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Literature, Film and Culture in Southeast Asia

# **Twelve Sisters: A Shared Heritage in Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand**

Edited by  
YAMAMOTO Hiroyuki

Thailand P.E.N. Center

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Literature, Film and Culture in Southeast Asia  
Twelve Sisters: A Shared Heritage in Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand  
edited by YAMAMOTO Hiroyuki  
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OKADA Tomoko

Cover designed by Opath KHAMMAVONG

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# Introduction

## Twelve Sisters: A Shared Heritage in Cambodia, Laos and Thailand

*YAMAMOTO Hiroyuki*

The “Twelve Sisters” is a Southeast Asian folktale, which is also known as *Nang Sip Song* (Thailand and Laos), *Pra Rot Meri* (Thailand), *Puthisen Neang Kongrey* (Cambodia), and so on. Although there are regional variations, the core narrative is common across countries. The story of “Twelve Sisters” grew into the national narrative of each country through literary works, school textbooks, and films.

The “Twelve Sisters” plot outline is as follows:

The twelve sisters were abandoned by their parents in a mountain and adopted by an ogress (a female demon), who incarnated as a beautiful woman, hiding her intention to eat them. When the twelve sisters learn about the ogress’ intention, they flee from her place and meet a king, who allows them to live in the palace. The ogress, in human form, visits the palace and, through her magic, wins the favor of the king and becomes his queen. She locks the twelve sisters in a cave, digs out their eyeballs, and sends the eyeballs to her daughter back home.

The sisters found out that they were pregnant and successfully give birth in the cave and ate the babies to feed their hunger. However, the youngest sister, who had only one eyeball removed, raises her son. The son grows up and goes out of the cave to bring food to his mother and aunts.

When he finds out that his father is the king, he goes to the palace. The ogress sends him to her daughter, the princess of the ogress’s native kingdom, with a letter that reads, “Kill this man.” However, he meets a thevada (saint) along his way, who rewrites the letter, and the princess marries him upon his arrival.

He lives happily with the princess, but at the urging of the divine horse, he steals his mother’s and his aunts’ eyeballs as well as medicinal herbs and leaves for the palace. The princess chases after him but is blocked in her path by the medicinal herbs he throws, and she dies from her grief.

This book discusses how the lore of the “Twelve Sisters” has evolved from the way it is told at different times and in different regions. The book comprises twelve chapters by scholars from Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Japan, who specialize in the literature and history of Southeast Asia. Each chapter deciphers the themes that have been traditionally told in the lore as well as those that have been added to it, especially those that were included in the lore through visual

technology in the mid-twentieth century. While most of the discussion in each chapter is country-specific, this book does not adopt the method of organizing chapters by country as the aim is to cross national boundaries.

The national and regional variations of the “Twelve Sisters” are given by Trisilpa Boonkhachorn in Chapter 1. She will also present a case study from Phanat Nikhom District, Chonburi Province, Thailand, to show how the “Twelve Sisters” folktale is deeply rooted in people’s lives today.

The story of the “Twelve Sisters” is understood to be a Buddhist saga; however, as Chanwit Tudkeao reveals in Chapter 2, it had likely originated from Lao folklore and Buddhist values were later added. In Chapter 3, Khamphuy Phollurxa presents how the “Twelve Sisters” narrative has developed over time in Laos to reflect the interests of the local community. By considering how its narrative was used to indoctrinate the public in the post-independence state after the second half of the 1950s, Van Sovathana analyzes the teaching of the “Twelve Sisters” in Cambodian national language textbooks in Chapter 4. She argues that the textbook reflects the Cambodian value that children should be loyal to their parents and guardians, and as Pal Vannarirak testifies in Chapter 5, the “Twelve Sisters,” along with other stories, gave hope to the Cambodian people during the three years and eight months of the “era of the black uniform” or the military regime of Pol Pot.

There is no doubt that the central theme of “Twelve Sisters” is filial piety for the parents. However, we can also read other themes in the “Twelve Sisters,” which have been recounted repeatedly to the present day. In Chapter 6, Hashimoto Sayaka emphasizes that the “Twelve Sisters” has been passed down to the present day in Laos by being superimposed on the landscape. She also finds a representation of the relationship between the Lao people and other ethnic neighbors in the “Twelve Sisters.”

