

A comparative study of Thai culture through Thai literary masterpieces

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1. Introduction

Whilst Thai culture has been the topic of many research papers and seminars, this writer intends to approach the topic from a different point of view.

In this paper, the writer will share a broad view of Thai culture, derived from Thai literary masterpieces. However, the writer will focus on only two literary categories due to time/other constraints.

Definitions: For the purpose of clarity, here are definitions of the two categories:-

1. Thai Literary Masterpieces. The term “literacy masterpieces” refers to 15 selected literary works which are officially recognised as literary masterpieces by the Wannakhadi Samoson (Literature Association) of Thailand.

They are:

- 1) *Lilit Phra Law*: the best of the *lilit* type,
- 2) *Samuthakhot*: the best of the *chan* type,
- 3) *Mahachat Khamthet*: the best of the *kap* type,
- 4) *Khun Chang Khun Phan*: the best of the *klon sepha*,
- 5) *Enau*: the best of dance drama,
- 6) *Huacai Nakrop*: the best of legitimate drama,
- 7) *Sam Kok*: the best of tales (essay type),
- 8) *Pharatchaphithee Sipsong Duan*: the best of narrative essays.

The second category comprises seven literary works which have all won the Southeast Asian Writers’ awards. They are:-

- 1) *Luk Isan* by Khamphoon Bunthawi (1979)
- 2) *Khamphiphaksa* by Chat Kobcitti (1982)
- 3) *Poon Pit Thong* by Krisana Asoksin (1985)
- 4) *Taling Sung Sung Nak* by Niyom Rayawa (1988)
- 5) *Cao Can Phom Hom* by Mala Khamcan (1991)

6) *Wela* by Chat Kopcitti (1994)

7) *Pachathipatai bon Senkhanan* by Win Leowarin (1997)

The first group represents classical Thai literature, while the second group represents contemporary Thai literature.

2. *Culture* refers to the development of the body, mind and spirit by training and experience; evidence of intellectual development (of arts, science, etc.) in human society or of a particular nation (Hornby & Parnwell, 1969:130).

Nidhi (1995:12) said that, “Culture means the system of relationships between human beings and the environment, human beings and human beings, and human beings and the supernatural.”

2. A comparative study of Thai culture reflected in Thai literary masterpieces.

Thai literature is similar to that of other countries in that it can serve as an indicator of a nation’s greatness or downfall (Chetana 1993). Written literature is derived from oral and memorised literary works.

It is obvious that culture can influence a poet’s works as the poet himself is a part of a specific culture and society. On the other hand, the poet undeniably influences the society and culture to which he belongs. His views, expressed through his work, may affect the thinking and behaviour of many people.

Thai culture (as reflected in literature) is of 3 kinds - literary conventions, Thai traditional ceremony and the status of women.

1) *Thai Literary Conventions*

There are seven of these: rhetorical patterns, openings and endings, personality of the main character, the bathing and costuming process, expressive gestures, figurative speech and beliefs.

1.1 *Rhetorical Pattern*

Thai literature is of two types: prose and verse. Thai verse consists of *khlong*, *chan*, *kap*, *klon*, *rai* and *lilit*. Five works out of eight in the first group are verse - *Lilit Phra Law* is *lilit* (as its name denotes), *Samuthakhot* is *chan*, *Mahachat Khamthet* is *kap* and *rai*, while *Enau* and *Khun Chang Khun Phan* are *klon*. As for *Huacai Nakrop*, *Sam Kok* and *Pharatchaphithe Sipsong Duan*, these are prose. The

other 7 works of the second group are prose. This illustrates that classical Thai literature emphasizes aesthetics while contemporary Thai literature emphasises realism.

1.2 Opening and Ending

The Opening, or Introduction, consists of reverence paid to God and Lord Buddha, or praise for Kings or the Motherland. *Lilit Phra Law* and *Samuthakhot* express reverence to God and Lord Buddha, while *Khun Chang Khun Phan* expresses praise for the King and Motherland.

The Ending usually consists of the name of the writer or copier of the works. In religious literature such as *Samuthakhot*, there is a short narration of leading characters who are to be reborn and become different characters in the next life. The Ending is less important than the Opening.

