The story of Prince Sudhana and the bird maiden Manoharā – in Thai Suthon and Manōrā – is an ancient tale which was already prominent in the Sanskrit literature of northern Hinayāna Buddhism in the early centuries of the Christian era. Its early history has been carefully traced by Jaini (1966) with particular reference to its presence in reliefs on the early ninth century temple of Borobudur in central Java. The Pāli versions of the tale are part of a collection of jātakas (birth tales) traditionally thought to be the work of monks in Chiangmai in northern Thailand from the fifteenth century onwards. The title of this Pāli collection is Paññāsa-jātaka (fifty birth tales) and it is known in three recensions: from Burma, Laos/Chiangmai, and Cambodia/central Thailand respectively.¹ All these birth tales are extra-canonical, that is, additional to the 543 birth tales included in the Buddhist canon, and more than half of the stories in each of the three recensions are unique to that particular collection. Only fifteen stories are common to all three versions (Pinot 1917:44-9).

One Pāli story from the Paññāsa-jātaka that has been critically examined and edited, the Samuddaghoesa-jātaka (the birth tale of Samuddaghosa), suggests in the form of its language that it was composed in South-East Asia rather than borrowed intact from a Pāli original from India or elsewhere (Terral 1957), while the Burmese collection is known as Zīn-me Pana-thā (the Chiangmai fifty) which supports the idea of its origin in northern Thailand.

In Thailand, certain popular stories with a Buddhist setting, from the Paññāsa-jātaka and elsewhere, were translated into Thai verse, presumably from a Pāli language source, and were written down on the characteristic long Thai folding books of paper made from the bark of the khọjı bush (Streblus asper). Such tales were read aloud to the laity on the sabbath day, and form a genre at once didactic and entertaining, known in Thai as klong suat. It is composed in a variety of verse forms, the usual mixture known as kāp (Skt. kāvya), comprising common Thai verse forms called yānti, chabang and suwāŋkhanāng.² Perhaps the most popular of all such stories in Thai was the story of Suthon and Manōrā, and two versions of it in the klong suat idiom are compared here. The Thai adaptors of the story are all anonymous, but their work is often charming and nearly always endowed with the Thai flair for the concrete, the realistic, and the human. In the process of transmuting the tale into the language and cultural terms of the Thai, the tales were inevitably recast and expanded
to many times their original length.

The first of the two Thai versions of the Suthon jātaka tale in klön suat verse is known in numerous copies preserved mainly in the National Library in Bangkok [abbreviated below as NLJ]. A copy in the Royal Asiatic Society in London was described, and a section of it analysed, by Professor Simmonds (1967), and another copy in private hands is the only one so far published in Thai (Du'ân Bunnâk 1956). The second version is called here the Songkhla text [abbreviated below as S] for the reason that the only known copy of it is preserved in Songkhla, in southern Thailand, in the museum collection in Machimâràêt temple, also known as Wat Klêng. It was edited and published in Songkhla by Suthiwong Phongphaibûn (1970). The Songkhla text was composed by a southern Thai poet with a good command of Sanskrit and Pâli loanwords. It is full of colloquial southern Thai expressions as well as rather high-flown Indic vocabulary. The text preserved in Songkhla is dated to the equivalent of November 23, 1868, though it is likely to be a copy of an earlier text. Its length is approximately 51,000 words written in three volumes of folding books. The author provides an informative colophon in which he tells us that he has

in devotion composed [it] according to the Pâli as they wrote it in ancient times. There is [here] no story of Nâng Kânom, daughter of the wicked brahmin, no birding of the lord of the birds, [these] are not to be found in the old text. I wrote the cßan verses according to the Pâli, the story as of old, of Manôrà. (Suthiwong 1970:297-8)

The reference to omitted incidents will be amplified later. In the course of the story's transformation into a southern Thai folk tale, numerous accretions were made to the original, but our author has not included them. And although he calls his verse 'cßan', this is not the classical Thai cßan where syllable length is specified in imitation of Sanskrit verse, but a mixture of verse forms in which the three common forms called yañû, cßabang, and surñîkhanâng are supplemented by eight other forms possibly of the poet's own invention, or at least highly uncommon.

In addition to these two versions of the tale, there are other Thai Manôrà manuscripts in southern idiom in a rather 'folklorized' tradition quite distinct from the two literary versions. Their language is highly colloquial with much rustic and rough dialogue, representing the Thai poet at his most direct and unrestrained. Although they may be said to possess little that is elevated or noble, they often rise to heights of effective natural sentiment unmatched in the more conventional Thai literary styles and they merit further examination. From central Thailand on the other hand, a highly formalized verse rendition of the tale was composed at the end of the nineteenth century by Phrayâ
Itsarānuphāp (1927) in classical Thai chān. This verse form attempts to imitate Sanskrit prosody and the resulting effect is, of necessity, somewhat stilted, although its high-flown and learned qualities endow it with a certain prestige in Thai literary terms. The effect of casting the Suthon story in this form is to break the story up into scenes upon which the author has written lyrical impressions or evocations, while the narrative element, which is so marked a feature in all of the more natural Thai settings of the tale, is almost wholly suppressed.