The “Twelve Sisters” were narrated in the twentieth century with a new theme added by the introduction of visual technology. The feature film *Puthisen Neang Kongrey* was created by director Ly Bun Yim in 1968. In her multi-faceted analysis of the film in Chapter 7, Okada Tomoko calls attention to the film’s conclusion. After defeating the ogress at the palace, the hero leaves the king and his mother at the palace and returns to the princess he has left behind. There, he learns of the death of the princess and remains in her kingdom as the king according to his late wife’s will. Here, Okada deciphers the story of a daughter who has been obedient to her mother who finally raises her voice and it is heard. It was a utopia dreamed of by the Cambodian people at the time.

The special effects techniques of director Sompote Saengduenchai, who studied filmmaking in Japan, brought *Phra Rod Meree* to life as a film in Thailand in 1981. As analyzed in detail by Hiramatsu Hideki in Chapter 8, the characters of the thevada and the ogre (male demon) in the film are very unique. The thevada, usually portrayed as wise (and sometimes old) man, is a comical half-naked middle-aged man. His magic power is used to provide the ogre, usually portrayed as brutal, cannibalistic monster, with breasts and made him feminine and caring who nurtures the hero during his childhood. Hiramatsu sees contemporary Thai



youth in the unmotivated hero, who does not ask for help but simply waits for it.

Through the media, the lore deepens its inherent themes and incorporates new ones. Films are one of the major national and international media in Southeast Asia today. Chalida Uabumrungjit will introduce the changing modes of production in Thai cinema in Chapter 9; Doung Sarakpich will introduce the development of the Cambodian film industry towards the second golden age and the current state of young filmmakers in Chapter 10. Dethnakhone Luangmovihane will introduce the development and current state of the film industry and film archives in Laos in Chapter 11; and Athidxay Bouandaohuang will share his experiences and aspirations about filmmaking in Laos in Chapter 12, including a question and answer session at a workshop.

The “Twelve Sisters” narrative, formed and passed down in multi-ethnic societies in Southeast Asia, has been developing in diverse ways. Today, it is easy to find differences in the “Twelve Sisters” narrative from region to region. This is the result of the narrative's acceptance of people's interests in different eras and different regions, and therefore, its diversity makes the narrative of “Twelve Sisters” a shared heritage that Southeast Asia should be proud of. While visual media can reinforce the character of a national narrative, they can also convey narratives across national boundaries. There will be more narratives of the “Twelve Sisters” with a variety of themes, and deciphering them will continue to be imperative to understand the society and the people of Southeast Asia.

# 1 Cultural Identity and Creative Tourism

## The Folktale *Nang Sip Song* (Twelve Sisters) in the Global Contexts

*Trisilpa BOONKHACHORN*

The story of “The Twelve Sisters” together with the continuing episode of “Phra Rot-Meri” are well-known and widespread in Southeast Asia literary contexts since 15th century in the form of folk story and Jataka story or the story of the Buddha to Be. In Thailand, the story is known as Nang Sip song (The Twelve Sisters) or Phra Rot Meri or Ratthasen Chadok from Pannajataka which is the collection of the stories of the previous lives of Buddha.

In Laos, the story has been transmitted both in the written and oral texts. Besides the story of Nang Sip Song as folktale, there is the legend of Phu Tao - Phu Nang in Luang Phra Bang Province. In Cambodia, the story is called Puthisen Neang Kong Rei. The story turns to be the legend of Kong Rei Mountain in Kampong Chanang Province and also the temple of the twelve sisters in Siem Riap. And in Southern Shan state, Myanmar at Mongnai, this folktale turns to be the legend of the town with the monument of golden cow, who saved the twelve sisters from Santaman, as the symbol of virtue.

### The Thai classical Texts of Nang Sip Song

In Thailand, this story has been referred to in many Ayutthaya literary texts, i.e., Khlong Nirat Hariphunchai, Kap Ho Khlong Phra Sri Mahosot and Jindamani. During Ayutthaya period, there are at least two written texts of this story in different genres; Kaab Khap Mai Rotthasen which were usually chanted in the royal ceremonies and Phra Rot Kham Chan or Phra Rot Nirat Kham Chan, the sophisticated prosody depicting the lovelorn episode of Meri and Rottasen which ended up with the death of the heroine, Meri. It can be noticed that the royal literary texts concentrate only on the sentimental episode of love lamentation because of separation which is similar to the tradition of “Nirat”, which is flourished during that time.

