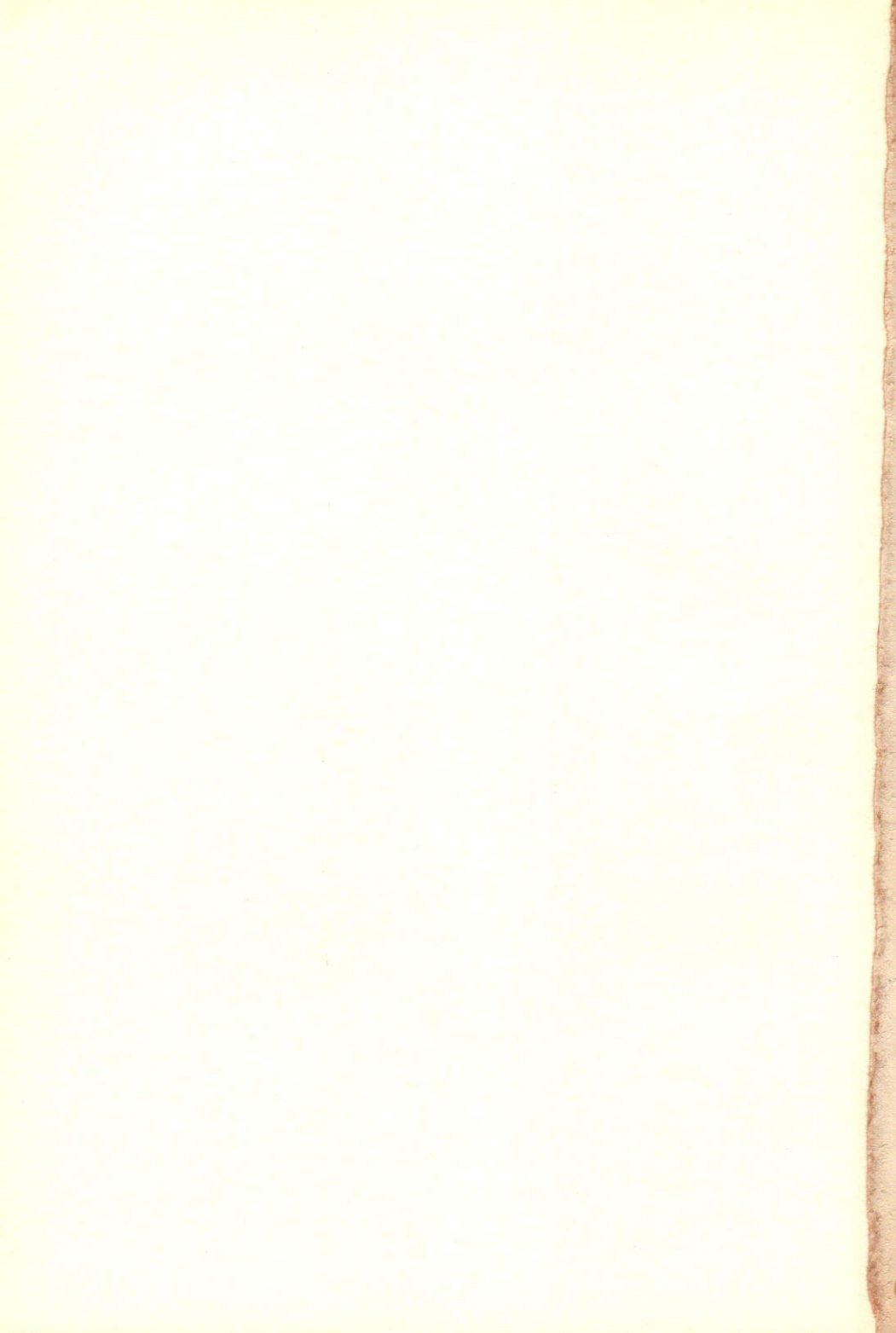


# Women in Thai Literature



















# **WOMEN IN THAI LITERATURE**

**(BOOK I)**

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**Cover**

***Pensive***

*Oil Painting by Chakrabhand Posayakrit  
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## **WOMEN IN THAI LITERATURE**

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## INTRODUCTION

The present volume is the second in a series of anthologies of Thai literature in English translation published by the National Identity Board. The reception given to the first volume *Treasury of Thai Literature – The Modern Period*(1988) has been fairly favourable and has thus given the editors encouragement to embark on new projects. That we have decided this time to tackle the subject of women in Thai Literature is not to be construed as a mere concession to the feminist fad, but we truly believe that to approach Thai literature this way can serve as an inroad into the essence of Thai culture.

As has been the case with *Treasury of Thai Literature – The Modern Period*, we would like to profess right from the outset that honesty is the best policy. *There* we tried to demolish the simplistic notion of Thailand being a "Land of Smiles"; *here* we shall not fail to realize, and to make other people share that realization, that things are not too rosy with us and that women do not fare well at all times. We shall not turn a blind eye to the problems and conflicts in our society, as these are reflected in literature, but we shall refrain from jumping to hasty conclusions or naming the culprits. Our aim is not to engender gender polemic, but to offer, as far as possible, literary and cultural analysis.

The present anthology deals with Thai literature from the Sukhothai to the early Rattanakosin (Bangkok) periods, with texts dating roughly from the 13<sup>th</sup> century to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. There is a need to draw the



readers' attention to the fact that the texts presented represent *written literature* that constitutes a tiny fraction of the Thai literary heritage that has always been dominated by the oral tradition. Added to this is the fact that the majority of written works were lost in the sack of Ayutthaya in 1767, and no one can claim that the restoration of the literary legacy in the early years of the Bangkok period was sufficiently exhaustive. To glean what might pass for "women's literature" out of this select but limited literary treasure is indeed an assiduous task that the editors have tried their best to fulfil.

The method of presentation adopted by the editors is a *loosely* chronological one, that is to say, moving from one epoch to another without adhering too strictly to the chronological principle within an individual period. *Sukhothai literature*, as is to be expected, figures as an age of enlightenment imbued with the edifying spirit of Buddhism. The *Traiphummikatha* or "Three Planes of Existence" may, in many respects, follow the usual pattern of a moral tale designed for popular consumption in extolling physical beauty as a result of good deeds, a rather simplistic interpretation of the law of *karma* (See Chapter 11: The Perfect Woman). Yet the story occasionally rises to great spiritual and intellectual heights, such as in Chapter 2 on "Queen Asandhimitta". Clad under the traditional garb of miraculous happenings, the tale unfolds itself as a forceful rational reaffirmation of the principle of *karma* that demolishes all gender barriers. Thus *Traiphummikatha* reflects the liberalism of the Sukhothai age in which women played an important role. Even simple records on the daily life of the Sukhothai people, as described in the various stone inscriptions, bear testimony to the equal status,



recognition and responsibility shared by men and women. What is most striking is women's participation in warfare: the Queen Mother and the King went on military expeditions together!

When we come to the Ayutthaya period, we cannot help feeling that literature has become somewhat personalized. In a society which was more complex and fraught with multi-faceted problems, literature becomes more emotionally charged, and at the same time lends itself more to formal innovations. The Thai woman is assigned more varied roles. In *Khlong Kamsuan* she becomes idealized, and at times idolized, in a new literary genre *Nirat*, in which the poet employs all poetic virtuosity at his disposal to express his yearning for the beloved woman he has left behind. In *Lilit Phra Lo*, the roles of mother, wife and lover are explored, each affirming its respective sense of devotion in an almost primordial (pre-Buddhistic) tragic grandeur. The "illicit" relationship between Phra Lo and the two young lovers, described as governed by "fate", rests on a dignified paganism of a "Liebestod"\* that looks at death as a path towards an other-worldly reunion. This indeed runs counter to the usual Buddhist sobriety, and it is not surprising that people should fall back on traditional morality in a work like *Chanthakhorop*, an overtly didactic tale that cautions against heedlessness and lust, in which, alas, the woman is given the role of a villain again. It is worth noting that many a Thai cautionary tale drives home its moral lesson at the expense of women. What a far cry from the more rarefied, Buddhist-impregnated atmosphere of the Sukhothai era!

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\* Liebestod : death-marked love



If Bangkok marks a new beginning in the social and political history of Thailand, Thai literature of the early Rattanakosin period is characterized by a number of philosophic and artistic innovations. It may be true that substantively the *Maha Wetsandon Chadok* is not allowed to stray too far from its Indic origin. But one cannot deny that in the Thai version, the plight of women is presented with such stark realism (and chanted with such histrionic fervour by "performing monks" during the Buddhist Lent Chanting Ceremony!) as to be able to deconstruct its own grain originally marked by male dominance. Who could remain insensitive to the eloquent counsel of Queen Phutsadi, or to the heart-rending lamentation of Matsi, or to the unjust ignominy suffered by Amittada? It is even possible to read the Thai version of the Buddhist *jataka* as a text that subverts itself.

It may be worth observing that the nearer we move to literary works of "popular" origin, the more clearly emerges the image of Thai women. *Khun Chang-Khun Phaen*, in its rugged realism, more than amply demonstrates that, in a land ruled by a highly emotional monarch and run by men with polygamous inclination, the "good woman of Siam" cannot very well survive. A modern reading of the story would inevitably end up (to parody a Sartrean dictum) with the verdict: "L'enfer, c'est les hommes" (Hell is men!). Those repeated utterances about *karma* cannot explain away Wanthong's pitiable end, and today read more like philosophic alibis. Be that as it may, the version we are reading today is the "royal" version, which proves that the royal court in the early Bangkok period was imbued with a remarkable spirit of self-criticism.



It is in a similar spirit that we shall have to approach *Sangthong*, a folk drama composed by none other than the versatile artist King Rama II. There is no denying that at any level of reading of this work, Queen Montha appears to be emotionally and intellectually more mature and in almost every respect more resourceful than King Samon. And the resoluteness of Rotchana stamps her as the prototype of strong women characters we shall encounter in Thai literature of the subsequent two centuries.

If popular culture and folk wisdom are the breeding ground for feminine supremacy, then the highly popular verse tale *Phra Aphai Mani* must be recognized as a very important milestone in the history of Thai literature. We encounter here a plethora of female characters (See the sectional introduction) that speak well for the poet *Sunthon Phu's* high regard for women's ability. In one particular case, he even departs from conventional Thai literature that mostly adheres to the image of "the perfect woman". In *Phra Aphai Mani*, good looks and intelligence need not always go together. Unfortunately, *Sunthon Phu* did not quite succeed in creating a new school. The predominance of dance drama in Thai artistic circle (which always demands good looks) will not admit of such revolutionary aesthetics, and Thai films and television soap-operas have more than followed the traditional way of thinking.

Our consideration of the image of women in Thai literature, based on a rather lean corpus of written texts, cannot possibly yield definitive conclusions. Yet it is not altogether impossible to indulge in a few general observations. First, an attentive reader will not fail to notice that in terms of equality of status, proximity to



Buddhist environment seems to serve as a guarantee for gender equality. The difference between Sukhothai literature and that of Ayutthaya would tend to confirm this. Secondly, adherence to popular ways of thinking provides an intellectual as well as an artistic framework that more readily allows women to shine out. It would, however, be premature to jump to the conclusion at this stage that male domination grows proportionately to the increase in distance from folk culture and folk spirit. Thirdly, although almost all the texts reproduced in the present volume were written by men, they somehow or other make enough room for women to distinguish themselves. Some of the texts are self-deconstructive in the sense that they represent attitudes and worldviews that are critical of one-gender supremacy. It is possible that at the root of Thai culture lies a capacity for self-criticism. Literature bears that out. Let us hope that other art forms and other disciplines succeed in discovering such trends, for present-day Thailand is in desperate need of such self-redemptive potential.

**The Committee for the Dissemination of Outstanding  
Thai Literary Works**

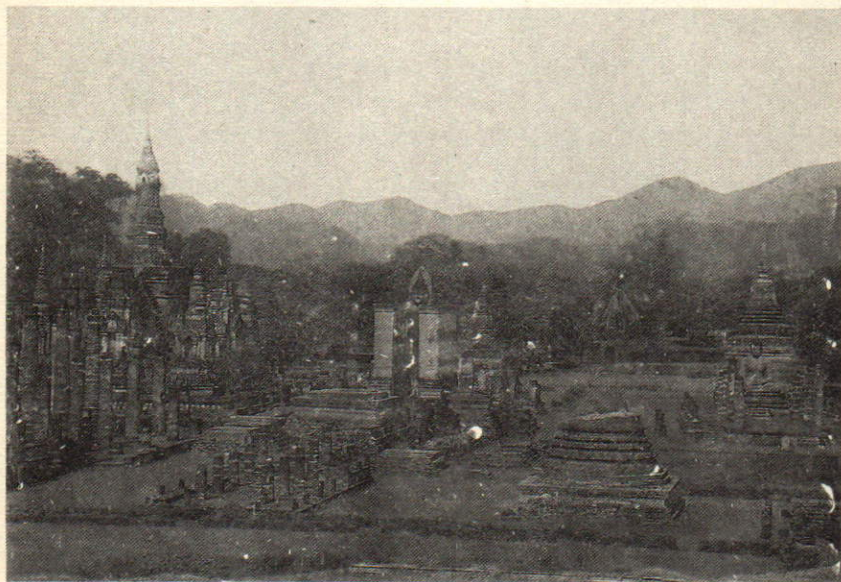
**September 1992.**



## SUKHOTHAI PERIOD

The Sukhothai Period (A.D. 1239-1377) marked the dawn of Thai history when a number of city states were consolidated into one sizable kingdom. As to be expected in those early days, men and women played equally significant roles in livelihood, defence and religious practices. Nevertheless, the concept of male and female role division was already expressed in fairly clear terms in Thai literature which was first put into writing during the period.

Sukhothai literary works were mostly records. There were records of contemporary events, such as stone inscriptions that served as chronicles, and records of temple constructions and occasional merit-making events. Among these works, there was a written account of religious beliefs, the *Traiphummikatha* or the Story of the Three Planes of Existence. Considered to be the first Thai Buddhist literary work, it presents a world-view according to Theravāda Buddhism which began to take root in the region, blending itself with traditional beliefs and influences (including

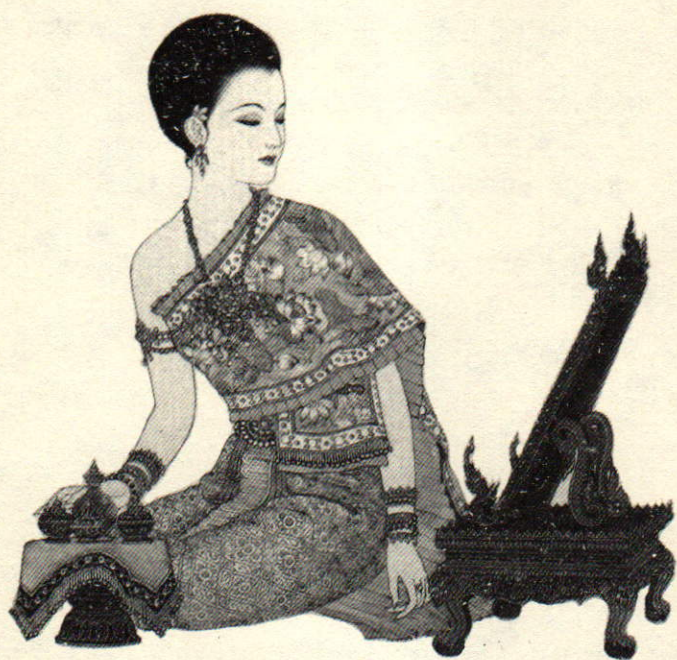


*The Sukhothai Historical Park*



ancestral worship, animism and Mahāyāna Buddhism), and exerting its influence down the centuries. The *Traiphummikatha*, also known as *Traiphum Phra Ruang*, was attributed to Phraya Lithai, fifth king of Sukhothai's Phra Ruang Dynasty, who supposedly wrote it in A.D. 1345. Despite the numerous corrections and additions to the original text, the work has survived with its contents almost intact, since the *Traiphum* has been copied and recopied over the years by anonymous scribes who regarded literary works as common property rather than that exclusively owned by their creators. In other words, the *Traiphum* is like a cultural data bank, which, more than any other concrete and material evidence, reflects the roles and values of Thai people of bygone days.

Images of Thai women, both idealistic and realistic, did appear in other works of Sukhothai literature, albeit fleetingly and incompletely. Its authors were exclusively male, who wrote for specific purposes to serve a male-dominated society. Inevitably, the images of the female sex were sketchy, one-dimensional and almost certainly prejudiced. Nevertheless, they should provide the reader with enough clues to trace the various strands of conceptual influence that prevails to this day.