1.3 Personality of leading character

Leading male characters are usually: intelligent, valiant, gallant, grateful, self-sacrificing and are sometimes imbued with supernatural qualities. Leading female characters are beautiful, sweet, faithful, well-disciplined, gentle and submissive.

1.4 Bathing and Costuming Process

Water is related to every stage of life for Thai people, from birth to death. In Thai drama the bathing and costuming process of the characters is an important component, as we see in *Enau* and *Lilit Phra Law*. In contemporary literature the bathing and costuming process disappears and is replaced by having a meal at the dining table.

1.5 Expressive Gestures

In creating literary works, the poet makes use of traditional rules in order to express his feelings or beliefs. The rules are readily intelligible to readers. The literary traditions prevailing in Thai literature are centred on the themes of love, sorrow, rites and beauty.

1.5.1 The expression of love is often found in poetic works because love is the symbol of feelings natural to all human beings. However, in didactic literature, women are supposed to keep such feelings hidden - they have no right to express this kind of feeling. If they do, they will be viewed harshly and not respected. In *Poon Pit Thong* (a contemporary novel), *Pali*, the heroine of the story, goes against this tradition when she shows her feelings and fails to guard her chastity.

In Niras literature, the expression of love is metaphorically alluded to in references to nature - such as trees or places whose names are coincidentally synonymous to loving terms - encountered whilst the man is on a journey away from his beloved. An exception to this rule is *Samuthakhot*, where the heroine of the story expresses her feelings of love when yearning for her departed husband - behaviour normally reserved for men.

1.5.2 The expression of sorrow occurs in times of separation of between couples - men and women have equal rights in expressing this kind of feeling.

1.6 Figurative Speech

The expression of a sense of beauty is important in poetical works and we see this in the description of nature, royal palaces, royal regalia and most important of all, feminine beauty.

The beauty of the 'gentler sex' is described repeatedly - in terms of each part of a woman's body. Very often the parts of the body are compared to things in nature such as plants or animals whose parts are conventionally regarded as beautiful. For example, the arm of a beautiful girl is compared to an elephant's trunk for its straightness and roundness - as well as its delicate form. In more recent times, the expression of feminine beauty has become more holistic instead of relying on the enumeration of each part of a woman's body.

1.7 Beliefs

It is customary in Thai literary texts to devote much time to an exposition of ritual performances and superstitious beliefs. Frequent mention of rituals by poets may reveal a firm belief in the rituals and superstitious attitudes of the society. We can see examples in; *Lilit Phra Law*, *Enau*, *Samuthakhot* and *Khun Chang Khun Phan*.

2) Traditional ceremony

A traditional ceremony can be defined as, "A mode of behaviour or standard produced by a group as distinct from an individual; and serves to intensify group consciousness and cohesion" (Julins Gould & William L. Kolb 1965).

In *Khun Chang Khun Phan* we can see the celebration of; birth, marriage, preparation for monkhood, and the funeral ceremony.

In *Praratchaphithe Sipsong Duan* we can see both ancient Brahman rituals such as the royal ploughing ceremony and Buddhist ceremonies such as Visakha Bucha (the holiest of all Buddhist memorial days in the year - marking the birth, enlightenment and nirvana of Lord Buddha). At a more localised level we also have festivals such as the rocket festival of Northeast Thailand.

3) *The Status of Women*

The role of Thai women is metaphorically, “Chang thow lang” (the elephant’s back feet) as they have to follow their male leaders who are “the elephant’s fore feet.” It is said in *Hitopathet* (a Sanskrit didactic work translated into Thai):

บิดาต้องรักษาในคราวเป็นเด็ก	ภักศดาต้องปกครองในเวลาสาว
บุตรชายต้องดูแลในปฐมชรา	อันสตรีหาปกครองตนเองได้ไม่

The meaning is that women cannot fend for themselves - they must be cared for by their fathers, husbands and sons.