During the Early Rattanakosin or Bangkok period, there are the klon version of Phra Rot Nirat which some scholars believe that it is the adaptation of the Ayutthaya’s version to different prosody, klon, which is popular prosody during

the Early Rattanakosin period. Another text is Phra Rotthasen Mahori or Thai musical ensemble. Again, the lovelorn episode of the story is the most impressive part that royal class audiences enjoy.

## The Twelve Sisters as cultural identity in Phanat Nikhom District, Chonburi Province

Phanat Nikhom is a district in the northern part of Chonburi Province, eastern region of Thailand. Though it is an ancient city since Dhavaravati Era, approximately 3000 years ago, but it is reestablished as Muang Phanat Nikhom during King Rama III of Rattanakosin period for Laos Wiang refugees, leading by Phra Intha-asa, from Nakhon Phanom in 1828. In 1904, King Rama V changed it to the district of Chonburi Province.

Actually, at the present time, there are three ethnic groups in Phanat Nikhom; the Thai ancestors, the Lao Wiang and Chinese from the adjacent town of Chachoengsao but the historical evidences indicate that the majority of people in this town since Early Rattakosin period was Lao Wiang. As Sujit Wongthet, a famous Thai historian, states that “wherever Lao people go, the story of Nang Sip Song will go with them”. This folktale is therefore not only a story for entertaining but also a folktale identifying the Laotian Ethnic group.

Phanat Nikhom is known as the city of Phra Rot. Nowadays, the slogan of Phanat Nikhom prefecture refers to the story of Nang Sip Song as “Phra Phanatsabodi is with our hometown, Bamboo-basketwork with our town, the famous Boon Klang Baan Festival, the legend of Phra Rot and Meri, the pride of clean city and the brilliant riddle clue”. The district’s logo also refers to the story of Nang Sip Song by picking up Phra Rothasen and his horse as the symbol of the story.



Figure:(left) Logo of Panat Nikhom Prefecture’s Municipality, Choburi Province (the picture of Phra Rot and his magical horse)  
(middle) Logo of the Office of Pnat Nikhom Prefecture’s Municipality, Choburi Province (the picture of Phra Rot and his magical horse)  
(right) Logo of Mon Nang District’s Municipality, Chonburi Province Phanat Nikhom Town Municipality as a city model for Sustainable Future City Initiative

Many places, ancient architecture and antiquities in Phanat Nikhom District are named according to the folktale of Nang Sip Song as local story. For example, Nang Sip Song Cave (Tham Nang Sip Song) at Mon Nang (Lady's pillows) district with shrine of Nang Sip Song spirits. At Tambon Mon Nang (Mon Nang Sub-District), there used to be twelve stone pillows of the twelve sisters but nowadays there are only four of them left. The rectangular pond or Phra Rot's pond which is believed that it used to be the place where Phra Rot gave water to his rooster. There is also a shrine with the statue of Phra Rot holding his rooster. The Red Mound (Nuen Din Daeng) which is believed that Santaman Ogress died and her blood turns the mound totally red. For Phanat Nikhom community, the story of Nang Sip Song is a part of their cultural identity with local belief that it's the story of their ancestors.

## **From Creative Folklore to Creative Tourism in Phanat Nikhom District's contexts**

Even though Phanat Nikhom used to be a small and quiet local district on the Eastern region, now this small district is the winner of numerous awards including Thailand Sustainable City Award 2012, Town Municipality Good Governance Award and The Environment Award on Carbon Emission Reduction.