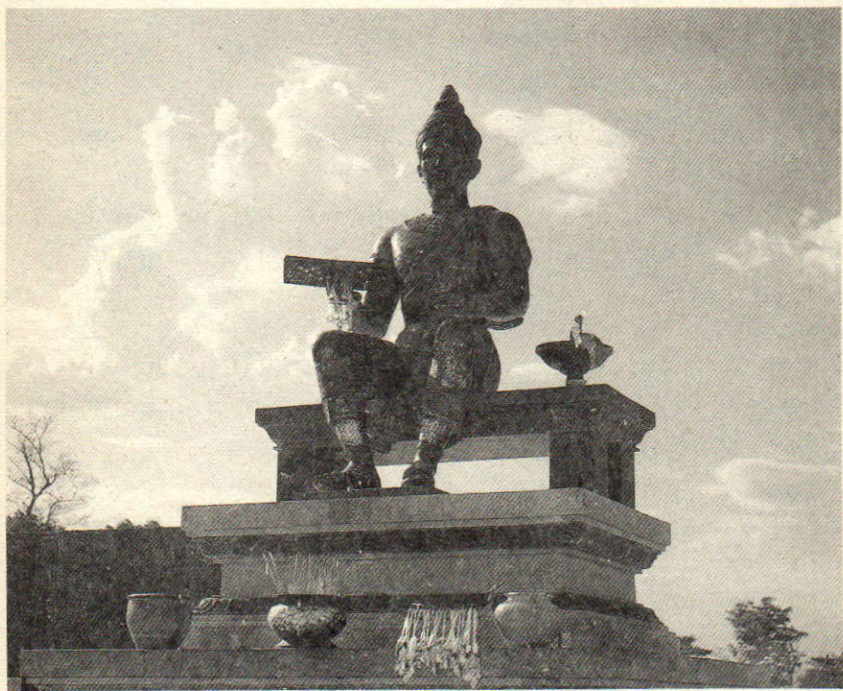


## **THE STONE INSCRIPTION OF KING RAMKHAMHAENG**

Little is known about Thai history before the Sukhothai Period. However, after the invention of the Thai alphabet by King Ram Khamhaeng the Great in A.D. 1283, scores of inscriptions have been discovered, preserved and studied up to the present time.

According to those inscriptions, Thai men and women have apparently been on equal footing since the Sukhothai Period, when the Thai history was first recorded in the inscriptions. A king and his queen performed their royal duties side by side. They fought together in battle, even on elephant's back. In one of the Sukhothai inscription, the Queen Mother and King Maha Thammaracha III led the army to fight and conquered extensive territory. Since then men and women in Thai history have been known to share responsibility in protecting their homeland. There was even a northern lady who, while leading an army, gave birth to a child on the battlefield. Her husband was away at the time fighting another war.





*King Ramkhamhaeng*



Thai men and women of that period enjoyed the same rights. This could have been due to the influence of Buddhist teaching. In one inscription it was stated, "When a commoner or a man of rank dies, his estate...is left in its entirety to his offspring, younger brother or sister." Nothing is mentioned about the share of each inheritor.

It is observed that the tradition of Sukhothai is more like that of Lanna than that of Ayutthaya. In Lanna, a daughter who took care of parents, received a bigger share of inheritance; and in case of a divorce, the wife, who owned the house in which they lived, received two-thirds of the entire property and vice versa.

The quoted excerpts from the Sukhothai inscriptions give us the picture of the role equally shared by Thai men and women both in time of war and peace.



*The Stone Inscription of King Ramkhamhaeng*



## Excerpts

*...The people of this city of Sukhodai like to observe the precepts and bestow alms. King Rāma Gaṃhēñ, the ruler of this city of Sukhodai, as well as the princes and princesses, the young men and women of rank, and all the noblefolk without exception, both male and female, all have faith in the religion of the Buddha, and all observe the precepts during the rainy season...*

(Stone Inscription No. 1, A.D. 1292)

*...the Brānā and Lady... caused the Footprint to be engraved, and invited everyone to rejoice also with them.*

(Stone Inscription No. 8, A.D. 1359)

*...After that the exalted Mahāthera sent word to the throng of devout laymen and laywomen, to all worthy people in general, and to all the throng of wise men, for laterite to be fetched and made smooth.*

(Stone Inscription No. 62, A.D. 1371)

*In Sakarāja 762, year of the Dragon, Saṃtec Brah Rājajanani Sri Dharmarājamātā Mahātilakaratanarājanārtha, the Queen Mother, and Saṃtec Mahādharmaṛājādhipati Śri Suriyavaṅsa her son, strong to subjugate (their foes), bold and intrepid, led the army forth to fight and marched over the territories of numerous rulers. (The son) has succeeded to the enjoyment of supreme sovereignty as King of the land of Śri Sajanālai-Sukhodaiya. Jointly they destroyed the host of their enemies, extending the royal frontiers...*

(Stone Inscription No. 46, A.D. 1404)

*After that, therefore, I and all the monks, together with Mahādharmaṛājādhirāja and Śri Rājamātā (the Queen Mother) and the King's great-uncle, (confirmed) Maṅgalavilāsamahāthera (as Abbot) of the Kalyāṇa Forest Monastery with full privileges and exclusive authority of every sort.*

(Stone Inscription No. 9. A.D. 1406)

*This Buddha image is installed by noble couple Saihong and Kaeo.*

(Stone Inscription No. 37 A.D. 1422)



*In the year 1431, a year of the Serpent, on the full-moon day of Vaisākha, a Wednesday, at the auspicious moment, Nāy Bān Debarakṣā, Nāy Bān Suriyāmāsa. Āṃtēñ Gāṃ Kòñ, and Āṃtēñ Gāṃ Kèṅ, having cleansed their hearts of evil, having purged them of gloom, and having joined together in agreement, being steadfast in good actions and shining in faith, assigned a large piece of land to the Mahāthera Rāhuladeba Vanavāsī Śriviriyaprañā of the Kān Sò Monastery, giving (the property) to be made into a monastery for the Saṅgha.*

(Stone Inscription No.15. A.D. 1525)





## TRAIPHUMMIKATHA

“Traiphummikatha” (Phra Ruang’s Three Planes of Existence) has a highly significant place in literature of the Sukhothai Period. Composed by King Thammaracha Lithai around A.D. 1345, it propounds the Buddhist philosophy derived from research into no less than thirty reference texts which he listed at the opening of the work. The beauty of the language and power of the imagery, drawn to induce belief in the Buddhistic faith, have earned *Traiphummikatha* the recognition of being the masterpiece of Sukhothai literature. Known as a king who ruled his empire with righteousness, King Thammaracha Lithai successfully conveyed his precepts of administration in *Traiphummikatha*.

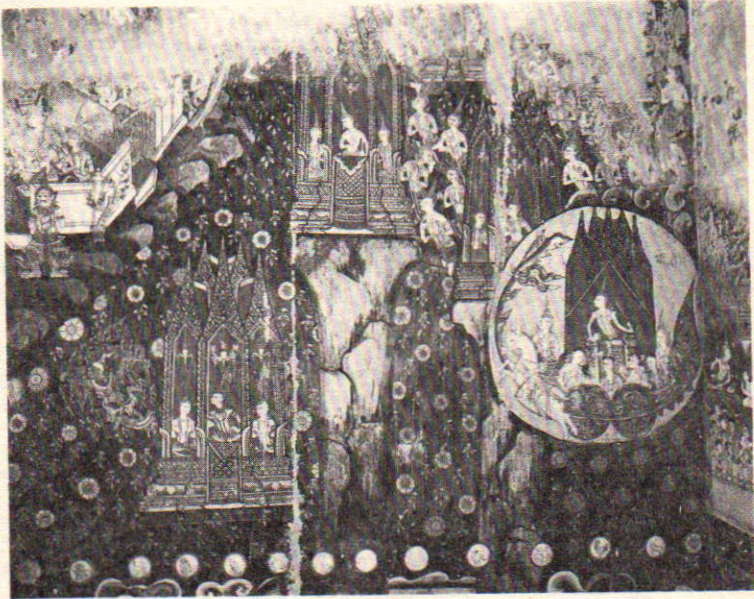
The work describes the three planes of existence in the Buddhist cosmology— the sensual, the corporeal and the incorporeal— in which all beings wander in an unending cycle of births and deaths, and from which they could only escape through the attainment of the fourth plane, *Nirvāna*. The content is therefore based on the heart of Buddhistic teaching concerning the three common characteristics of all



existing things— *Aniccatā* (impermanence, transiency), *Dukkhatā* (state of suffering) and *Anattatā* (soullessness or not-self). It also includes concepts from other faiths that are mixed with Buddhism such as the concepts of geographic cosmology, the division of time into “kap” (*kalpa*). As a result, *Traiphummikatha* is a composite of knowledge, beliefs and imagination.

*Traiphummikatha* has strong and long-standing influences on Thai traditions, the most important being the beliefs in transiency, heaven and hell, and in *karma* which constitute main supports to moral codes in the Thai society. The concept of the Righteous Sovereign, holder of the five precious gems: the Perfect Woman, the Competent Chancellor, the Valiant General, the Noble Elephant and the Mighty Steed, has a profound influence on the art of government. The impact of the work on art and literature is clearly evident in the frequent references in literary works of all periods down to the present, as well as in mural painting and in architecture. It has become the Thai tradition to build the main structures of Buddhist temples in accordance with such concepts as the cosmology of the universe and the positioning of Mount Meru.





*Traiphummikatha*



Because *Traiphummikatha* was conceived as a religious work, references to women are made from a religious point of view. There are four references to women in *Traiphummikatha* --- the "female Peta" (miserable spirits), the women of the Uтарakuru continent, the Perfect Woman of the Righteous Sovereign, and Queen Asandhimitta, consort of King Asoka the Great.\*

The women described in *Traiphummikatha* are idealized types-- the women of Uтарakuru and the Perfect Woman are of unsurpassed beauty, possess immortal youth and unmarred happiness in their carefree lives which are unspoiled by sadness or pain, not even the pain of childbirth or travails of child-rearing. As for the Perfect Woman, she is bestowed with the shining quality of being able to make the Righteous Sovereign happy at all times. A more individualistic picture of a woman is the portrayal of Queen Asandhimitta which illustrates religious equality of men and women in Buddhism in the fact that a woman can accumulate as much merit from her previous lives as a man can. Queen Asandhimitta demonstrates the powers of her great merit to King Asoka

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\* King Asoka was historically credited with the spreading of Hinayāna Buddhism to Thailand.



and his court as well as gives him advice on merit-making, alms-giving, attending sermons and keeping the Buddhist precepts so that his greatness prevails over a long time. The portrait of Queen Asandhimitta is, therefore, one of a woman who points the way to the illuminating paths of religious practices.

## **Excerpts**

### **1) Female Spirits**

*One kind of female spirit is always naked and their bodies smell from every pore. Flies alight on their bodies and burrow into their flesh. These females are emaciated, without an ounce of flesh on their bodies. Only sinews and skin barely cover their bones. They are famished. They cannot find anything to eat. When they deliver, they always deliver seven babies, and they eat their babies' flesh. And still, they do not feel full. Then, they deliver seven more babies, and they again eat them and are still as hungry as ever. These female spirits eat the flesh of their own children because they cannot stand the gnawing hunger.*

*As human beings, they gave medicine to pregnant women to abort their babies. And then they falsely swore as follows: "If I gave medicine to get rid of babies, may I become one of those ghosts who have bad-smelling bodies perpetually stung by flies; and may I deliver every day seven babies in the morning (and seven babies in the evening) and may I eat the flesh of my own babies every day without end, if I committed the sin of giving medicine to pregnant women to get rid of their babies." So they swore, and now they are naked, with flies eating them. They are so thin that there is no flesh to them. They tear up their children's flesh and eat it every day, as many as fourteen infants a day, as the consequence of their sin.*



*These next of the female spirits are ugly and naked. They are always hungry. When they see food and water before them and they pick out what they want to eat, the food and water turns into feces, blood clots, and pus. When they see a piece of cloth, they wish to wear it; but the cloth turns into burning-hot iron sheets when they try to cover their bodies. These departed spirits, when being human, were angry with their husbands when their husbands gave food, water, and cloth to the monks, and they cursed them as follows: "May the merit from giving food, water, and cloth to the monks turn into feces, blood clots and pus that you have to eat every mouthful of! May the cloth turn into burning-hot iron sheets!" Because of the sin of cursing their husbands in that way, they were reborn ugly female spirits.*



## 2) Women of Utarakuru

*The women of this continent are all very beautiful. Their bodies are neither too short nor too tall, neither too fat nor too thin; they are neither too fair nor too dark. Their skin is as perfectly beautiful as burnished gold, and this pleases all the men. Their toes and fingers are quite round and very beautiful; their nails are magnificently red as if they are painted with lacdye. Their cheeks are creamy-white and are as smooth as if they were carefully powdered, their face are clear without any blemishes, and look like the moon then it is full. The pupils in their eyes are as black as those of a three-day-old fawn, and the white parts are as white as a newly polished conch; their lips are as red as Momordica, a ripe "white melon" gourd...*



*The strands of hair are so fine and soft that it takes eight of their hairs to make one the thickness of ours. Their long hair is as black as the wings of a carpenter bee; and when it reaches the lower part of their shoulders, the tips of each hair curl upward of themselves. Whether they sit, stand or walk it looks as if they are smiling all the time. Their eyebrows are black and as pretty as if they were carefully painted. When talk, their voices are clear and their throats without phlegm or saliva. Their necks are adorned with ornamental jewelry. Their figure and complexion is as beautiful as that of a sixteen-year old maiden. They never become old, and all of them remain as youthful as that all their lives.*



### 3) The Perfect Woman

*Due to the great merit of the Universal Emperor, there would be born in the Kingdom of Madda a Perfect Woman who had performed good deeds in the past. Born in a family of kings, she would become the Queen of the Great Cakravarti King. If no such precious woman is born in our continent, then, by the power of the Emperor, a Precious Woman from the **Utarakuru** Continent would be drawn to him. She comes bringing clothing adorned with the seven kinds of precious gems; and she travels through the air like an angel and prostrates herself before the Universal Emperor. The Blessed Woman is neither tall nor short, but of the perfect height. She is dear and precious to everyone, and has a complexion so clear and smooth it is as if her skin had never been touched by even a single speck of dust, like a lotus flower touched by beads of water.*

*She is endowed with all of the good qualities pleasing to everyone on earth. However, she should not be compared with the angels in the Heaven of the Thirty-Three for she lacks their radiant glow. The angels in the Palace of Indra have a radiant glow to their bodies that shines afar. By her own merit, the Precious Woman sends out radiant glow from her body as far as 10 cubits. No matter how dark it is around her, there is no need for a candle.*



*Her face is flawless and glowingly beautiful. Her skin is as soft as cotton which has been fluffed a hundred times and moistened in the clear oil from the joint of a yak. When the Emperor's body is cool, or cold, her body will be warm; when his body is hot, hers will be cool. Her body has a divine scent like that from sandal wood and aloes ground and mixed with the four kinds of fragrant essence. Whenever she speaks or laughs, her breath is scented, like blooming lotuses of the Nilupala and Cankalani kinds.*

*When the Great Cakravarti King comes to see her, she never waits for him to approach her but moves forward to greet him. Seated on a golden pillow below him, she will fan him and pleasingly massage his feet and his hands. She never lies on the royal bed before the Emperor does, nor does she ever leave it after him. Before she does anything, she will inform her husband first and when given permission, she will then proceed. Never has she ever disobeyed her husband. Whatever she does or say, it is intended to please her husband. Only a Cakravarti King, and no other man, can be the husband of the Perfect Woman. She never acts disloyally to the Emperor.*

*Here ends this brief account of the **Perfect Woman.***

#### 4) Queen Asandhimitta

*At dawn on the same day, Queen Asandhimitta had arisen from her bed, bathed and prepared the food which included cooked rice, side dishes, and betel nuts and leaves, to be given to the 60,000 Buddhist monks. Having given to the monks, she poured the water of dedication of the merit and paid homage, after which she withdrew to the palace interior with her attendants.*

*Seated on a platform, she eyed the sugarcane stalks brought to King Dharmasoka by the devyata. She took one, peeled it and ate it in front of her entourage. This was just when King Dharmasoka was returning after sending off the monks. He noticed Queen Asandhimitta sitting among the ladies of the court eating sugarcane. Moved by her dignified beauty and with the love he had for her that was more than for all the other concubines. he teasingly remarked to her. "Who is this lady sitting here eating sugarcane among my concubines. Who is she with such a beautiful face? Are you an ordinary woman, or a dancer who has skilfully decorated herself?" He was standing in front of her when he playfully spoke these words.*



Having heard her husband's playful words, Queen Asandhimitta thought to herself: "My husband is a great king reigning over all the lords in Jambu continent. His power extends one yojana beneath the earth and one yojana above it. Devyata, garuda kings, naga kings, giants, heavenly musicians, male and female half-bird, half-human demi-beings, along with vidyadhara sorcerers, werewolves, jackals, lions, bears, yellow wildcats and tigers, all come to pay him respect and prostrate themselves before him. He also possesses an enormous number of elephants, horses, soldiers, and followers, and is endowed with invaluable assets such as silver, gold, and magical items. He is abundantly supplied with clothing, rice and water. My husband rules Jambu continent with all the lords, monks, brahmins, laymen and courtiers as his attendants and followers, just like Indra amidst all the devyata. Why then, when he saw me sitting eating sugarcane, would he have said these words as if he did not know me, why did he mock me asking who was that sitting here eating sugarcane. It is because he intended to mock and shame me, and to suggest that while he is truly powerful and immensely wealthy. I myself have no merit and thus live only by his grace."