In the old days, women had no right to choose their spouses. The marriages were arranged by their families. What is more, they had no right to divorce their husbands. They were expected to stay virtuous till their wedding day. Furthermore, as previously mentioned, they were not allowed to express their feelings of love - these were supposed to be kept secret. An example of the typical (traditional) Thai lady is *Pim* or *Wanthong*, the heroine of *Khun Chang Khun Phan*. *Pim* got married twice at the consent of her mother - but was really forced (by her mother) to get married the second time to *Khun Chang*. Although she was a good wife to her two husbands (who she was married to at different times – in succession) and a good mother to her son, she was sentenced to death because of her indecisiveness in choosing which husband she preferred to stay with permanently.

Today, the role of women has changed. They are more literate than their predecessors and have more confidence in doing things. Women now enter the workforce and work outside their homes. In contemporary literature they are depicted as capable family leaders. *Pali* (in *Poon Pit Thong*) is a good example of how women’s status has changed - perhaps because tradition is less important nowadays.

3. The analytical results

In this section we can see the difference between classical Thai literature and contemporary literature (which has been influenced by western ideas), when we compare the two.

1) Almost all of the eight classical works emphasise aesthetics while the contemporary ones emphasise realism.

2) Nature plays an important role in the first group - characters' actions are influenced by nature, while in the second group, daily human life is the main theme. These depict human conflicts and the seeking of ways to overcome nature. Examples include; *Khamphiphaksa* and *Taling Sung Sung Nak*.

3) There is no evidence of scientific belief in the first group.

4) The ideas behind the writing in the first group are; idealism, romanticism and symbolism - whilst in the second group they are: realism, naturalism, and existentialism.

5) Most of the first group are in verse, whilst most in the second group are prose.

6) In the first group the scene and atmosphere are unreal - the content is far removed from everyday life. Characters may not even be human beings, but can communicate in human language. On the other hand, in the second group, scene, atmosphere and characters are real and nearly an exact reflection of daily life. If characters are not human beings, they are personified and imitate human beings.

7) The first group clings to rules and traditions, whilst the second group is more innovative.

The difference between the two groups of literature may be the results of social and economic change in Thailand and the emergence of a "new" culture in Thai society. The mass media tells us how far the cultural changes have gone. A good example of this can be found in literary works such as *Poon Pit Thong*, which illustrates the change in women's role in society - women having become more independent. In *Taling Sung Sung Nak*, which represents the life of a poor man called *Khamrai* and his poor elephant called *Phlai Sut*, we can see how things have changed even in rural society where people have become more selfish, do not care for their fellow human beings and follow the rule of "survival of the fittest." *Kham Phiphaksa* is another good example of this trend.

4. Conclusion

The data gathered from this comparative study of Thai culture through Thai literary masterpieces can be considered in terms of three main categories. Firstly,

there are the *literary conventions*. These have become less important now and have little impact on readers who prefer prose to verse - or novels to rhetorical works - people have busier lives nowadays and have little time for verse or rhetoric. Secondly, *traditional ceremonies* have become simpler and less meticulous. They have also had to be adapted to a busier society. Today, all religious, royal and popular ceremonies have become less punctilious - to suit today's society. Thirdly, the change of the *social status of Thai women*, who have now become much more independent, creates clashes between the more conservative elements of the society who disagree with this trend, and the "modernists." However, Thai women also have to deal with more demanding lives and the problem of working much harder - to be working housewives means to do two jobs at the same time.

Fearing that the Thai people will be overwhelmed by foreign culture, the Thai government has adopted a policy of urging Thai people to preserve Thai culture. This policy, however, is not easy to carry out as Thai society has undergone so much change already. This writer agrees with Professor Dr. Prawase Wasi (1998:44-45) and his idea of "The Culture of Knowledge"- that, "One of the strengths of modern Thai society is the fact that we are a nation of opinions. Ten people will have ten different opinions on the same subject. Unfortunately, this will lead us nowhere unless knowledge is properly applied. Only then will a suitable solution be identified. First and foremost, we are called upon to build a culture and a social mechanism that bases itself in "applied knowledge" which is relevant to the situation, and can be fine-tuned to suit differing circumstances."

Finally, it is this writer's hope that this paper will encourage those who are responsible for social policy to pay more attention to how the culture can be preserved - and perhaps more research could be undertaken which will benefit the social planning process.

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