The city participated in ASEAN ESC Model Cities Programme organizing and conducting training for a citywide Green and Clean Awards for Model School and "Model Communities." With the city vision that in 2017, Panat Nikhom will be a sustainable city which based on the economic efficiency concept, people participation and good governance. Phanat Nikhom is one of the 6 model cities of the TFCP or Thai Future City Project which started in 2015 to promote sustainable urban development of local cities of Thailand by the National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB) and the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). Phanat Nikhom also has the potential resources to develop the slow tourism which consist of natural tourism resources, art and culture tourism resources and historical tourism resources. (Manirochna, Suwanno, 2018)

Amidst the move to one of the 1000 most livable cities in the world, the legend of Nang Sip Song continues and is adapted to creative tourism trend. The yearly Nang Sip Song Festival, organized by Mon Nang Sub-District Council of Cultural Affairs and Panat Nikhom Mon Nang Organization, started in 2018. During January 20-21, 2018, the parade with Nang Sip Song statues passed around Panat Nikhom district and stopped in front of Nang Sip Song Cave.

With the strong belief in superstition, some local people still believe that they are the descendants of those in the folktale and all the places concerning the story are sacred places of their ancestors. The transmission of this folktale into the yearly festival of the town and more sacred shrines and statues is not only creative folklore but also creative tourism to support the government's policy of creative tourism in secondary cities. The interesting challenge is how can the story of

Nang Sip Song as historical and cultural identities and cultural heritage be transmitted and creative by the local people to the new social contexts of sustainable city which will certainly be one of the most interesting model of the most livable city in Thailand.



Figure: Phanat Nokhom's slogan: Basketry Town, the legend of Phra Rot-Meri



Figure: Poster of the yearly Nang Sip Song Festival, organized by Mon Nang Sub-District Council of Cultural Affairs and Panat Nikhom Mon Nang Organization, January 20-21, 2018,





Figure: Nang Sip Song sacred statues in the shrine in front of Nang Sip Song Cave.

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## 2 From Folktale to Buddhist Tale

### The Twelve Sisters in the Buddhist Tale, *Paññāsajātaka* in Thailand

*Chanwit TUDKEAO*

There are two important questions about this topic: 1. What are the main characteristics of the Twelve Sisters story in *Paññāsa Jātaka*? 2. How do Buddhist concepts differ between the Pali version and other popular versions in vernacular language(s)? However, before the discussion, it is necessary to provide a brief background about *Jātakas* and *Paññāsa-Jātakas*.

#### **Jātakas and their form**

*Jātakas*, or “Birth Stories”, are composed in verse, consisting of roughly 2500 verses. They are arranged in *Nipāta* “a collection”, according to numbers of verses in each Ja, from 1 to 80. Ja that contain more than 80 verses are referred to as *Mahājataka* “great *Jātaka*”. The most well-known collection of these birth stories is a Ja collection in *Khuddakanikāya* of Pali Tipitaka. Although these verses refer to previous lives of the Buddha Shakyamuni as Bodhisattva, there are some Ja that show no connection to Buddhism. K.R. Norman indicates that the Ja stories are a set of Indian fables which, adapted by the Buddhists, purport to tell the previous birth stories of the Buddha<sup>1</sup>. According to von Hinüber, the complete collection of 550 Ja with prose was once available in Burma, where it was likely brought from Kāñcī in South India. In Sri Lanka, 550 Ja were probably known as well based on the fact that the number 550 is mentioned in various texts, but, in fact, in Pali literary tradition, only 547 Ja were handed down from Sri Lanka to other Theravada countries, including Burma, while 3 Ja were lost -Ja 497-499<sup>2</sup>.

As mentioned above, in Pali tradition, only Ja with verse obtained canonical status. Ja with prose that include the explanation of the meaning of Ja, which are generally acquainted to us, are preserved and classified as commentary, referred to *Jātakaṭṭhavaṇṇanā*. Without the prose parts in Ja, we do not know their stories. Generally, the form of Ja consists of an incident in the present (*paccupannavattu*), which provides an opportunity to the Buddha to narrate an

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<sup>1</sup> K.R. Norman (1983), p.77.

<sup>2</sup> O. von Hinüber (1996), p.54-55.

event from one of his previous births (*aṭṭavavattu*); *gāthā*(s), or verse(s), as in the Tipitaka are normally found in *aṭṭavavattu*, but sometimes there are also in the *paccupannavattu* - commentary on the verses (*veyyākaraṇa*). Finally, the concluding part (*samodhāna*) outlines which characters in the *aṭṭavavattu* are identified with those in the *paccupannavattu* and those in the circle of the Buddha's disciples<sup>3</sup>.