Having contemplated thus, she formed unkind thoughts about her husband. Hence she answered: "My dear Lord, this sugarcane has never been grown by any man, but grew naturally in the Himavanta Forest. The devyata brought it to me due to my own merit. That is why I am eating it alone, solely from my own merit." Having heard this, King Dharmasoka thought to himself: "My wife considers herself to be endowed with merit. She must be assuming that I am living on her merits." He therefore answered her mockingly.

"Well then, Asandhimitta, if the devyata truly brought you this sugarcane from Himavanta due to your own merits, imply you not that all my royal possessions in this Jambu continent also resulted from your merits, and not mine. You dare to raise your merits to the level of the **Supreme Brahma** and hence lowered mine down to **Maha Avici, that Great Hell of No Respite**. If you really think that your merits are greater than mine, tomorrow I shall challenge you. In the morning, 60,000 monks will come and eat in the palace after which I shall offer 60,000 sets of robes for each and every one of them. So, tomorrow morning, you should provide me with 60,000 sets of robes. If you can do as I ask you, then I will humbly admit that you truly possess great merit and that your merit extends all over Jambu continent. However, if you fail



to do so, then tomorrow will show." Having said these words, he walked away.

When Queen Asandhimitta reflected on her husband's words, she was afflicted with great worry. She thought to herself: "My husband must have been infuriated with me to say that." She became burdened with grief and sorrow. From dusk to midnight, she tossed and turned on her golden pillow without a wink of sleep. She kept sighing with the worry of how she was going to find 60,000 sets of robes.

It happened that it was a full moon night, one for Uposatha observation. On every full moon night and on every moonless night, and also, on the eighth night of the waxing moon and on the eighth night of the waning moon, the Four Great Kings, the **Catulokapala**, who are the guardians of the four quarters of the earth, namely **King Kuveru**, **King Dhataratha**, **King Virupakkha**, and **King Virulahaka**, roam the land observing people committing good and evil deeds.

One of these guardians, King Kuveru, that is, the Great King Vaisaravana, who has yaksha demons as his attendants, was travelling south in his superb vehicle from his palace at Alakamanada in the north, when he happened to pass the bedroom window in the palace where Queen



*Asandhimitta was lying. He heard her sighing because she could not find the 60,000 sets of robes as challenged by her husband. King Vaisaravana descended from his celestial vehicle and approached her. He said : "Well, Asandhimitta, my lady, do not worry nor grieve. In a previous life you offered honey to a Lord Pacceka Buddha. Your merits are in abundance from this good deed, and you can now obtain the fruit of your own merits. So, do come and accept it." After having said this, the Great King Vaisaravana, with his magical power, produced a magic urn. Opening it, he offered it to Queen Asandhimitta. The urn was filled with heavenly cloth. He said: "Asandhimitta, if you need any cloth from this urn, simply lift the lid and pull the cloth out. No matter how much in quantity you need, it will never run out. No matter how long a piece you need, just imagine it and with your heart it will be there. If you need a short piece, likewise you only have to wish for it. Having thus spoken, the Great King Vaisaravana mounted his magic vehicle and went back to his Alakamanada Palace north of Sineru Mountain.*

*When morning came, King Dharmasoka offered food to all 60,000 monks. After they had finished eating, he respectfully offered them joss-sticks, candles, flowers and scented paste. Queen Asandhimitta had prepared beautifully*



arranged garlands of flowers in all kinds of colors. She had put them in a large golden container along with scented perfume, candles, and joss-sticks. She then put the magic urn with the celestial cloth inside another jewelled container and hid it inside another golden container like the first. She then asked her trusted maids to carry both along. When Queen Asandhimitta and her attendants arrived, she helped present the food to all the monks and venerated them with flowers, candles, joss-sticks, scented perfume and oil, betel nuts and betel leaves. Having done so, she seated herself beside King Dharmasoka.

Seeing Queen Asandhimitta beside him, King Dharmasoka said: "Well, my dear Asandhimitta, please bring me now 60,000 sets of robes so that I can offer them to these 60,000 monks." When she had heard his command, she humbly answered: "My dear Lord, I will now present you with 60,000 sets of robes. So, please proceed with your offerings as you wish." After having said that, she then opened the jewelled container and lifted the magic urn out with her left hand. With her right hand, she opened the lid, put it down, and gently pulled out pieces of cloth, one after another, until there was enough for all the monks. First she presented one piece to King Dharmasoka. He accepted it and offered it to the head monk, who is the eldest. This piece of cloth was so fine it was as



if it had been obtained from the Kalpavriksha tree in the Utarakura continent.

Then she continued to pull pieces of cloth from the magic urn and they were offered to each of the 60,000 monks, In so doing, she never ran out of celestial cloth for the urn remained as full as before. This proved a wonder to King Dharmasoka and he was overwhelmed with joy. He remained seated and worshipped the monks. Hence the monks acknowledged his alms-giving and departed accompanied by the King to the main palace gate.

When he returned to the palace, he said to Queen Asandhimitta: "My Asandhimitta, my Precious Lady, from today onward I grant you all of my land, city, palace, royal residences, elephants, horses, servants, soldiers, precious jewels and gems, and all of my 16,000 concubines. Will you be their mistress? In future, when you wish to do anything, you should do as you wish and you will always have my full consent."

Even with this permission from her lord, Queen Asandhimitta, who considered herself merely his humble servant, never did anything to contradict her husband. She would always ask permission from her husband before doing anything, no matter how unimportant it was. If King



*Dharmasoka had not yet dined, she would never dine before him, nor did she sleep before him. She would only go to sleep after him; and never would she wake up after him. She always woke up before him. Queen Asandhimitta was endowed with good manners and intelligence and was very much loved by people and she befriended a lot of people. She knew how to speak and was never lazy or idle. Thus she was the Queen who could govern 16,000 concubines.*

*When the concubines who had once been King Dharmasoka's favorites saw the King's great love for Lady Asandhimitta, they became jealous and talked maliciously to one another as follows: "Our Master must think that Asandhimitta is the only woman in this world. No other woman ever occupies his mind. That is the way he thinks! He never sees us with both his eyes!"*

*Their jealous remarks reached King Dharmasoka's ears. The King reflected thus: "What these women have said shows them to be quite ignorant. They have spoken ill and maligned a lady of great merit. What lady can compare with the charismatic Lady Asandhimitta. They do not realize her great merit. Because they are so ignorant. I will have to make these women aware of the great merit of Asandhimitta."*



*One day, the King ordered 16,000 sweet rice dumplings made. When they were brought to him, he took off his ring and inserted it in one of the dumplings. He placed the dumpling with the ring on top of the others. Then he called all his 16,000 concubines to assemble, and spoke to them as follows: "Ladies, of all the sweet rice dumplings in this gold container, should any one please you, take it. Hold it in your hand. After you all have taken from the 16,000 dumplings there will be just one left. I will give the last dumpling to Asandhimitta. In one of these 16,000 dumplings I have put a ring taken from my finger, and made a wish that the lady who has the greatest merit shall take the dumpling with the ring. Each of you may now make your wish and choose one dumpling from the gold container."*

*Then all 16,000 wives picked the dumplings of their choice from the gold container, but none could take the dumpling with the ring. This dumpling remained in the gold container. The King then bade the Lady Asandhimitta to take it. She rose and walked gracefully to the gold container, picked up the dumpling and held it in her hand. The King then spoke to his ladies as follows: "O ladies, each of you now has a dumpling in your hand. Break it open. Whichever of you has my ring, bring it to me so that I will know who is the meritorious one."*



*At once, all 16,000 concubines broke open the dumplings in their hands. But none of them had the ring. Then, the King took the dumpling from the hand of the Lady Asandhimitta and, bidding all the women to look, broke it open. He took the ring from the dumpling before their very eyes.*

*The King, then addressed the assembly as follows: "The Lady Asandhimitta is more meritorious than you all. You did not know that she had merit accumulated from previous lives, so you criticised me for loving her. That is why I have had to demonstrate her merit."*

*Hearing the King's words, the Lady Asandhimitta wanted to show further the merit she had accumulated from her previous lives. So she held the magic urn in her left hand and, with her right hand, pulled out 1,000 pieces of heavenly cloth. She laid them at the feet of King Dharmasoka in the presence of all 16,000 concubines. Then the Lady Asandhimitta pulled out more magic cloth from the urn. To the provincial princes she gave 5,000 pieces each, to these princes' sons 100 pieces each, to noblemen 50 pieces each, to the wives of the provincial princes 50 pieces each, to high-ranking officers and ministers 50 pieces each, to all 16,000 wives of the King 25 pieces each, and to all citizens of Pataliputra City, both men and women, 22 pieces each. There was none who was not given pieces of the heavenly cloth.*



*When King Dharmasoka, and the princes, officers and citizens who were there assembled, saw the Lady Asandhimitta endlessly pulling the cloth from the magic urn, they marvelled greatly and shouted their praises. Their cries reverberated to all corners of the earth. As for King Dharmasoka, when he saw so much of such beautiful cloth as had never been seen before, he also greatly marvelled and wished to know the full extent of the merit that the Lady Asandhimitta had made in the past. He therefore spoke to her as follows: "O Queen Asandhimitta, I see you in possession of this crystal urn and I am filled with doubt because I do not know how you obtained it. Please tell me, so I can rejoice in your merit."*

*Then the Lady Asandhimitta made ready to tell of the merit she had accumulated in previous lives. She told the King as follows: "Your Majesty, in a previous life I gave a handkerchief to a non-teaching (Patyeka) Buddha. King Vaisaravana the Great was my witness. And when you challenged me the other day to find 60,000 sets of monastic robes for 60,000 monks. I thought I would fail. I was greatly distressed and tossed about in misery in my bed. King Vaisaravana and his demon ministers happened to pass by a window of my palace. He heard me sighing for the monastic robes. He left his carriage and came near to where I was lying. And*



then he addressed me as follows : O Queen Asandhimitta, do not grieve at all. Do you not remember that, in a previous life, you gave a handkerchief to a (Pacceka) Patyeka Buddha. Do not grieve, for the merit in giving to the non-teaching Buddha then will yield heavenly cloth now. So saying, King Vaisaravana put a crystal urn in my hands and taught me as follows: 'If you have any use for cloth, hold this casket in your left hand and with your right hand pull the end of the cloth. Thus you will obtain heavenly cloth from this magic urn.' Ever since I received this crystal casket from King Vaisaravana, I have been able to obtain any cloth I wish. If I want white cloth, I shall get it. If I want crimson cloth, I shall get it. If I want black cloth, I shall get it. If I want yellow cloth, I shall get it. If I want a light red cloth, I shall get it. If I wish for any cloth of any color, I shall get it. If I wish to pave the Jambu continent, which is 10,000 yojana across, with cloth from this magic urn, this cloth will not be exhausted. This is because of my merit in giving a handkerchief to a non-teaching Buddha in the past, and the merit has thus reverted to me."

In demonstrating to King Dharmasoka the result of the merit she had made in the past, the Lady Asandhimitta also taught the King. She went on to teach him in the following



*Dharma verse: "O my Lord and King, it is hard for angels and for men who are born in this world to encounter the Lord Buddha, the Dharma, and the Holy Order. So those who are wise should try to make merit in order to attain the nine transcendental Dharmas and gain the City of Nibbana. O my Lord, it is difficult to be born a human being in this world. And for those who have already been born human beings, it is difficult to have faith and to believe in the principles of merit and of sin. Furthermore, even with faith and belief in the principles of merit and sin, it is difficult to find an opportunity to hear the Lord Buddha's teachings. And, even if the Lord Buddha's teachings are heard, it is difficult to remember them and to relay them on to others. O my Lord, although it is difficult to be born a human being, you have had the experience. Although it is difficult to be a person who has faith in the Lord Buddha's religion and knows the principles of merit and sin, you have had the experience. Although it is difficult to have faith and to find an opportunity to listen to the Buddha's teachings, you have had this experience. Although it is difficult to listen to the Lord Buddha's teachings and to remember them and to preach them to others for the future, you have had experience in this. All these things are difficult to accomplish, but you have had experience in them all. Therefore, I urge Your Majesty to from now on take up*



*religious practices. Listen to sermons, observe the precepts and make merit in the religion of the Lord Buddha. It is very difficult for us to encounter the religion of the Lord Buddha. As for the merit and the Dharma made in the religion of the Lord Buddha, of the non-teaching Buddhas, and of all the arahanta, and the Khinasava saints, the results of such are uncountable and uncalculable. For these reasons, then, from now on may Your Majesty persevere in making merit, giving alms, listening to sermons, observing the precepts, restraining from anger, and associating with good friends. May Your Majesty not be careless about the Dharma for even one moment."*

*After King Dharmasoka had heard these instructive words from Queen Asandhimitta, he spoke to her as follows : "O Asandhimitta, from now on I will listen to your words. From now on whatever you say, O Meritorious One, I will believe you,"*

*Thenceforth, the powerful King Dharmasoka steadfastly practised the Dharma. He erected 84,000 cetiya memorials containing holy relics of the Lord Buddha in the middle of every city in Jambu continent. He had 84,000 monasteries built. And he gave 60,000 trays of food to 60,000 monks daily for the rest of his life.*







## AYUTTHAYA PERIOD

The Kingdom of Ayutthaya was first founded in A.D. 1350. It had grown over 400 years from a small city-state into a major kingdom on the vast Chao Phraya River basin, comprising three allied towns: Suphan Buri, Ayutthaya and Lop Buri.

Surrounded by water, Ayutthaya was built on a strategic site, suitable for both defensive and offensive warfare. This was during a period when there was no powerful artillery and waterways still served as major communication routes. The growth of Ayutthaya was not without obstacles. For over a century after its establishment, Ayutthaya had to wage many war to consolidate its power and extend its territory over other neighbouring states.

The first ruler of the Kingdom had, from its inception, chosen the title "Ayodhya" or "Ayutthaya", which means the "Invincible City", probably because he already had a vision of warfare to be waged by a large kingdom. The name "Ayutthaya" is in contrast with "Sukhothai", the "City of



Happiness", the name of a former capital city which it superceded. Endowed with massive manpower and expansive land area, Ayutthaya was engaged for hundreds of years in wars with Hongsawadi, another large kingdom to the west, with its seat of power on the Irrawadi River basin. These protracted wars incurred a great deal of losses in national resources and eventually was the primary cause of Ayutthaya's downfall.

Every few years or so, Ayutthaya would get ready to engage in a battle which became a way of life for its inhabitants. There was an efficient drafting system for the entire population. The labour recruitment system had developed into a complex commoner system, with a precise categorization of types of commoners and recruitment periods. With trade expansion, the Thai-style tax system, the "suai", became correspondingly complex.

Ayutthaya warfare concentrated more on manpower rather than territorial acquisition. War captives formed the basis for Ayutthaya's slavery system. These prisoners of war and their families were not entitled to become Thai citizens and were reduced to slavery with no redemption.





*Ancient ruins at Ayutthaya*



It could be said, therefore, that warfare was the major cause of the commoner and slave classes. These two classes, in turn, formed the basis for the traditional Thai social stratification.