The plot of the Suthon story in all its versions, both Indian and South East Asian, consists in basic plan of the union, the separation, and the reunion, of the hero and heroine. Suthon is heir to the kingdom of Uttarakambala, while Manūrā resides in the inaccessible kingdom of the kīnmaras, the half-bird, half-human beings who inhabit the lower slopes of the cosmic mountain Krailāt (Skt. Krailāsa). The first sub-plot brings the couple together by events that enable a forest hunter to capture Manūrā with the aid of magic noose belonging to a nāga king. In the Pāli/Thai versions, the land which is next to Suthon's kingdom is in famine, and its king offers a reward to a brahmin capable of casting a spell on the nāga king residing in a lake lying between the two kingdoms. This spell would reverse the ill fortune of the kingdom. The nāga is aided by a hunter from Suthon's land; the hunter halts the brahmin's evil spell and, as a reward, is later able to borrow the nāga's magic noose to trap the kīnmarā princess Manūrā. He then leads her to Prince Suthon and the couple marry.

The second sub-plot causes the separation of the couple. A jealous court brahmin in Suthon's land tells the king that Suthon must be sent to subdue a rebellious vassal. Then the brahmin falsely interprets a dream of the king and calls for the sacrifice of Manūrā, but she cannily asks for her wings and tail on the pretext of performing a last dance before the queen, and flies away to her father's kingdom in Krailāsa. Suthon returns victorious but, in grief at the loss of his beloved, he undertakes a perilous journey to her land beyond the magic Himavanta forest in order to regain her. He has to perform miraculous feats to win her back, but the couple are at last reunited, and eventually they return to Suthon's land where he accedes to the throne.

The number of characters in the Pāli version of the tale is fifteen, compared with sixteen and seventeen in the National Library and Songkhla texts respectively. All of the fifteen Pāli characters occur in the two Thai versions and they can be conveniently grouped in the following manner:
Sudhana group: Sudhana and his parents, King Ādīccavamsa and Queen Candadevi;

Manohara group: Manoharā and her parents and six sisters.

First sub-plot group: Jambucitta, the nāga king; the king of Mahāpāṇīcāla; the evil sorcerer brahmin; Pundarika the hunter; and Kassapa the hermit.

Second sub-plot group: the purohita and the brahmin promised promotion by Sudhana.

The fifteenth character, the god Indra, appears ex machina at appropriate points in the plot.

The sixteenth character in both Thai versions is the vassal king in revolt in the second sub-plot, named Phrayā Čhan in the Songkhla text, and also Čhantaphānu (P. Candabhānu), while his name is Nanthaṟāṭ (P. Nandarāja) in NL. This latter name may arise from a misunderstanding that the king of Mahāpāṇīcāla (named Nandarāja in the Pāli) and the rebellious vassal were one and the same person, as the rebel is not clearly identified in the Pāli. In fact, the king of Mahāpāṇīcāla is not named in either Thai version. The seventeenth character in the Songkhla text is the hunter's wife, named Mēkkhabidā, unique to this text, though found in other southern versions. Her presence is an example of the many elements of naturalization in the setting of the story in southern Thailand.

Among these characters a few variations in names and spelling can be noted. The neighbouring king of Mahāpāṇīcāla, King Duma in the Pāli (Manohara's father), becomes Prathum (Praduma in Pāli spelling) in NL and Thumbhōn (P. Dumvara) in the Songkhla version. Manohara's mother is unnamed except in NL where she is Čhankinnarī. Čhan is a popular name, readily supplied in this tradition where a name is wanted. For example, the extra character of the vassal king in revolt is named Phrayā Čhan in S, as already noted.

There are no differences of primary significance between the three versions. They can all be said to be clearly in the same overall tradition, and the fact that the two Thai versions omit nothing significant from the Pāli, and only occasionally alter or add to it, strongly indicates that they both derive directly from it. Indeed, the poets themselves have each stated clearly that they took the story faithfully from the Pāli text, and there is nothing to suggest that we should doubt this.

The following twelve points stand out as the most prominent differences in the three texts:

1. In the Pāli, the scheme to kill the nāga lord is formulated by King Nandarāja on advice from his ministers. Neither