Besides the tradition of the Ja collection in Pali, there are also number of previous birth stories of the Buddha in other Buddhist traditions - such as *Jātakamālā* of Āryasūra, *Jātakamālā* of Haribhaṭṭa, and *avadānas* in the Vinaya of Mūlasarvāstivādin school - of which the stories are parallel to those of the Pali canonical Ja while others completely differ from the canonical story but are preserved in Pali non-canonical Ja collections. One famous non-canonical Ja collection is the *Paññāsa-Jātaka* collection, which is discussed in the next section.

## Paññāsa-Jātakas

Scholars call *Jātakas* that do not exist in the canon and their commentary apocryphal *Jātakas*. A later collection of *Jātakas*, **Paññāsa-Jātaka** (the collection 50 *Jātakas*), considered to be apocryphal *Jātakas* as well, was presumably composed or assembled at Chiangmai in North Thailand. The author(s) of these *Jātakas* composed them by using Ja and Dhammapada commentary (Dh-a.) as a model<sup>4</sup>. According to O. von Hinüber, sources of the stories in PJa are the old Ja and Dh-a, as well as Buddhist Sanskrit literature such as *Avadānas* in Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya, the *Divyāvadāna*, and *Pañcatantra* verses are quoted from *Mahābhārata* and *Manusmṛti*<sup>5</sup>.

PJa exists in four recensions from Thailand, Cambodia, and Burma<sup>6</sup>, of which two are in Thailand. The Northern Thai recension or Chiangmai recension contains 50 stories, identical with the Burmese and Cambodian recensions, although the arrangement of the stories is slightly different<sup>7</sup>. On the contrary, the Central Thai recension/edition, edited and first published in 1923 by Thai

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<sup>3</sup> K.R. Norman (1983), p.78.

<sup>4</sup> O. von Hinüber (1996), p.135.

<sup>5</sup> O. von Hinüber (1996), p.136.

<sup>6</sup> For details, see O. von Hinüber (1996), p.135ff.; K.R. Norman (1983), p.177ff.; Supapan Na Bangchan (1990), p.13ff.

<sup>7</sup> ประสิทธิ์ แสงทับ (บรรณารักษ์). เชียงใหม่ป็นณาสชาดก (๒ เล่ม). กรุงเทพฯ : กองวรรณกรรมและประวัติศาสตร์ กรมศิลปากร, 2541. (Prasit Saengthap (ed.). Chiangmai Paññāsajātaka (2 vols.). Bangkok: Literature and Historical Archives Office, Fine Arts Department, 1998.



National Library<sup>8</sup>, contains 61 stories and 3 miscellaneous texts<sup>9</sup>. Supapan Na Bangchang divides these 61 Jātakas into 3 groups based on their dates and main characteristics in the following manner: 38 Jātakas that were composed in Haribhunjaya and Lanna (Chiangmai) between 1257 and 1407; 10 Jātakas that were composed in Chiangmai between 1357 and 1457; and 13 Jātakas that were composed in Chiangmai and Ayutthaya between 1457 and 1757, which do not exist in the Burmese recension<sup>10</sup>. In this chapter, one of these 13 Jātakas - the Rathasena Jātaka (RJ) - will be discussed in further detail.

## The Twelve Sisters story vs. Rathasena Jātaka

As mentioned above, RJ belongs to Supapan Na Bangchang's third category. The common characteristics of the stories in this group are their complexity. Each Jātaka contains a long and complex story. It does not aim to emphasize the career path or any prominent virtue of Bodhisattva but rather narrates the heroism and martial skills of the Bodhisattva. The main content of these Jātakas are the adventurous events of the hero and heroine. Therefore, their style is closer to romantic novels than proper Jātakas.

RJ was presumably composed in Pali, based on a northern Thai or Lao folk tale. Suchit Wongthet suggests that the Twelve Sisters story, or Pra Rot-Meri, story originally belongs to Khmu or Kammu - the local people - who had lived in the region before Lao ethnic group(s) settled in the northern part of present-day Laos, namely Lan Xang. Lao people adopted this story and composed their own versions<sup>11</sup>, whereas Supapan Na Bangchang and other scholars believe RJ derives from a northern Thai folk tale.