Taking these developments into account, one should find it easy to understand how warfare had an overpowering influence on contemporary literature, values and attitudes. Most literary work of the Ayutthaya Period including *Lilit Phra Lo* and *Lilit Yuan Phai* sang the praises of great warriors or were written by the warriors themselves. In this respect, elephants were highly valued since they were indispensable to warfare. White elephants especially enjoyed an exceedingly high status, and literary works were composed in their celebration.

Religion was a major uniting force for the old kingdom since religious belief strengthened political legitimacy. Buddhism became the major inspiration to the literature of this period. Several renowned literary works based on Buddhist tales of the Lord Buddha's incarnations or the *Jataka*, including *Maha Chat Kham Luang*, *Samutthakhot Kham Chan* and *Sangthong*.



Buddhist monasteries constituted a pool of national scholars. Buddhist monks commanded a great deal of respect from the people. Several major poets such as Phra Maha Nak wrote while in monkhood. The popular *Khun Chang-Khun Phaen* was composed by a number of learned men who had been educated in Buddhist temples.

As for the common people, their main livelihood is agro-based since the regions around Ayutthaya were fertile lands on which rice crop could be planted in great abundance. Rice-farming was a lucrative occupation requiring modest labour and yielding rich produce. Throughout its 400 years of history, the people of the Kingdom of Ayutthaya did not have to face much hardship, a factor which was to have an impact on Thai literary creation. Beyond the rice-field were also rich forest lands on which the people could rely for their daily subsistence. The surplus which was considerable could be traded off in the form of barter. With the advent of foreign trade, the people of Ayutthaya took the initiative to engage in exporting natural products from the forest. In literary term, we encounter various instances in which people and forest formed a harmonious unity. Many literary works of this period contained exquisite description of journeys through the forest.



Against such background of simple living under rather propitious natural surroundings, the common people of Ayutthaya took pleasure in composing impromptu literary works that were communicated orally. In contradiction to the more ritually conscious works of the royal court, folk literature consequently took the form of performing arts as well as of stories and tales.

The economic trends developed further to such a stage where rich bourgeois could assert themselves in the city. Furthermore, they accumulated wealth and power through a system of taxation in which the government farmed out the collection of taxes to wealthy bidders who, in turn, tyrannized the people.

In the well-known epic-romance of *Khun Chang-Khun Phaen* the conflicts between the bourgeois and those in the king's service reflected clearly class rivalry, prevalent in Ayutthaya in those days. In a way, the enmity between Khun Chang and Khun Phaen, which most critics considered to have stemmed from the divided allegiance of Wanthong, could also be interpreted as having social and political implications.



The presence of foreigners in Ayutthaya did have the bearing on the status of women. Some Thai women married wealthy foreign merchants, thereby acquiring a higher social status for themselves, and at the same time, jeopardizing the religious hegemony in the country. Consequently, a law was decreed whereby women were prohibited from marrying foreigners.

Thai society at that time was marked by its own class system consisting of two major groups: commoners and slaves who were the ruled, and kings and noblemen who were the rulers. This dual system was extended to gender classification, and women were relegated to the group of the ruled. This very same arrangement applied also to their family way of life: when they were young, they were under the care of parents; when married, they were cared for by their husbands and in old age, they were looked after by their children.

Consequently, Thai women or ladies projected an image of those who served. They were not required to make a decision in love and marriage. They followed their men's wishes like "the hind legs of an elephant". They had to get up before and go to bed after their husbands. They kept their houses clean and orderly. They had to be stoic, patient, and



tolerant, never complaining under the severest hardship. Their obedience and loyalty to husbands were unshakable. Those women in literature who had no such attributes or had the opposite, such as Wanthong, had to suffer an appalling fate. Others like Matsi and Laksanawadi or the women in *Nirat* whose roles were passive and subservient were considered the ideal types in Ayutthaya literature.

What may have been taken up in Ayutthaya literature in terms of inequality between man and woman was incorporated in a somewhat radical manner into the Law of the Three Seals which was in use right up to the early Rattanakosin (Bangkok) Period. In this particular legislation, women's role was marginalized to a deplorable degree. A woman has to acquiesce in polygamy as commonly practised by Thai men; she was subjected on occasions to corporeal punishment by her husband. She owed her husband a formal apology if ever she dared to offend him verbally. If accused of adultery and found guilty, she would be humiliated in public. In case of a divorce, the wife would have to return the wedding gifts, and the property accumulated in the course of their marriage would be divided unequally in favour of the husband.



In point of fact, what women in literature had to suffer was but a pale reflection of the onus they had to bear in real life.

What was described above pertained more to court literature. It would appear that women in folk literature enjoyed a greater measure of freedom and respect. Folk literature then, was a faithful representation of the commoner's life in which mutual regards between man and woman were still possible. This was due to the fact that the family arrangements were such that the husband had to leave the family for a total period of six months per year to serve the royal *corvée*. Women were therefore placed in a privileged position as the mainstay of family life where they could wield an immense influence on the upbringing of children, on the family economy and on their livelihood. Unfortunately as already described above, these great merits were rarely recorded in written literature. It must therefore be realized that the excerpts presented below can give only a partial image of Thai women in Ayutthaya society.





## KHLONG KAMSUAN

*Khlong Kamsuan* is regarded as a gem among Thai classical literary works. Despite its title, it is one of the masterpieces of the *Nirat* genre, a genre that perfectly suits Thai poetic genius. The *Nirat* has had an august lineage and most distinguished poets, both classical and modern, have, at one time or another, tried their hand at it. Arising in the mid-Ayutthaya Period as a form of love poetry, it has proved to be a poetic vehicle of immense potential and resiliency. In its early manifestations, the *Nirat* is an expression of the poet's longing for his loved one, the physical absence serving to intensify the desire for reunion. It can be said that with the advent of the *Nirat*, Thai poetry gives legitimacy to a personalized mode of expression.

This development does not necessarily preclude other kinds of experiences, and the *Nirat* often functions as a record of a journey, imaginary or real as the case may be. These poets in love, often times posing as what is known in French as "mourants et soupirants", need not become oblivious of the outer world. Scholarly efforts have gone into



reconstructing, sometimes successfully, an actual journey, such as in the case of *Khlong Kamsuan*.

*Khlong Kamsuan* begins with the eulogy of the city of Ayutthaya, glorifying the beauty of the palaces, the monasteries, the turrets, the city gates and so on. Then the happiness and well-being of the citizens catch the poet's attention. After that we hear about the woman he is leaving behind. He praises her beauty, grieves on having to leave her, wonders whom he might ask to guard and protect her.

On his journey, he describes the passing trails and everything he sees to remind him of his beloved. He also compares his miseries of parting with those of many characters in other literary works. His grief increases as the ship sails over the stormy sea. Here the reader trembles with him as he encounters the towering waves and the howling winds. He longs for his sweet love and ends his message by asking her to keep his letter under her pillow as her companion in bed.

The poet's choice of words and the way he weaves them into his rhyme have been loved, admired and honoured down the centuries although the authorship of this work has not been conclusively established.



## Excerpts

### Stanza 14

*Shall I ask Indra to guard thee?  
The God might fly thee up to Heaven.  
Shall I let Earth keep thee then?  
The King on Earth might claim thee for his own.*

### Stanza 15

*Shall I ask Water to guard thee?  
If Naga wronged thee my heart would break.  
The Three Worlds have I searched, and found  
Thy own heart thy best guardian.*

### Stanza 30

*My heart aches away from my love.  
I mope and moan and wail and weep.  
Pain like a thorn pierces my breast  
As my adored one must cry alone.*

### Stanza 34

*The lofty trees stand tongueless.  
Nothing of her can they tell me.  
I pine for thee, my love, say I  
To each and all the trees.*

Stanza 35

*How sad am I, how sick inside.  
So far, so long, away from thee.  
O my dearest, art thou asleep,  
Or sitting, sobbing, or strangling thyself?*

Stanza 37

*Rock-strong thou art, my sweet,  
Yet a rock needs earth to rest upon.  
Look, beloved, where the earth meets the sky  
And holds it fair and steady.*

Stanza 38

*Here I am on the Field of Gems.  
How empty! As if swept by the Field Spirit.  
I gaze at the moist sky; my face wet with tears,  
My heart sickened by lack of thee.*

Stanza 41

*O my love, a deadly agony is mine.  
I know not if I live or die.  
My tears flow like blood, heavier than rain.  
Louder than thunder, my cries for thee.*



*Stanza 129*

*Place this writing 'neath thy pillow.  
Peruse it not in play but in earnest.  
Sleep with it. 'Tis thy friend in bed  
Each passing night and day.*







## LILIT PHRA LO

The epic poem *Lilit Phra Lo* has always been considered one of the great masterpieces of Thai literature. Written during the early Ayutthaya Period (14th century A.D.), it depicts the fate of starcrossed lovers whose death-marked love and uncontrolled passion inevitably lead them to a tragic end.

The story, believed to have been drawn from a romantic legend of Northern Thailand, is based on the familiar love theme in which innocent lovers fall victims to the "ancient grudge". In this epic poem, Phra Lo, the young king of Suang Kingdom, is renowned for his valour, grace and unsurpassed physical perfection. His fame travels far and wide until it reaches the ears of Phuen and Phaeng, the young princesses of the Kingdom of Song, the bitterest foe of Suang. Enchanted by Phra Lo's attractiveness and consumed by an inexplicable yearning for the king of Suang, the royal maidens, with the help of their two faithful attendants, set about the task of luring Phra Lo to the realm of Song. By using magical powers, they succeed in making Phra Lo leave





*Phra Lo*



his kingdom, his devoted mother and his loyal wife, and come to them in Song. Their love is fulfilled, but their lives are destroyed by the "ancient grudge" long nursed in the vengeful heart of Phuen and Phaeng's step-grandmother, whose husband, the former king of Song, having died at the hand of Phra Lo's father.

The four excerpts given here represent the different roles women play in this famous work.

The first excerpt shows how the high-born ladies use their feminine guiles to get the man of their desire without jeopardizing the behavioural standards expected of women of their status.

The second excerpt portrays a mother whose devotion to her son, Phra Lo, is of such magnitude that she plans his whole life even before conception. After vainly trying to combat the magical powers which bring about her son's strange behaviour, she accepts her defeat with dignity.

The third excerpt tells about the archetypal wife who looks up to her husband as a protector whose presence is essential to her everyday existence. She tries to deter him from undertaking the dangerous journey to the Kingdom of

Song. Realizing that her effort has failed, she resigns to her fate and lets him go.

The fourth excerpt reflects a male concept of the priorities given to the women in his life.

The fifth and last excerpt demonstrates royal valour and the determination of the two princesses who stand beside the man they love until death. It is the climax of the romance.

## Excerpts

1) The love-stricken twin princesses of the Kingdom of Song pined for Phra Lo of whose beguiling looks they had heard from travellers and minstrels. Seeing the royal maidens' listlessness, the two attendants asked the princesses what sickness ailed them. (nos. 30–34)

30

*“Oh, cousins, of whom are voices raised?*

*In whose praise do all the world sing?*

*Is your sleep so deep you forget to wake?*

*Think, sisters; beg not us to speak.”*





*Phuen and Phaeng*



31

*“Fret over this no more, dear loves.  
We shall undertake to find ways.  
To bring the king to consort with both.  
To him veiled summons shall be made.”*

32

*“Wrong thoughts are shameful, cousins,  
Women enticing men to love.  
Better to die of longing  
For we love he who knows us not.”*

33

*“Such thoughts are not wrong, my loves,  
Wiles woven for love are always right.  
To every shaman we shall go,  
How then could he resist their spells?”*

34

*Inwardly both were pleased      outwardly both denied  
replying that it was a disgrace      of goodness there  
was naught      aught anyone should discover      royal  
daughters would be shamed      defamed the world  
over      in what corner would we hide      deep inside  
the two companions understood*



2) Realizing that the love spells cast over her son, Phra Lo, were too strong for anyone to prevent him from leaving his kingdom in quest of the princesses of Song, the Dowager Queen Boonlua wept and spoke of her love and care for him even before his conception. (nos. 183–190; 199–200)

183

*As though dying she wept and beat her breast,  
“Mother’s words repeated over years wasted,  
Is your karma haunting you, oh king?  
Knowing yet not knowing, distraught and perplexed.*

184

*“Seven full days spent in retreat, my son,  
I garnered merits enough to fill the sky,  
All to conceive an heir with righteous heart,  
That was how I came to bear you, my son.*

185

*“Through full ten months that I bore you my son  
Not for one moment did I neglect myself.  
From the minute you saw the light of day,  
I held and bathed you with tenderest care.*

186

*“And three times a day I fed you,  
Not letting anyone treat you wrongly.  
I protected you, sharer of my life,  
And tended you till you could feed yourself.*

187

*“With care I prepared your repast  
Never overlooking the minutest part,  
Tasting and dressing every dish,  
Never trusting others to take my place.*

188

*“I nurtured you since infancy  
Till you grew into manhood  
And mounted this royal throne.  
Your parting would kill me with grief?*

189

*“In life I had hoped for haven in you,  
In death for your care of my remains,  
Now that you are leaving my bosom  
Who will light your mother’s funeral pyre?*



190

*“Beyond holding back, sovereign lord,  
Beyond heeding your mother’s words,  
My heart is weighed with grief;  
Remaining here to burn in sadness.”...*

199

*“Thrive and grow in glory and might,  
Be you untroubled by all ills,  
Let all foes succumb to your powers,  
Be joyful and untouched by woes.*

200

*“May you have your wish with the two,  
May you not be snared by their charms,  
May you not forget Mother’s teachings,  
May you soon return to this brave kingdom.”*

3) Leaving his mother, Phra Lo proceeded to bid farewell to his lovely wife, the gentle Laksanawadi. (nos. 208–219)

208

*Then to the Queen’s chamber  
To bid her farewell.*

209

*"I am leaving you behind but grieve not  
For soon I shall come back to you."*

210

*Tears overflowed her eyes  
Almost turning into blood.*

211

*"With all my devotion, would you leave me  
To remain all alone?"*

212

*"Beasts on your way you may encounter,  
Ghosts may haunt and play tricks on your eye.*

213

*"For you I fear imminent dangers, here behind I suffer  
As if the light is extinguished from both my eyes.*

214

*"Let me keep you here to protect me,  
Do not go forth, my Lord."*



The adamant Phra Lo said to her in reply,

215

*“Unlasting are all things in this world.  
Only merits and sins are certain,  
Following you inexorably like shadows,  
Joys and sorrows are wrought by them.”*

216

*“Fevered and sad to part with my love.  
Wrong may I be to leave love for love.  
Should I remain, flames would consume my heart,  
Leave you I must but shall soon return.”*

217

*“If you go hence and consort with the two,  
Would you ever come back to me?  
Think not, hope not that they would set you free.  
For they will imprison you in their embrace.”*

218

*“Not from hate do I forsake you.  
No distance can sever our love,  
A lotus leaves a gossamer thread when plucked,  
Fret not for I ne'er forget my dear beloved.”*





*Phra Lo and Laksanawadi*



219

*Beyond powers to restrain she yielded to fate,  
In woeful lamentation she laid her tearful face  
Against the kings feet and, in homage,  
Wiped them with her long, loosened hair.*

4) And yet on approaching the Kingdom of Song, Phra Lo ruminated: (no. 290)

290

*Less than a wife is a hundred lovers,  
Less than a mother a thousand wives,  
Hard it is to give birth and rear a child,  
To you, dear Mother, so much is owed.*

5) Following a short period of idyllic love with the twin princesses in the hostile Kingdom of Song, the presence of Phra Lo was discovered and the vengeful Dowager Queen Grandmother of the princesses sent palace guards to besiege the lovers with orders to capture Phra Lo whose father had killed her husband in a battle years before Phra Lo's birth. The three lovers and their four companions put

up a valiant resistance until their four companions fell at the hands of the guards. Seeing their end drawing near, the princesses vowed to die with Phra Lo. (nos. 601–603 ; 607)

601

*“Don’t ever doubt us, dearest lord,  
Death we choose rather than part with you.  
Tarry not in life, our beloved lord,  
No other time is more right for death.*

602

*“Perished we shall be born together,  
Together we shall enjoy our place in heaven.  
To live is to be derided by the living,  
To live without you, we would rather die.*

603

*“Why wait when the four dared to die?  
Would we, a king’s daughters, forsake you?  
Loving life, we fear cruel shame.  
Loving you, with you we shall die.”...*



607

*The two princesses were fearless they stood braced  
for the blasts they stood fast by the king palace  
guards pelting poisoned arrows that spiked the  
noble three till blood flowed free and fast as  
one they faced their foes seeming as though sculpted  
all expired the same moment standing unbent as  
though alive...*







## CHANTHAKHOROP

*Chanthakhorop* is a folk tale which has been passed down orally through centuries. The story is often used in performances especially in the genre of folk theatre known as *likay*. In common with other oral tales, there are several written versions. The best known is the rhymed version believed to have been composed in the early Rattanakosin Period. The manuscript, now in the archives of the National Library, is probably the work of more than one writer, judging by the unevenness in the quality of the prosody, with parts of the story missing. Like all folk tales told in rhyme, *Chanthakhorop* is long, rambling and unfinished.

