyond the seas, especially the Farang, both real and imaginary. As to the English queen in the story of Phra Abhai, no doubt the poet heard stories from foreigners of the great Queen Victoria who he wove into his story. Where did he get his idea that the country ruled by the English queen was Langka or Ceylon ? The following information may give a clue:

“Bishop Middleton was said to have once asked him (the Hindu pundit) two very simple questions. (1) Whence are the English come? (2) What is their origin? The reply of the pundit was somewhat to the following effect. The English are come from somewhere in Langka or Ceylon and they are of mixed origin, springing from monkeys and cannibals, because they jabber like monkeys, and sit like them on chairs with their legs hanging down in an attitude peculiar to the monkey species.” (The Hindoo as they are, by S.C. Bose).

As known, the story of Phra Abhai was first printed by Dr. Samuel J. Smith, a Baptist missionary in Bangkok, in his weekly Thai newspaper “Syam Smai” in a serial form. It was later reprinted in book form divided into parts of 48 pages each, which, in a later period, became a standard sized book containing this story so well-known to the people of the last generation. The book Phra Abhai is popular with the public not only because of the story but also due to the style of the poet’s genius and perfection of style.

There is an English translation in a concise form, “The Story of Abhai Mani” by Prem Chaya (Bangkok, 1952) and the poet’s life and work in French in, “La vie du poet Sounthons- Bhou” by Camille Notton (Rougerie, France, 1959).



Rishi Phra Abhai Mani and the mermaid, his wife.



“Phra Abhai Mani” the Birth of Sudsakhon Episode.

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