According to Supapan Na Bangchang, there is a clue of this folk tale in Nirat Haribhunchai, a Thai literature in the early Ayutthaya period, in which the separation of the author is compared with the separation of Prince Rathasena and Kangri. The mention of this in Nirat Haribhunchai might refer to the folk tale, not RJ<sup>12</sup>. However, it is not at all certain which version among them is the earliest

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<sup>8</sup> The Foundation of Thai Government Savings Bank has published the bilingual (Thai-Pali) edition of Pja (4 vols.) in 2011.

<sup>9</sup> For the list of stories, see Supapan Na Bangchan (1990), p.17-18. For an historical study of Pja, see also Niyada Sarikabhuti, Paññāsajātaka: History and importance to Thai poetries, Dissertation, submitted to Thai Language Department, Faculty of Arts Chulalongkorn University, 1981.

<sup>10</sup> Supapan Na Bangchan (1990), p.18-25.

<sup>11</sup> See สุจิตต์ วงษ์เทศ: พระรถ เมรี ตำนานมหรพจนลาว  
ละครยอดเยี่ยมของชาวบ้านยุคอยุธยา, online accessible at  
[https://www.matichon.co.th/columnists/news\\_142068](https://www.matichon.co.th/columnists/news_142068) (July 2, 2018).

<sup>12</sup> Supapan Na Bangchan (1990), p.24.

one and becomes the source of RJ, since this story is widespread among many ethnic groups including Thai, Tai and Laos peoples. Due to its popularity, there are various versions of this story in various forms such as the Thai version, Nang Sip Song “Twelve Ladies” or Pra Rot-Meri; the Lao and northeastern Thai version, Nang Sip Song; the Tai Lue version, Nang Sib Song; the Tai Yuan version, Nang Sib Song; the Tai Khuen version: Chantasopha or Sib Song Nang Phee Nong “Twelve Sisters”, and the Tai Yai version: Mak Ta Sib Song Nang or Nai Ta Sib Song Nang “Eyeballs of Twelve Ladies”<sup>13</sup>.

Even in the royal court from the Ayutthaya period to the Ratnakosin period, the story of Pra Rot-Meri is greatly popular and is narrated in various literary forms, such as Kam Kab in one version, Kam Klon in three versions, Kam Chan in three versions, Bot Lakorn in three versions, Khab Mai in one version, and Mahori in one version<sup>14</sup>. Remarkably, most of the versions in vernacular languages show strong Indian influences such as proper names, story setting, and religious concepts - especially Buddhism. It is, however, difficult to precisely indicate which versions among them are influenced by RJ or the folk tale.

The model of RJ is obviously Ja. It begins, however, abruptly with aṭṭavattthu and ends with samodhāna, without paccupannavattthu. RJ can be divided in two parts: the story of the Twelve Sisters and the story of Rathasena and Kaṃṛī. Briefly, its content is as follows:

*A rich man, named Nanda, honored the Kassapa Buddha with twelve bananas. Due to this merit, his wife begot twelve daughters. He became poorer and could not nourish them; therefore, he brought them to the forest and left them behind. An ogress, named Sandhamāra, the queen of Gajapura, adopted these twelve girls as her own children.*

*One day, having known the truth, the twelve girls escaped from the ogress and reached a city named Kutāranagara. The King of that city, named Rathasiddhi, married and appointed them as his consorts. The ogress, with rage, went in search of the twelve young women. Having found them, she transformed herself into a very beautiful woman, using her magical powers. The King Rathasiddhi appointed the ogress - in human form - as his chief consort. Having removed the eyeballs of the twelve women, the ogress imprisoned them in a tunnel and sent their eyeballs to her daughter, Kaṃṛī.*

*Meanwhile, the twelve women begot children in that tunnel. Due to hunger, they consumed their own newborn children. Only the son of the twelfth woman was alive. He was the Bodhisattva, named Rathasena. Rathasena grew up, and*

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<sup>13</sup> Ratanapol Chuenkha (ed.), Nang Sib Song-Pra Rot-Meri Studies. Proceeding papers in the national conference “ขับนิทานนางสิบสอง ขานตำนานพระรถเมรี”: นิทานมรดกแห่งอาเซียน, 2017, p.239.