Though the authorship is unknown, its world-view leaves practically no doubt that the writers (or writer) were male. The story takes the form of a cautionary tale to teach young men about the dangers of fickleness in women. The rhymes open with strong words against Mora, the first of the two leading female characters, making the purpose of the tale perfectly clear.

*Here goes the tale of a wicked, treacherous woman  
That all noble young men should be advised against.*

The story is memorable for its first part in which Mora plays the dominating role, while the second part which is virtually forgotten, features the heroine, Mutchalin, imbued with ideal feminine virtues. Mora belongs to the rare breed of "anti-heroines" in the traditional Thai literature in that she lacks the essential womanly quality, namely, faithfulness. When Chanthakhorop, her husband, is attacked by a band of bandits, he asks Mora to hand him his dagger. Wavering between the two men, the gentle prince on the one hand and the valiant bandit on the other, she hands over the dagger in such a way that its handle is turned towards the bandit, who seizes it and kills Chanthakhorop. Mora is duly punished by gods and men: the bandit abandons her in the jungle and the god Indra turns her into a pathetic hairy creature, the gibbon, who swings herself from tree to tree in eternal search for her husband, vainly calling for him at every sunset because the redness in the sky reminds her of his blood.

Despite their obvious condemnation of Mora, the rhymers put together her character with details that engage the sympathy of the modern reader. Excerpts presented here



make us wonder whether or not Mora's "sins" are attributable to men's actions.

1. Birth of Mora. Mora owes her existence to a rishi who transforms a peacock feather into a beautiful woman contained in an ornate jar. She is created by magic for the sole purpose of becoming Chanthakhorop's consort.

2. Chanthakhorop discovering Mora. Curiosity prompts Chanthakhorop to open the jar during his journey home through the forest despite his promise to the rishi not to do so until he has reached his father's kingdom. Mora emerges from the jar and becomes property of the first man who courts her—for her, choice does not exist.

3. Mora handing the dagger. This is the part that marks Mora out as "bad" woman in Thai literature because of her desire for both men. In her dilemma she extends the dagger in equal reach of both men. The bandit takes the handle which happens to turn towards him and kills Chanthakhorop.

4. Indra punishing Mora. Indra transforms himself into a hawk and tests the hungry Mora with a piece of meat. When he finds that she is willing to give herself to him in

return for the meat, he condemns her promiscuity— “Two men, and now a beast” – and turns her into a gibbon.

## Excerpts

1) The verse tale begins with lines cautioning young men against wicked women and goes on to relate how young Prince Chanthakhorop left his father's kingdom for a distant jungle to seek a rishi who could teach him martial arts and the art of kingship. After years of studies and training, old rishi told him that it was time for him to return to his kingdom. The prince bade farewell to his teacher.

*Here goes the tale of a wicked, treacherous woman  
That all noble young men should be advised against.*

.....

*The Rishi sadly embraced his beloved protege.  
So graceful and sublime was the prince  
That no earthly woman could be worthy of him.  
A fitting paramour must thus be created.  
Contemplating this he conjured an ornate jar,  
That glittered and sparkled in bright splendour  
And with magic touch placed the delicate feather*



*Of a gorgeous bird-- "Mora"\* its name,  
Securely closing the sparkling lid,  
He chanted magic verses.  
Mora feather became a beauteous woman,  
Exquisite in her perfect loveliness,  
A woman conceived in a resplendent jar:  
On the lid he imprinted her name,  
"Mora" of uncomparable beauty.  
Handing the jar to the prince, he said,  
"Take it, for its fame will spread far and wide.  
Once reaching your parents and kingdom  
You will reign a great and all-conquering king."*

---

\*Mora: peacock

2) Chanthakhorop left the rishi with the magic jar, whose content was a mystery to him, and journeyed home through the jungle. He had given the rishi his promise not to open the jar until he reached his palace.

*Fifteen days by approximate count,  
From the day he left the rishi's Ashram,\*  
Chanthakhorop bore with all the hardships  
Time came when fate caused fire  
To flame hot in his heart.  
He rested on a sloping stone slab  
Out of the searing rays of the sun.  
Picking up the bright glittering jar,  
The prince wondered about the secret inside.  
And reflecting on in puzzlement,  
The rishi's words were forgotten.  
Impatient, he opened the forbidden lid  
And saw the woman whose peerless beauty,  
Bright as a shining moon,  
Beguiled his heart.*

---

\*Ashram: hermitage



3) Having taken Mora as his consort, Chanthakhorop continued his journey in the company of the lovely Mora. A bandit with his hoard of five hundred men saw the prince and the woman. Attracted by the beauty of Mora, he ordered his men to take Chanthakhorop's life but the prince easily killed them all. The bandit and the prince then fought a man-to-man combat which lasted into the night.

*The moon shone bright  
Lighting the sky and the jungle.  
With one hand the bandit seized the prince's bow,  
With the other he seized the woman's wrist  
And fiercely struggled to win her.  
The woman felt love for the bandit  
Who fought such deadly battle for love  
At the loss of so much of his band.  
Feeling love, too, for her husband,  
The woman's heart was divided in two.  
Pulling back his captured bow,  
The husband held her with the other hand.  
Dragged back and forth between prince and bandit,  
The woman was caught in the middle.  
The bandit held her right wrist,  
The husband held fast to her left,*

*Calling to his lovely Mora,  
"Hand me the dagger -- here, on this side."  
The greedy, unsatiated woman,  
Was blinded with desire for both.  
To help the husband, she feared for the rogue,  
To help the rogue, she feared for the husband.  
In the middle she thrust the weapon and laid it down.  
Towards the bandit turned the handle  
The deadly blade pointed towards the husband.  
The rogue grabbed at the dagger,  
Sharp blade slipped the prince's hand,  
The rogue slashed at him  
Until he fell to the ground,  
His hand loosening from hers.*



4) Chanthakhorop's untimely death disturbed the God Indra. Knowing its cause, he decided to test Mora's morality to see whether she was worthy to remain a human being.

*In falcon form, the God Indra  
Wooed the woman with devious words.  
"With whole heart I love you at first glance  
But I know not your heart.  
Ask for this piece of meat, already in my beak,  
And I shall not refuse.  
I yearn for your love  
But you would refuse it, if asked.  
If your love matches mine  
I would give you my very heart  
And follow you everywhere  
Not caring for my own life."  
The woman heard the falcon's words  
And overlooked the difference in kind.  
With female wiles, she replied,  
"You know that I did ask for it,  
So you tricked me with words of love.  
Should I be indebted to you  
I would surely return your favours."  
Hearing this the Falcon Indra realized*

*That she would love him.  
In sweet deceit, he cunningly declared,  
"Subtle meanings I understand not.  
If you accept it, you shall have my love,  
Trust me and fear not."  
The woman believed what she heard  
And assented with ready glee.  
"If you favour me, please give me the meat  
To save me from death."  
Scathingly the God Indra replied,  
"Even to beasts in the wilderness  
You give consent when merely asked.  
Only mention love and love granted  
To be forgotten ere long enjoyed.  
Your easy heart selects not!  
Wife to a loving husband,  
Yet with a bandit you enjoyed.  
The rogue tasted and left,  
Is that not yet enough to satisfy?  
Two men and one beast must it take  
To slake your desires.*

.....

.....

*Let it be known the world over*



*That this treacherous woman  
Be undesired by men for as long as she lives.  
Only black semians would her mates be,  
As deserved she who killed her husband.  
May she take the form of hairy semians  
'Gibbon' she be called."*  
*As Indra's curse ended,  
The exquisite Mora changed  
Into a beast covered with hair  
With not a stitch of garment over her body.  
Alone in nakedness she roamed.  
Vague were her memories of the human tongue,  
But clear were those of her husband's murder.  
Her human instinct of shame vanished  
So she climbed and exhibited herself on trees.  
When setting sun reddened the sky,  
She recalled her husband's blood.  
Swinging from branch to branch  
In human tongue would she call for him.*





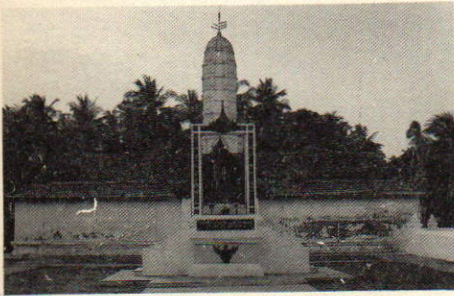
## THE FIRST THREE REIGNS OF THE RATTANAKOSIN PERIOD

The early Rattanakosin Period was devoted to the reconstruction of the kingdom and the restoration of the people's morale in the aftermath of the long protracted war with Burma that lasted from the late Ayutthaya Period through the Thon Buri Period. On his accession to the throne, the founder of the new dynasty, King Rama I, built a new capital city on the east bank of the Chao Phraya River. Formally known in brief as Rattanakosin City, Bangkok was modelled after the city of Ayutthaya in its full glory, resplendent with glorious palaces and glittering temples. In those days materialistic and spiritual progress went hand in hand. The ancient Buddhist Scripture—the Tripitaka—was revised while the Law of the Three Seals, dating from the Ayutthaya Period, was completely overhauled. Throughout these years of political, religious and economic consolidation, art and culture, especially literature, was raised to new heights.

The First Reign could be called the renaissance of art and culture inherited from the Ayutthaya Period: Poets, artists and craftsmen who had been trained in the Ayutthaya



*King Rama I*



*King Rama II*

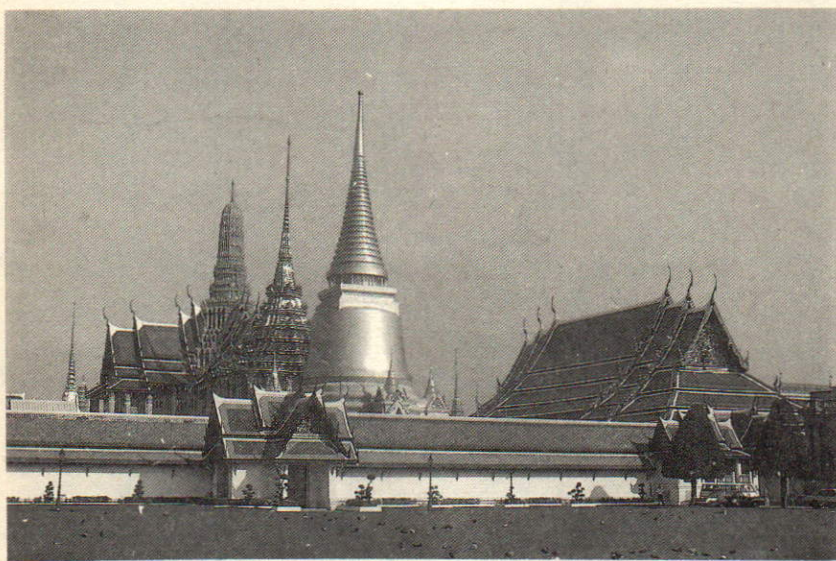


*King Rama III*





*The Grand Palace*

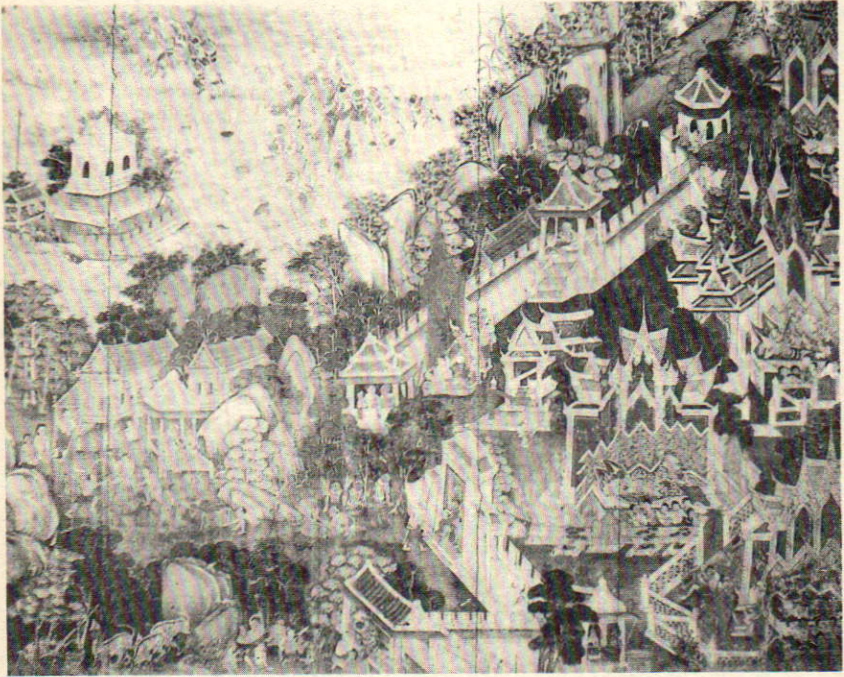


*The Temple of Emerald Buddha*



artistic tradition were taken under royal patronage. Under the King's guidance, major literary works of the Ayutthaya Period were collected, revised and rewritten. These works such as *Ramakian*, *Unarut*, *Inao*, *Dalang*, *Wetsandon Chadok* (Vessantara Jataka) formed a corpus of national literature as known today. King Rama I's literary interest gave rise to royal command translations of numerous historical accounts and chronicles of neighbouring countries. These translated works, notably *Sam Kok* (Romance of the Three Kingdoms), *Sai Han*, *Rachathirat* etc., originally intended to enhance courtiers's knowledge, formed the nation's first prose literature.

Art and literature reached the apex in the Second Reign. Apart from several renowned court poets, the King himself was a consummate artist, versatile in several artistic disciplines: literature, music, dance drama and sculpture. He was especially known as a dramatist, having adapted episodes from earlier major literary works to stage performances. His dramatic composition, *Inao*, was praised by King Rama VI's Literary Club as the best verse drama for its perfect prosody and style which harmonized with the dance movements. The King was known to have composed this dance drama while it was being choreographed for the stage by master dramatists.



*Ramakian*



The King also rewrote folk dramas for court performances, including *Sangthong*, *Kraithong*, *Khawi*, *Mani Phichai* etc. These works demonstrated his commitment to preserve and pass down folk wisdom to later generations. In terms of versification, this is the golden age of the *klon* type of verse, noted for its internal and external rhymes. The *klon* verses were popular and widely composed by versifiers among the masses and at court. Besides the *klon* verses in drama, there was the *klon sepha* narration, which was sung to musical accompaniment. The major *sepha* work, *Khun Chang-Khung Phaen*, remains a masterpiece of Thai literature, having been composed from Ayutthaya's oral literature by poet courtiers at royal command.

Due to the previous reign's enormous wealth, derived from an active maritime trade with China, King Rama III focussed his efforts on construction and restoration of monasteries. Following royal predilection, courtiers and commoners alike turned to building and restoring monasteries of which there were a great many. In the field of literature, King Rama III commanded composition of proverbs, text-books and didactic tracts for the general public. Whenever a monastery was due for restoration, these literary compositions would be engraved on temple

walls and columns. The best example could be seen at Wat Pho where a corpus of didactic literature was engraved during its restoration for the people's moral edification.

Literature of the Third Reign was no less rich than that of other periods. The Ayutthaya tradition still prevailed, resulting in several important works, including *Nirat* and several episodes from *Wetsandon Chadok*. Major poets of the Second Reign continued their work to this reign, notably Sunthon Phu whose popular *Nirat* works were composed while he was an itinerant monk during the Third Reign. Having lost his royal patron in the person of King Rama II Sunthon Phu had to earn a living by composing several tales in the *klon* verse, the major one being *Phra Aphai Mani*.

This masterpiece distinguishes itself from other traditional works by putting more emphasis on female roles. The male protagonist no longer excels in martial arts but aesthetic skills. His victories are achieved through the spell-binding beauty of the sound of his flute. On the other hand, the majority of female characters differ from traditional women in Thai literature in their intelligent leadership and war-like prowess.



