

# A comparative study of Thai culture through Thai literary masterpieces

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## 1. Introduction

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

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

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

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

They are:

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

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

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

6) *Wela* by Chat Kocpitti (1994)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### 1) Thai Literary Conventions

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

#### 1.1 Rhetorical Pattern

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

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

### *1.2 Opening and Ending*

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

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

### *1.3 Personality of leading character*

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

### *1.4 Bathing and Costuming Process*

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

### *1.5 Expressive Gestures*

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

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

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

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

### 1.6 Figurative Speech

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

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

### 1.7 Beliefs

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

#### 2) Traditional ceremony

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

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