<sup>14</sup> Supapan Na Bangchan (1990), p.23; Ratanapol Chuenkha (ed.) (2017), p.26ff.

with help of god Indra, he earned food for his mother and aunts by gambling.

Later, the King Rathasiddhi got to know the truth that Rathasena was his own son. The ogress Sandhamāra pretended to be sick and requested the king to send Rathasena to hand a letter to her daughter Kaṃrī. In that letter, she ordered her daughter to kill him as soon as he arrived. On the way, Rathasena visited the hermitage of a seer, who realized that this Prince was the Bodhisattva. He helped Rathasena by changing the message in the letter: instead of urging Kaṃrī to slay him, the letter indicated that she should marry him. Rathasena arrived at Gajapura and met Kaṃrī. They fell in love at first sight, got married, and lived together happily.

Time went by, and he was warned by his divine horse that he should pay his gratitude to his mother and relatives and go back to his city by bringing the eyeballs and some herbs to cure them. He sedated Kaṃrī with strong liquor. While she was sleeping, he escaped. Having woken up, Kaṃrī ran after him. Rathasena threw magic herbs to obstruct her many times, until she could not reach him anymore. Unable to reach and take her husband back, Kaṃrī died because of the great sorrow.

Rathasena went back to his city and helped his mother and aunts. The ogress could not bear her loss, and she died of fear of Rathasena. At the end, the Bodhisattva Rathasena lived happily with his father, mother, and relatives.

In samodhāna, the Buddha related the persons in the previous birth to those in the present as follows:

- The ogress Sandhāmārā is Devadatta.
- His divine horse, Assarājā “King of horses”, is Kaṇṭhaka.
- Sakka, the god Indra, is Anuruddha.
- The seer is Sariputta (one of chief disciples).
- The King Rathasiddhi is King Suddhodana.
- His mother, the twelfth sister, is the Queen Mahāmāyā.
- His relatives are Buddhists.
- Kaṃrī is Yasodharā.
- Rathasena is Buddha Shakyamuni himself.

In RJ, different forms of the Twelve Sisters story, or Pra Rot-Meri in folk tale versions, some Buddhist moralities and concepts are clearly emphasized. In every important event that happened to particular characters in the story, the concept of deed (karma) and karmic fruit (vipāka) is used to explain them - for example, why the father of the twelve sisters became poor, why they were abandoned in the forest, why they were hidden and had their eyeballs taken away - with these explanations: In the past, the rich Nanda took things such as gold and silver from these women while they were eating and did not give them back. Therefore, he experienced (his) previous karmic fruit (*pubbe nandaseṭṭhī bhojane tāsam suvaṇṇarajjaṭṭādīni gehetvā adatvā tena porāṇavipākam anubandhīti*).

In the past, the young women amused themselves by abandoning twelve puppies in the forest (*pubbe kira nāriyo dahare kilante dvādasasunakhapotake vane chaḍḍetvā*). In the past, the twelve young women played at the riverbank,

took twelve fish out of the water, and placed them on the ground. Only the youngest sister pierced one eye of a fish. The eleven elder sisters pieced both eyes of the other eleven fish. Once they stopped playing, they released those fish back in the water (*pubbe kira dvādasanāriyo daharakā tīre kīḷitvā dvādasamacche gahetvā thale ṭhapenti. Kaniṭṭhā pana ekamacchassa ekacakkhuṃ vijjhi. Ekādasā tā ekādasannaṃ macchānaṃ dve cakkhūni vijjhiṃsu*) na kīḷtvā muñciṃsu.

Moreover, the concept of Bodhisattva and the perfections (pāramī or pāramitā), especially the perfection of truth (sacca) and compassion (karuṇā) of the Bodhisattva; the concept of impermanence (anicca), suffering (dukkha), and non-self (anattā); and the concept of Nibbāna are imbedded in the story, such as