Some female characters in the early Rattanakosin Period continue to project the traditional Ayutthaya image of women. Women are men's property. They are followers, not leaders. Wives are obedient, loyal and dutiful. All these attributes are underlined in a number of didactic literature especially geared to women's consumption. However, certain works do reflect another side of women's image. Female characters have a higher profile; some are highly intelligent and iron-willed, even more so than their male counterparts. Take Queen Montha from *Sangthong* (The Golden Conch) as an example. She is the adviser and emotional prop of her husband, King Samon. The tale in verse, *Phra Aphai Mani* provides a salient example of female leadership. Practically all female characters, protagonists or otherwise, play more significant roles than their male characters. They are all strong and brave warriors. Their depiction is so persuasive that the reader is led to believe that there could have been some actual female prototypes in existence in those days.





## **MAHA WETSANDON CHADOK** **(The Jataka of the Great Vessantara)**

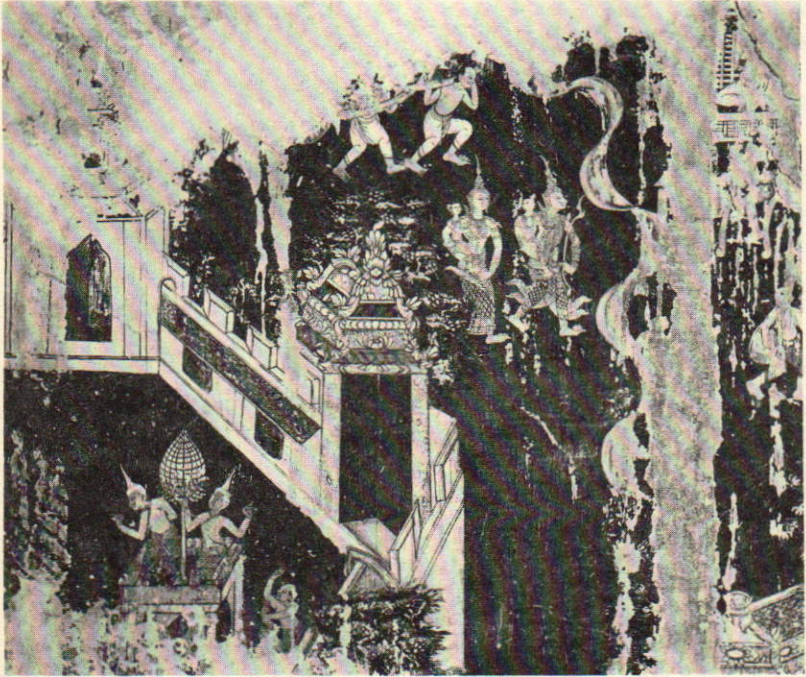
The *Chadok (Jataka)*, the word itself meaning "birth", is originally a collection of stories told of Buddha's lives.

It is believed that before reaching Enlightenment Buddha had already lived "10 former major lives". The last incarnation as Wetsandon marks his greatest accomplishment of "giving", detachment from all possessions.

This feat symbolizes the principle of total detachment, freedom from desire and attraction, leading to Enlightenment or *Nirvāna*.

The Jataka of the Great Vessantara or *Maha Wetsandon Chadok* as transliterated from the title of a Thai literary masterpiece, was composed in the reign of Rama IV or King Mongkut with the objective of celebrating Buddha's last life before attaining Enlightenment.

The work is a combined effort of many authors of the time, ranging from King Rama IV himself to a high-ranking ecclesiastic of royal birth who was also a great poet, to



*Maha Wetsandon Chadok*



many other recognized literary personalities, monks and laymen.

*Maha Wetsandon Chadok* is written in a style called *rai* which is the nearest equivalent of Western prose poetry; the only prosodic requirement is a rhyme between the last syllable of a sentence with another not too distant in the following one.

The literary value of the *rai* is more in the use of intricate and exquisitely selected words and expressions, rich in sounds and meanings, artistically woven together to give not only the flow to the narration of the story, but also to render the appropriate feelings and atmosphere to each scene, making an adequate translation into another language almost impossible.

The work's difficult and finely selected language presents no obstacle to its popularity among the Thai Buddhists, whether educated or not. Out of its popularity a tradition is born: every year during the Buddhist Lent in the rainy season, in temples all over the country there are recitals of *Maha Chat* (the great life) or *Maha Wetsandon Chadok*.

This *chadok* (or *jataka*) is divided into 13 parts, traditionally recited with musical interludes, the best known being the composition initiated by Prince Naris, a distinguished artist and musician.

### **The story of Wetsandon**

The story is supposed to have been told by Buddha himself when he returns after having attained Enlightenment, to teach the Four Noble Truths to members of his family and to a gathering of 20,000 disciples.

A miracle takes place in the form of a heavy downpour of red rain called Bokkhoraphat, such as never before witnessed. To his puzzled followers, the Lord Buddha explains that this is not the first time, for in his last life as Wetsandon it has happened before, at Wetsandon's reunion with his family and people.

And so the Lord Buddha tells them of the life of Wetsandon:

"Wetsandon" means "amidst merchants". The prince is so named because his mother gives birth to him while visiting a market.



The prince who later becomes king has been known since childhood to be generous and charitable, giving away everything to whoever asks. Once people from a neighbouring kingdom suffering from natural calamities come asking for his white elephant, believed to bring back prosperity to them. Wetsandon gives it to them, incurring the wrath of the people of Sonchai. Subsequently the king banishes Wetsandon.

With his wife Matsi and his two children, Wetsandon goes into exile to live an ascetic life in the forest of Himavanta. Even so, a persistent Brahman beggar named Chuchok tenaciously seeks him out, in order to ask for the two children to serve his beautiful young wife, Amittada. He succeeds in doing so during the absence of their mother, Matsi.

At this point, the God Indra sees it necessary to intervene. He comes down to ask for Matsi, so that Wetsandon will not be able to give her away to anybody else.

On his journey back, Chuchok is inspired to travel in the direction of the kingdom of Sonchai. The two children are recognized and, with Chuchok, are invited into the palace. Chuchok, overwhelmed by the unexpected reception, overeats himself to death.

King Sonchai and the people go out to welcome Wetsandon and Matsi home. It is at this reunion that the gathering is blessed by the Bokkhoraphat or the red rain.

### **Women in Maha Wetsandon Chadok**

Even though this literary masterpiece is written to celebrate the greatness of Buddha's last life before attaining Enlightenment, women's roles are not lacking. The image of women is created to portray those living before Buddha's times, yet they clearly characterize women who actually lived in Rama IV's reign.

Only two types of women are recognized: royalties such as Queen Phutsadi, Wetsandon's mother, and Matsi his wife and commoners such as Amittada, Chuchok's young wife and her neighbours.

Although the ways of life and social values between these two groups of women, in many instances, are heavily influenced by Hindu traditions, they are all in essence the pictures of traditional Thai women of Rama IV's reign: born and bred to serve and follow men. Whether queen, princess or common village girl, each is the embodiment of loyalty and responsibility, knowing her place and duty.



Queen Phutsadi, in spite of her wifely effort, fails to reason and cannot save Wetsandon from being banished from the kingdom. The least the Queen can do is to turn her care and concern toward her daughter-in-law and her two grandchildren, trying her best to dissuade them from following Wetsandon into exile.

Matsi is a determined woman. She is adamant about sharing her husband's fate. Her pleading with the King and the Queen on her husband's behalf shows her to be a clever woman with an alert mind, and extraordinary power of reasoning.

She upholds one of the social values of the time: death is better than life as a widow.

As for Amittada, a beautiful young girl given to Chuchok by her parents in exchange for accumulated debts, she proves to be a dutiful daughter who accepts her fate calmly. As a wife, she tries to carry out her responsibilities to the utmost.

Had it not been for the admiration shown to her by all the men of the village, when they compare her to their own wives, Amittada would not have had to suffer so much from





the attack of her neighbours, both verbally and physically. The scorn and cruel treatment received make her revolt and refuse to continue working and Chuchok is thus compelled to go out to find help for her.

### **Excerpts**

1) Having heard of Wetsandon's banishment, Queen Phutsadi hurried to the King with all her motherly concern to plead for forgiveness on her son's behalf.

*"Our son is a most revered monarch. Banishing him from the kingdom won't bring back the royal elephant. How could Your Majesty let yourself be influenced by the words of those worthless irate town people? A small loss may lead to a much bigger one. O Sire, do consider it with care. When comes a time of desperate need, can horses and elephants save you? Who but your wife and children will remain to the end by your side? Don't let grief or despair drive you to a hasty decision. With all the merits you have accumulated in the past, another sacred elephant will certainly come to you. Yet to have a son so dear to our heart will be as hard as to search for Indra's gems.*



*If you send your son away, when Your Majesty grows old, who will act as your eyes and look after the kingdom? The city will be deserted like an empty crow's nest. When the time of succession comes, confusion will set in.*

*Be kind O Sire. If you have decided to believe the town people's accusation, and have no consideration left for my pleas, you had better kill me first before sending away our son. Keep in mind, that though you may have no more love for son, I, your wife, have done nothing wrong, and my loyalty to you should be at least worthy of your compassion."*

2) Having failed to convince the King to change his mind, Queen Phutsadi turned her concern to her two grandchildren. She tried to influence Matsi and to convince her that she herself as well as the two royal children had not been brought up to endure the hardship of life in the jungle, and that they should give up the intention of following Wetsandon into exile.

*"Tomorrow morning you will have to go all by yourselves into the wild, without the entourage of the four armies. Only wild deer and buffaloes will there be for you to feed your eyes on. Instead of bathing in scented water as you were accustomed to, from now on you will know only the coolness of the dews. Morning and evening, instead of delicately prepared meals, there will be only roots for you to eat, bitter or sweet.*



*O my poor dear children, you were used to soft beddings, for mattresses now you will have only leaves and twigs, and only hard blocks of wood for pillows.*

*To lull you to sleep, no more will there be music melodiously played by court ladies, nor such exquisite dances as if performed by heavenly angels. Every night you will hear only the soulful cries of peacocks in the heart of the forest.*

*Poor dear Matsi, you are so determined to brave hardship and follow your husband. How can those two delicate feet of yours endure the hard dusty ground? And you are easily frightened. How can you refrain from shuddering at the howlings of those wild dogs?"*

3) In response to the King's plea for her to remain behind and not to follow her husband Wetsandon into exile, Matsi deplored the fate of a widow continuing to live as such in her society.

*“Sire, it is already so difficult for a woman to learn to live properly. Should she neglect her appearance, men would make fun of her or even insult her. Yet, in order to look neat and proper, should she put powder or make-up on, she would be severely criticized. Even combing her hair to keep it clean, or putting on scented powder on hot days would be interpreted as making attempt to attract men’s attention, in order to find a husband. Looking at a man would be taken as a provocation. And yet should she walk past him with her eyes fixed on the ground, she would be branded as vain and haughty.*

*How I pity myself as a woman, having to endure critical remarks from all quarters. Yet, the fate of a widow, abandoned by a man, is even worse. Sitting or lying down, she will always be burned by desire, like having poison in her throat that cannot be swallowed. She nurses both love and hatred for herself, and can never thus look happy.*

*Yes Sire, the presence of a husband is like that of a royal umbrella over a woman’s head, forever her pride. A young woman abandoned by a man can be compared to a tarnished diamond that no one wants to buy.”*



4) In Matsi's plea to Wetsandon to let her follow him into exile, her adamant determination as well as certain traces of Hindu values can be detected, especially the one regarding the fate of widows who prefer death by fire to a cursed life.

*“What a breach of royal tradition! Have you ever seen a King going alone thus? Though you are now without entourage, wherever you go I will be there. I shall not remain behind. I will follow and serve you with my body and soul to the end of my days. No, I shall never desert you.....*

*.....Just like a pair of golden slippers, I will dedicate my whole life to serve you. Should you refuse my plea to follow you, I would rather jump into a burning pyre than be left a widow to be cursed by everyone.”*

5) Amittada was a country girl who docilely accepted her fate and became wife of an old Brahman beggar, Chuchok. This character represents a woman of lower status, not only in the Hindu society but in Thai society of the time (Rama IV's reign). Parents could do whatever they liked with their children, even “sold” them as slaves, and such is the case of Amittada, who was married off to an old man as payment for accumulated debts.

*“She (Amitlada) was a daughter worthy of her Brahman lineage. She discarded all concerns about having to become a slave wife of an old beggar, reasoning that as a grateful child she had to shoulder part of her parents’ hardship. She was not ashamed of having to tend faithfully to her lowly duties of cooking, polishing rice grains, preparing meals, gathering wood for fire and vegetables for food, and taking care of her old husband at all time.....”*

*The village was full of young men both rich and poor. So good and industrious was Amitlada in her duties as wife to her old husband, that those young husbands could not help admiring her, and comparing her to their own wives. Feeling so disgraced, they all came home discontented, frustrated and angry. The whole village was then in uproar.*

6) The reproaches and attacks levelled against their wives by the village’s young husbands reveal certain details about the traditional practices of betrothal and marriage, and the deplorable status of women who could still in those days be sold off permanently or temporarily by their own husbands.



*“Look at the precious girl, Amittada. She doesn't need anybody to teach her. Even with the shadow of death looming over her old man, she remains faithful to him and takes good care of him. And...she's ten times prettier than you!*

*Don't you dare raise your voice to defy me! Who am I, your husband or a slave you have bought with money? Think it over. In order to have you for wife, how much did I have to spend for dowry, bridal quarters and such? How dare you rebel and insult me? Have you ever learned to pay proper wifely attention to your own husband? You should be ashamed of yourself. I really have a mind to lead you by the hand to sell you off as slave, and leave you to toil for a while, until you learn your lesson and repent, before I'll go and buy you back.”*

7) Superstitious beliefs play important roles in people's everyday life; for example, some women went to the extent of propitiating the gods to grant them husbands.

*"In order to ask for a husband, you Amittada, you must have prayed for the blessings of all the gods with a sumptuous set of offerings including gold candles and incense sticks. Yet, something must have gone wrong with your preparations. The occasion was not an auspicious one: it fell on the ninth day of a waning moon, a dark night with the shadow of the God of Death. On top of all this, a passing crow must have swooped down to steal the balls of rice put there as offerings. The whole ceremony was a miserable failure. It was a bad omen that destined you to an old man.*

*Or was it the result of your having insulted or cursed some saintly priests or Brahmans? The bad deed followed you, and thus condemned you to this fate: life with an old husband."*



8) Besides her gratitude to her parents and her determination to be a good wife, there are instances in Amittada's behaviour that are worthy of admiration. She refused her husband's offer to do all her chores in order to save her from having to face those rowdy village wives.

*“How could that be, my dear Brahman husband? Never in my family have we ever come so close to that necessity. How can a wife let her own husband do the work of slaves? It is unheard of! If you love me, my dear old man, find me slaves, male or female, to serve me.*

*Not till then can our life together be peaceful. Or else, we'll be quarrelling endlessly.”*





## PHRA APHAI MANI

*Phra Aphai Mani* is a long narrative poem written by one of the greatest Thai poets, Sunthon Phu, during the early Rattanakosin Period. In this imaginative poem, Sunthon Phu weaves a tale of two brothers, Phra Aphai Mani and Si Suwan, who have been banished from the kingdom by their own father, King of Rattana. After having lived in a world of adventures, full of magic and bizarre happenings, they become rulers of two separate kingdoms. In the end, Phra Aphai Mani decides to leave his worldly life and becomes a hermit, while his brother remains ruler of the kingdom.

The story begins with the two brothers setting out to acquire knowledge in preparation for their roles as future rulers of Rattana. Phra Aphai Mani is trained and finally excels in the art of flute playing, while his brother masters the art of cudgel-fighting. Unfortunately, their father, the King, disapproves of their training, thinking their pursuits to be beneath the dignity of royal princes, let alone kings. They are consequently expelled from the kingdom. Hence, the beginning of their adventures.



*Sunthon Phu*



It is interesting to note that although Phra Aphai Mani is portrayed as the hero and protagonist of the story, it is the female characters who are actually responsible in bringing about Phra Aphai Mani's adventures.

First, it is the sea ogress, Phisua Samut, who abducts Phra Aphai Mani and in the guise of a beautiful woman, lures him into becoming her husband. Then he is later rescued by a young mermaid who carries him across the sea and brings him safely ashore to a hermit's island. The next woman who steps into his life is Suwannahamali, the future queen, who refuses to marry him and runs away to become a nun. Phra Aphai Mani is left helpless until an ugly but highly intelligent woman, Wali, engineers Suwannahamali's return. When he becomes ruler of Phaluk and the kingdom is threatened by a host of enemies, it is his queen, Suwannahamali, who gives orders and leads soldiers into battles.

Unlike female characters in many other traditional Thai literary works, women in *Phra Aphai Mani* are strong, intelligent, determined and courageous. They are men's equals: they rule the country, engineer military manoeuvres, and engage in actual fighting. In many ways they are superior to men. The major male characters such as Phra Aphai Mani,



*Phra Aphai Mani*





*Phisua Samut*



Si Suwan and, Phra Aphai Mani's two sons, Sin Samut and Sut Sakhon, have all been influenced, dominated and outwitted by their female counterparts.

The following excerpts are taken from four different episodes. They clearly demonstrate the valour, intelligence and determination of two women: Suwannamali, Phra Aphai Mani's queen, and Wali, his adviser.

### **Excerpts**

1) Sin Samut, Phra Aphai Mani's son, born of the Sea Ogress, was befriended by Suwannamali, and regarded her as his own mother. Sin Samut wanted to break up the betrothal between her and the alien prince Usaren in order to bring together his father and his newly adopted mother. Phra Aphai Mani at the time happened to be aboard Usaren's ship, so Sin Samut challenged Usaren to a fight. Suwannamali, being adept at the art of war, offered him her help.

*"It is true that I am a woman, but I am quite well versed in war strategies. Dear son, I will help you fight the enemies in order not to be outdone by Phra Aphai Mani."*





*Suwannamali*



*“If you really say so,” said Sin Samut, “I will make a stand against the enemy. I wish you were like my mother, the Sea Ogress, for I will not have to fear our foes regardless of their number.”*

*Suwannamali replied readily, “I will go with you, indeed, my son. I have been so shamed by your father’s attitude that never will I take a husband in all my life.”*

.....

*She then bound her breast and donned a suit of diamond armour to disguise herself as a man with a sword and a dagger attached to her belt, she wound a turban around her head.*

*Sin Samut praised her for her martial appearance...*

*Suwannamali gave orders that her masquerade be kept secret. At a glance, she could be taken for a real foreigner. Sin Samut remarked that in body she looked like a man, only her cheeks and chin gave her away as a woman. Only with a mustache and a beard, she would pass for a man. Smiling, Suwannamali suggested that her son lead the way and she, a two-edged dagger in hand, would follow so that no one would notice anything amiss.*



*They reviewed troops of valiant soldiers strategically set up in the formation of a powerful **hera** (half-dragon, half-crocodile) ready to swerve to attack the enemies before they could flee. Then they turned their eyes to Usaren's troops set up as a springing **naga** complete with head, tail and fangs, ready to encircle the enemies. Knowing the treatise on war, she surmised that Usaren's tactics were inferior to that of her son since the **naga** had only the body but the **hera** with its feet had an advantage over its opponent. While inspecting troops with her son aboard the great ship, Suwannamali sized up the battle situation...*

*Suwannamali whispered an instruction to her son that when the sky was cloudless and the wind was gathering, they should go out to fight. But they should not get too close, otherwise they would get into trouble if the wind blew the flames back. She would fight alone and Sin Samut should join her only when she was in difficulty. Acknowledging her words, Sin Samut lighted tinder to fire the gun which went off resoundingly. The whole force cheered in unison and the fleet was launched.*

2) To avenge her brother Usaren's death, Nang Laweng contrived a clever plot whereby Phra Aphai Mani succumbed to the supernatural charm of her portrait. With a mighty



army under her command, Nang Laweng then besieged the city of Phaluk.

*The earth-rocking din of battle reached Suwannamali in her palace. She held back her tears and went straight to the throne to report the situation to Phra Aphai Mani, her husband. Forces from hundreds of foreign states, big and small, were now besieging their kingdom. Deafening sounds of fighting and gunfire could be heard. Phra Aphai Mani simply told Suwannamali to let the enemy be, for it was she and her ladies-in-waiting who had harassed Laweng first, so the latter's companions came to take revenge. Forgetting himself in his infatuation with Laweng, he brushed Suwannamali off with a jeer. The poor queen, crying her heart out, took leave of her husband. She would fight with all her strength and sacrifice even her life for him in the hope that his majestic grace would render her victorious over the enemy. She would rather die before her husband. Without Phra Aphai Mani the State and the Church would come to an end. Crying, she kept clinging to his feet. Amidst uproarious sounds of gunfire, she returned to her chamber. Hastily, she assumed the guise of a man equipped with bow and arrows. Her five hundred-odd maids, all wearing soldier-like turbans, highly skilled in the use of crossbows, went to pay respects to their queen before setting off for battle.*



3) Another female character, Nang Wali, represents the first woman in public service. Despite her unsightliness, Phra Aphai Mani accepts her service at court on account of her capabilities.

*There was a thirty-four-year-old spinster named Wali who had a swarthy complexion. She was so ugly that not a man bothered to look at her. Her face was pock-marked and not a shade of beauty could be found on her. Orphaned since early childhood, she was raised by an elderly couple on the outskirts of a rice field. A Brahman descendant, she inherited the lore of the ancient folk which she thoroughly studied with diligence. She understood auspicious times, signs of earth and skies, as well as the three Vedic rites and the occult lore. Having committed everything to memory, she burned all the texts. When the rice-planting season came, she would inform the old couple of impending floods or droughts so that they could change their planting sites accordingly. Their harvests were so fruitful that people regarded Wali as prophetess...*

Wali came to offer her service to Phra Aphai Mani but was stopped at the palace gate. The court officials told Wali not to volunteer because fighting was not a woman's job. Not understanding her intentions clearly, they refused to let her have an audience with the king. Boldly she answered, "Your speech spells your ignorance. According to martial law, those who commit an offence are to be put to death and those who perform a good deed rewarded regardless of their sexes. Do you still insist that this is none of my concern? Can a man not die at a woman's hand?"...

She said to the king, "I have not a bit of doubt about my ugly appearance, but knowledge, like an unblemished diamond, is my spiritual beauty. Among your host of beautiful concubines, you can never find as learned a one as I. The reason I am humbling myself before you is that I want your fame to spread far and wide so that learned men in all disciplines would seek to come under your patronage. Should you take pleasure only in beauty and care not for the wise and the learned, you would be going against traditions. I fear that good men would never pay their allegiance to you. Pray ponder upon it if you were to be the pillar of the three realms. A woman's beauty, however delectable, is only fuel for the flames of passion and desires."









## KHUN CHANG—KHUN PHAEN

Among tales in verse handed down through generations as ballads, *Khun Chang—Khun Phaen* is best loved and remembered. The ballad, called *Sepha* in Thai, is traditionally sung to rhythms provided by a pair of bamboo-pieces held in one hand, known as *Krap*. This work has been composed by several poets at different times in history, based on a supposedly true story in the early Ayutthaya Period, during the reign of King Ramathibodi II. The official version known today was the one published in A.D.1917 by the Department of Fine Arts during the reign of King Vajiravudh (Rama VI). Selected and included in the newly-compiled book of verse, *Khun Chang—Khun Phaen* were mostly those composed by poets of the Second Reign, including Sunthon Phu and the King himself. It was indeed the heyday of *Sepha* or verses put to music.

The story of *Khun Chang—Khun Phaen*, is long and complex, involving three generations of characters. However, the most fascinating part is the love story involving Nang Phim or Wanthong, Khun Phaen and Khun Chang.



Wanthong is a beauty, with wits and eloquence. She has been eyed by a single-minded wealthy but bald-headed millionaire. Even after Wanthong has become the wife of Khun Phaen, a dashing warrior, Khun Chang is determined to win her. Khun Chang's relentless pursuit and vicious designs compounded by Khun Phaen's womanizing and neglect of her, turn Wanthong into the prototype of a "fickle" lady in Thai literature, although brought up as a proper young lady. She is loved by two men, tossed and torn between them, and is unable to decide which one to choose, until she is executed by the King's order.

To most Thais who know the story, Wanthong is condemned as the archetypal fickle and unreliable woman. Yet, close studies of her character through the impartial eyes of a modern-day critic, without preconceived ideas, show Wanthong to be a notable example of a woman who is powerless to direct her life or to determine her own fate. Those she loves are the ones who cause her sufferings, intentionally and unintentionally, be they her own mother, the two men in her life, or her only son. They have no regard for her feelings and reactions. Wanthong has been brought up to have consideration for other people's reasons and needs. So, when<sup>1</sup> ordered by the King to choose, she cannot, and that indecisiveness costs Wanthong her life.



It is worth noting that Wanthong's charm has captured both the authors and the audience. Even after her execution, she is brought back from the nether world to intervene in the conflict between Khun Phaen and their own son. Again she is as powerless as when she is alive, but the scene gives the author another chance to bring this character back to charm the public.

The selected passages are meant to portray Wanthong through her thoughts and reactions at different periods in her life, from a teenage beauty to a wife, a mother and a restless spirit. Wanthong is a truly interesting woman in Thai literature. The translated passages should go some way towards presenting Wanthong impartially and accurately.

## **Excerpts**

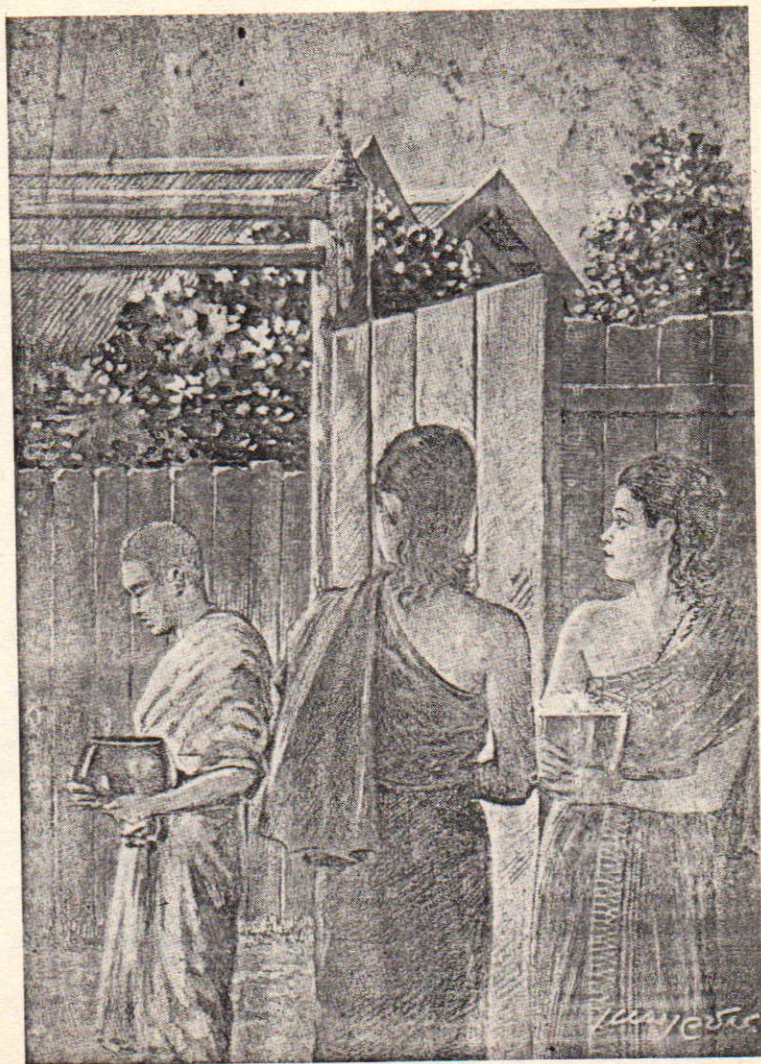
### 1) Phim Meeting Novice Kaeo

This episode portrays Nang Phim as a maiden, getting dressed up to go to the temple. There she met the novice Kaeo who later became her paramour. Her reaction then indicated the impulsive nature that would ultimately be her undoing.



Phimphilalai told her mother to get ready to leave since it was almost time for their chapter (of the Maha Chat) to be recited. She got up promptly, bathed and changed her clothes. She began her toilet by applying tumeric all over her body, anointing her hair and powdering her face. Then she used a black paste to blacken and scrub her teeth to make them sparkle. Afterwards she put on a red brocade **phanung** with golden decorative designs. For wraps, she wore two eye-catching layers of **sabai**, a soft pink one underneath and a bright ruby-coloured brocade one on top. She also wore a diamond ring studded with rubies, and round her little finger was a snake ring. Her maids were told to take along with them her gold bronze betal and accessory box and her niello enamel bowl. The attendants finished their toilet in no time and waited in front of the house. Laying eyes on her daughter, Sivrachan commented that she was too old to adorn herself and put on a brocade **Tani** garment and a wrap with gold decorative designs. Her daughter laughed at her for not dressing like others. Sivrachan looked at herself and changed into a black check garment with a loincloth for wrap. Sivrachan led the way followed by Phim, as beautiful as a lady of the court. Their maids walked behind with the servant carrying gifts for the monks. When they arrived at the sermon hall, brightly lit up by joss-sticks and candles, mats were spread





*Novice Kaeo and Phimphilalai*



out and mother and daughter went down on their knees to pay their respects to the monks. When the monks finished their recitation of the chapter on Kumara, the bald-headed millionaire Khun Chang stepped forward to offer his gifts while the orchestra struck a tune.

Phim and Siprachan then ordered their servants to arrange the offerings for the monks consisting of alms-bowls, satchels, tiered trays containing a set of robes fruit and sweets in order and place them before the monks with the betel for the upcoming chapter. The orchestra played...

It was evening and Kaeo the novice changed his garb in preparation for delivering the sermon. He formally wrapped his garment around his body and went to pay his respects to the aged abbot. Leaving the abbot's room, he said a prayer and cast a magic spell on his lip balm. Novice On, carrying the scripture, walked in front and they left the cell for the sermon hall, Kaeo ascended the seat of sermon and took the scripture in his hands. He recited the episode where Matsi encountered a tiger and a lion and asked their leave to let her pass. Night came, brightly lit by the moon. Reaching the hermitage, she was petrified to find her children missing. Crying her heart out, she wandered in search of her children. At this point, the whole congregation were so moved that they

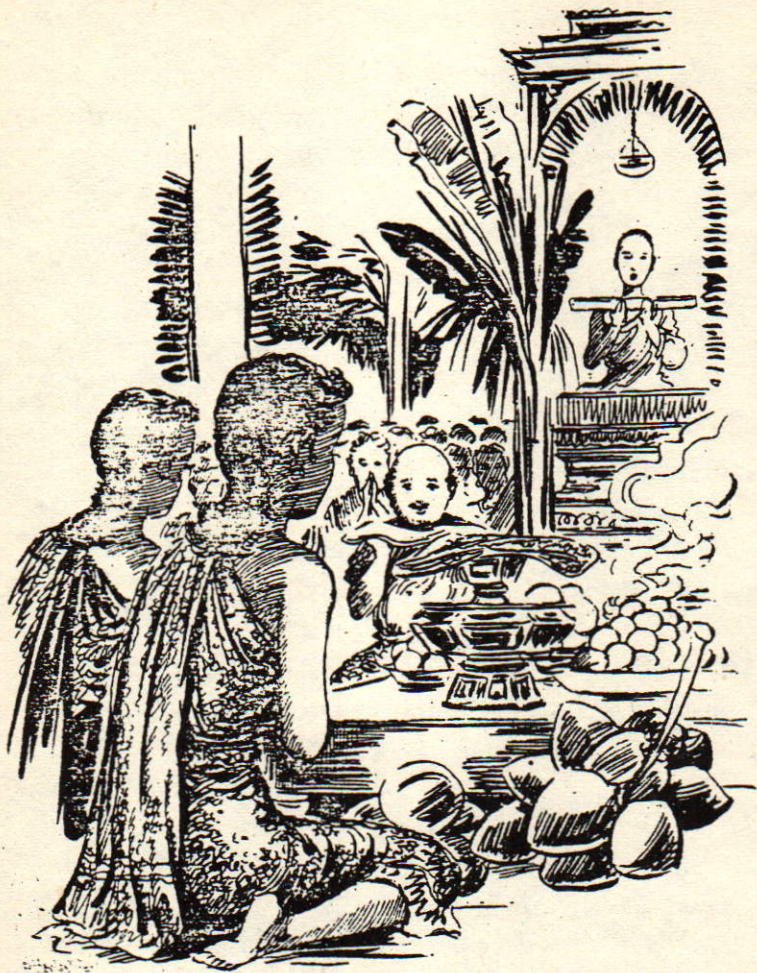


cried out "Sadhu" in unison. Out of profound devotion, Phim took off her outer brocade wrap and folded it three times before placing it on the tray. Offering it to the novice, she made a wish that her act of donating might result in her becoming endowed with fame and fortune in the future. She then sat back and listened attentively.

Seeing Phim offering the wrap, Khun Chang was abashed. If she who was a mere girl could do so, it would be humiliating for him as a man to sit there doing nothing. So he said, "I congratulate you on your devotion. Even though I did not sponsor this chapter, my devotion is no less than yours." Looking at Phim, he smilingly took off the strip of shoulder cloth he was wearing. Having folded the cloth, he held it in his palms above the head and made a wish. "May my generosity reward me with my heart's desire as soon as possible, no later than tonight." Then he placed his cloth next to that of Phim's. "May this dainty wrap escape not my reach. May it float to me by tonight at the latest."

So enraged was Phim at these words that she spat in his face and ordered the servants to retrieve her tray. Ee Phrom and Ee Bu, knowing their mistress's mind, brushed over Khun Chang's bald head to get the tray. Khun Chang glared indignantly at them. Saithong then spoke out loudly. "What! Ee Phrom, you ill-mannered wench! Do you not see that the edge of your garment has brushed over his honorable's hair? Let us leave this place, dear Phim, and listen no more."





*Khun Chang*



2) After the recitation of the *Maha Chat*, Novice Kaeo tried to get in touch with Saithong and had a chance to court Phim in the cotton field. When Khun Chang sent a matchmaker to ask for Phim's hand on his behalf, she drove the matchmaker away. She then secretly plotted with Novice Kaeo to have him leave novicehood and ask for her hand in marriage. Their wedded bliss lasted only two days when Khun Chang cunningly recommended the King to appoint Phlai Kaeo as commander of the army for the battle of Chiang Thong. Phim was taken ill by her grief and to comply with traditional belief, her name was changed to Wanthong.

Khun Chang deceived Wanthong's mother into believing that Phlai Kaeo had been killed in the battle and that his family and everything he owned were to be confiscated by royal decree. Siphachan, Wanthong's mother, was frightened. Since Siphachan was already inclined towards having a rich son-in-law, she insisted that Wanthong marry Khun Chang. Wanthong refused because she wanted to wait for Phlai Kaeo to return. Meanwhile Phlai Kaeo came back victorious with a new title of Khun Phaen and a new wife, Laothong. There was a big scene when the three confronted one another and Khun Phaen left in anger. Seizing the opportunity, Khun Chang forced Wanthong into marrying him. Although she stayed with him unwillingly at first, she later relented when



perceiving Khun Chang's love and loyalty. In the meantime, Khun Phaen, separated from Laothong through Khun Chang's instigation, abducted Wanthong in retaliation. They took refuge in the forest where Wanthong bemoaned her unaccustomed hardship.

*"...How miserable it is to have been born a woman! I am not even happy now that I should be. I have been punished with these sufferings because I was in no control of my wavering heart. It is a pity that such a fickle heart should be housed in so lovely a body. Blessed with unsurpassed beauty and womanly skills, how could I sink so low." As she pondered upon her misery, she sighed deeply. Wanthong weighed her love for Khun Phaen against her plight and decided to let things take their own course. "I should not hold a grudge against him for he has proved his love for me. Even though he has been away for so long, instead of remaining with his new woman, he returned to me out of love. He has put his life at stake in abducting me to the forest. So now, no matter what happens I would follow him and leave it up to fate whether I should live or die." Lying down beside Khun Phaen, she embraced him and cried until sleep overtook her.*





*Khun Phaen and Wanthong*



3) Khun Phaen and Wanthong remained in the forest until they had to leave for help because Wanthong was expecting, and her time was due. Khun Phaen gave himself up and appealed for justice against Khun Chang's charges. He was pardoned but the King was so incensed by Khun Phaen's insistent demand to have Laothong back that he promptly sent him to prison. The wily Khun Chang took advantage of this opportunity and forced the expecting Wanthong to live with him. At first, he helped taking good care of her son but became displeased when Wanthong named him Phlai Ngam after his father, Phlai Kaeo or Khun Phaen, so he tried to kill the boy. When Wanthong learned of the incident, she secretly placed her son in the care of the abbot and later on sent him to live with Khun Phaen's mother.

*She arranged her son's topknot, tied his sack around his waist, and gave him a gold ring as a good luck charm. Hugging him tightly, she sobbed in sorrow at having to part with him and entreated deities to watch over him. "I pray upon you, great God of the Forest, to subdue tigers, lions and buffaloes. Venerable God of the Mountain, pray do not let my son go astray but lead him to his grandmother. Mighty Khun Phaen, the father of my son, please keep Phlai Ngam from all harms so that he may reach Kanchanaburi in safety.*



*I feel as if my heart is festering. It has been ten years since I have borne and reared you, my son, and now we have to part. You have never been away from me, eating or sleeping. Now you will be all alone in the forest with no one to tie your topknot for you. Days, months, and years will go by and you will never return to me like an eclipsed moon. O wretched me! My life has been a misery. Not only have I lost a husband but now I am losing a son."*

#### 4) Wanthong Begging Pardon for Khun Chang

Phlai Ngam grew up to be a fine young man and entered the King's service. When the Chiang Mai war broke out, he opportunely pleaded with the King to let his father out of prison to help him fight. Both father and son emerged victorious and Phlai Ngam was promoted to the position of Chamuen Wai. At his wedding, Wanthong came to help, accompanied by Khun Chang. Being drunk, Khun Chang raked up Chamuen Wai's past and let slip the fact that he had once tried to kill his stepson. Chamuen Wai took the matter to court and Khun Chang was sentenced to prison. Out of pity for her husband, Wanthong went to ask her son for forgiveness on Khun Chang's behalf.





*Wanthong and Chamuen Wai*



Wanthong then took some money from the basket and gave it to the gaoler and his subordinates, including all the prisoners. Having entrusted her husband to their care, she took her leave. After she had given some money to the warden, she went up to Chamuen Wai's abode. Embracing her son, she cried until she almost fainted. Sympathizing with her, Chamuen Wai greeted her, "How have you been doing, my dear mother? Do not cry. Have we lost any old relatives?"

Wanthong answered, "Dear son, my grief is killing me and there is no one else who can help me but you. You alone can alleviate my pain. Khun Chang's wickedness has brought harm on himself. No matter how vile he is, as his wife I cannot let him die without lifting a finger to help him. That would be shameful indeed, and I would be branded forever. There is nothing else I can do except to come crawling to you for help. Pray be kind to mother and ask for a royal pardon so that Khun Chang's capital sentence be waived. Merciful as he is, His Majesty should not decline your plea. Khun Chang has also sent you a message asking for your forgiveness. Other than you, no one else could speak on his behalf. Please save his life and he will be at your service. Do not hold a grudge against him for his past maltreatment of you but let bygones be bygones."



*Chamuen Wai answered his mother promptly, "Why are you begging me so? I was not the one who accused Khun Chang. It was he who tried to kill me by giving false report about me to the King. I was fortunate enough to have escaped with my life since I had a witness to prove my innocence. You yourself had a complete knowledge of Khun Chang's attempt to beat me to death when I was a child. Why did you not take pity on me? I was lucky to have recovered. You were not concerned about your son's plight then but you are pleading for your husband's life now! You forget yourself in your fear for his life. His Majesty being at the height of his anger, how can I plead for clemency on Khun Chang's behalf? It would be like running into a raging fire. I am at my wit's end, dear mother."*

*Crying, Wanthong embraced Chamuen Wai. "What you have said is all true. When you almost got killed by Khun Chang I was well aware of it and that was why I took you to stay with the abbot and concealed the truth from Khun chang. Never had a day passed without seeing you that I had not cried over you. Love for one's husband is not as precious as that for one's child. Three steps from home and a husband becomes stranger. No matter how much I love him, I do love you more. Khun Chang's attempt on your life happened a long time ago, so bear no more grudge against*



*him and do not be vengeful. If you take no action, he would certainly be executed. Please save him for my sake. It would be like making merit by freeing fish and turtles. I have been taking care of you since you were still in my womb. Since you were born I nurtured you and lulled you to sleep. Khun Chang found for you tiny tots to keep you company. He ordered gold bangles, necklaces and enamel amulets made to adorn you when you went to the temple on religious occasions. The wet-nurse carried you with a bevy of little servants in tow. When Khun Chang loves someone, he would get for that person everything but the moon and stars. He never denied you anything in Suphan Buri that you took a fancy to. He has his vices but he also has a lot of virtues that you as a child might not have recognized. So bear no more grudge and save his life. It would be as if you are showing your gratitude to me."*

5) Later on, Chamuen Wai, Still harbouring resentment against Khun Chang, took Wanthonng from him back to his father, Khun Phaen. Khun Chang appealed to the King who commanded Wanthonng to choose who she would like to live with: Khun Phaen, Khun Chang or Chamuen Wai, her son. She was reluctant to choose and evaded the issue by asking the King to decide for her. Enraged by her seemingly insatiable promiscuity, the King ordered her executed.



*Having heard the royal command, Wanthong became confused. Now that her end was near, she was driven by misleading thoughts. Her Heart sank as though she was falling from the heights of Sumeru. Overwhelmed by consternation Wanthong was at her wit's end, fearing that she might blunder again. How could she say that she loved Khun Chang for in reality she never did. Both Khun Phaen and her son were as dear to her as life itself. One more wrong answer and she would incur the King's wrath. Thus, she decided to give a non-committal answer and leave it to the King to interpret. Having made up her mind, Wanthong humbly gave a prompt answer. Her love for Khun Phaen was so great since they had been through so much together. She recalled their days of hardship and loving care in the wilds. With Khun Chang, she had never suffered a harsh word. All his riches were for her to enjoy and his retainers were like her own. She loved Chamuen Wai as much as Khun Phaen since he was her own flesh and blood. As she delivered her answer, she trembled in fear of royal punishment.*









## **SANGTHONG**

### **(The Golden Conch)**

*Sangthong* is a dance drama written by King Rama II in the early Rattanakosin Period. The story of Prince Sangthong was originally a popular folk tale known among the Thai people since Ayutthaya Period and also taken up as one of the Buddha's former lives in the *Panyas Jataka*. The dance drama from which the following excerpts are taken consists of many episodes. Each represents one phase of Prince Sangthong's life: his unusual birth in the golden conch shell, his exile, his disguise as a negrito, his marriage to Princess Rotchana, and finally, his reinstatement as ruler of his father's kingdom.

The selections represented here are from the best known and most frequently performed episodes. The story runs as follows:

King Samon, ruler of Samon Kingdom, has a queen named Montha. They have seven daughters and no son. The King is concerned about not having an heir to inherit his kingdom, so he decides to let his seven daughters choose



their own consorts, hoping that one of them could become his heir and eventually rule the kingdom. The six older sisters manage to find their consorts from among hundreds of suitors. But Rotchana, the youngest and "fairest of them all" is not satisfied with any of them. So more suitors are brought in for her to choose. Still she is not satisfied. Finally they resort to bringing in the "half wit" negrito who happens to be in the kingdom and is actually Prince Sangthong in disguise. Rotchana shocks and stuns everyone by choosing him. Guided by divine spirit, she can see the golden Sangthong underneath the ugly and repulsive appearance. King Samon is furious, but is brought back to his senses by Montha, his wife and sensible queen. He finally lets Rotchana marry the negrito but banishes them from the palace. Rotchana stoically accepts her fate and goes to live with her husband in a small cottage outside the palace where she has to endure the hard life of an exiled princess. Disturbed by Rotchana's plight, the God Indra, disguised as a ruler of a neighbouring state, comes to Samon and challenges the old King to a match of *khli* (a polo-like game) with the kingdom as stake. The six sons-in-law have already tried their hands and have lost the matches. King Samon is desperate. Again, it is Queen Montha who thinks of seeking their youngest son-in-law's help. For Rotchana's sake, Sangthong decides to reveal himself as a



prince and heir of another kingdom. He agrees to enter the match and wins. The kingdom is thus saved. Rotchana and Sangthong are reinstated with pomp and splendour.

It is quite apparent that in these episodes Queen Montha and Rotchana play very significant roles. As King Samon's queen, Montha is always by her husband's side, giving him moral support and counsel whenever needed. She is more sensible and emotionally more stable than King Samon who always depends on her in times of crisis. As a mother she is practical and understanding. Very often she has to act as buffer between her husband and the seven daughters, and always manages to smooth out the differences among them.

The character of Rotchana is also very interesting. She is the combination of an 'ideal' woman in traditional Thai literature and her independent-minded modern counterpart. Her unsurpassed beauty is compared to that of the "celestial ladies". She is portrayed as a dutiful daughter, a loyal and faithful wife. Yet she could be seen as a strong and resolute individual. As a dutiful daughter, she complies with her parents' wish to choose a husband and is willing to accept the candidate of her choice. When she chooses Sangthong against her parents' will, she has the courage





*Sangthong and Rotchana*





*Sangthong in disguise*

and determination to adhere to her choice and brave the consequences.

## Excerpts

1) Unable to find the right match for herself, Rotchana made a plea to her father that she would stay unmarried and spend the rest of her life serving her parents. King Samon was greatly disturbed. Naturally, he turned to Queen Montha for advice.

*Hearing Rotchana, King Samon gave a sigh,  
And replied to her plea:*

*“Listen to me, my beloved daughter,  
I have called for an assembly  
Of handsome young men,  
With ranks and titles to their names.  
Still you are not satisfied.”*

*“What shall we do, dear Montha?  
Only Rotchana remains our worry.  
She should not stay unmarried,  
Lest she goes astray.  
Let’s find her a match,  
And marry her off along with her sisters.*



*Speak out, if you do not agree.”  
Fearful for her daughter’s plight,  
Montha decided to speak her mind,  
“Tis easy for a woman of rank to err,  
And bring shame to her father,  
Should she not love her husband.  
So be patient, my Lord, I beg of you.  
This time let them bring in  
Every male in the kingdom, young and old.  
Give her yet another chance,  
Then let fate take care of the rest.”*

*“How wise you are, Montha, my dear Queen.  
Hearing your counsel, I feel relieved.”*

2) When Rotchana chose the negrito as her consort, King Samon and Queen Montha were enraged. Seeing her mother suffer thus, Rotchana tried to convince her that it was her own *karma* that led her to such an unfortunate choice.

*Trying to pacify her enraged mother,  
Rotchana tactfully replied,  
“It was my karma, dear Mother, that drove me on.  
Should I say that I do not love him,  
Who would ever believe me?  
I know right from wrong but cannot tell.*

*Like one whose lips have been sealed,  
I cannot help but be silent.  
Hate me, but forgive me, Oh Mother.  
Let fate guide me on.  
I am ready to atone for my past deeds.  
So hold your tears, and do not cry."*

3) Being vengeful of the negrito, King Samon devised a plan to get rid of him. Using his need to make an offering to the Gods as a pretext, King Samon demanded a hundred fish from each of his seven sons-in-law. To make sure that the negrito would fail to meet his demand and be killed as a consequence, only one day was given for this task. Unaware of her husband's magic power, Rotchana was in distress.

*"Now it seems that we are fated to die,  
For father has no mercy on us.  
From you he demands a hundred fish.  
And you have to stake your life for it.  
How can we contend with the other rich sons-in-law?  
For such rich men can have things done at their fingertips.  
Poor as we are,  
Where can we find so many fish in one day?"*



*Oh, what shall befall you, my beloved husband?  
Should they take your life, I would follow you,  
And let them take mine too.  
No longer do I want to live, and face the world.  
Never shall I let another man touch me,  
And be my husband.”  
Thus she prostrated and beat her breast.*

4) When the six sons-in-law lost all the matches, King Samon realized that his kingdom was really at stake. Unable to solve the problem, he became sullen until Queen Montha came to his rescue.

*Perplexed and disturbed, King Samon remained silent.  
Seeing her husband thus, Montha was afraid  
Lest their kingdom be seized.  
Moving closer to the king she advised him hence;  
“Why look so sad and sullen, my Lord?  
Restrain yourself and be calm.  
Listen to me, and ponder over my words.  
Thanks to the enemy  
For reminding us of Rotchana’s husband.  
Methinks he is a man of wit and intelligence.  
Scorn him not, for he is proud and fearless.  
Magical power he might even possess.*

*For how else could he have met your demand,  
And managed to bring, in multitude,  
Fish and antelopes.  
So cast aside your anger.  
Go and beg him forgiveness.  
We might regain our kingdom,  
Should he agree to help.*





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