*aniccā sabbe saṅkhārā* upādavayadhammino  
upajjītvā nirujjhanti tesañ vūpasamo sukho  
kammāsako kammadāyādo yaṃ yaṃ akāsi; or  
...*kaniṭṭhā pana cakkhunā passati. aniccā sabbasaṅkhārā dukkhā anattāti*  
*bhāvanaṃ bhāveti...*; or ... *saccaṃ paramatthaṃ nāma bodhisatto ca karuṇo*  
*mātāpitāro pāleti nātikaṃ karuṇādhhammo*; or  
*saccaṃ paramaṃ loke saccaṃ loko padhānakaṃ*  
*karuṇā paramaṃ loke karuṇā loko padhānakanti.*; or  
...*aho sukhaṃ paramaṃ sukhaṃ tato nibbānaṃ paramaṃ sukhaṃ ...*

## Concluding remarks

Having compared RJ with the story in vernacular versions, it is remarkable that the Twelve Sisters story in vernacular languages emphasizes the heroic deeds of the hero and his adventure, whereas the author of RJ converted this folk tale to a Buddhist tale by using the Jātaka form and inserting some familiar Buddhist verses and Buddhist concepts.

In addition, there is, among Thais, a well-known saying: “In this birth, I (Meri) followed and searched after you (Pra Rot), but in the next birth, you must follow and search after me”. It is believed that the Pra Rot-Meri story (Rathasena Jātaka, story no.47 in PJa) has a close connection to another story, the Pra Sudhon-Manohra story (Sudhana Jātaka, story no.2 in PJa), as the first one is the previous birth story of the latter. However, in PJa, these two Jātakas have no connection at all to each other. In RJ, at the part in which the heroine and hero of the story make their firm wish, it is clearly visible that the heroine must follow the hero until their last birth, namely, the birth as Prince Siddhattha and Prince Yosodharā. Their wishes in RJ are thus the wish of Kaṃrī:

“... I do bad deeds. Wandering (in the transmigration) by birth, (it is my) wish to meet my beloved again and live together with no more separation”, and the wish of Rathasena: “from now on, follow (me) like (a mother cow follows) her calf, in the future births”. The connection of Pra Rot-Meri and Pra Sudhon-Manohra has presumably happened in the Ayutthaya period, since both stories were highly popular and performed on stage as one connecting set. However, this supposition still needs further research.

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### 3 **Shapes of Love in Lao Tradition**

#### **The Legend of the Twelve Sisters in Laos**

*Khamphuy PHOLLURXA*

The Legend of the Twelve Sisters is a folktale that demonstrates the way of thinking, wit and understanding of Lao people towards the world. The story also closely relates to Lao lifestyle which can still be applied even in the society of the current era. The Legend of the Twelve Sisters depicts Lao lifestyle in various aspects, such as geography, family love, inter-ethnic love, and belief in shamanistic spells, religion, spirits and Brahmanism which constitute the life philosophy of Lao people. The legend is widely popular in Lao society and passed down from generation to generation via oral story-telling, written texts, books, sculptures and many other methods which allow the story to persist within the unique environment and society of every local area in each province of Laos.

#### **The Legend of the Twelve Sisters Demonstrates Love as in Lao Tradition**

The legend is a folklore which has existed and expanded through different times in correspondence with Lao lifestyle. It can be said that the story is well-known among Lao people from north to south due to the illustrations of love as in Lao tradition, reflected in family love, romantic love and inter-ethnic love, embedded in the tale.

##### **Family Love**

The legend informs us of an incorrect way of love which the parents in the story share with their children. According to the Lao tradition, family love refers to love with a strong bond. Family members are not only related by blood, but also economy and society. This is because family members in the past were the main labor force for producing rice, food and clothes, as well as for expanding their family roots through marriage and giving birth which served as an important commitment for everyone in the family. As the Lao proverb says “without wife is an offence, without children is an insult,” which reflects the trend in the past when young couples tended to get married early in life and have more children in order

to serve their family. Those who did not marry or already got married but had no children would be considered being lazy, thrifty, cruel and mean for not being able to find their love or have children. The proverb is also well-reflected in the way Lao people greet by asking “are you married? Or how many children do you have?” when they first meet each other.

After marriage and having children, the family home must be built with all members, namely grandparents, parents and children, living together happily. Lao people regard a family with all three generations living together as the ideal happy family. Everyone has their rights, important duties and roles to bring security and happiness to their family. This is well-reflected in legal behaviors, parenting customs, marriage customs and so on, which serve as social behavioral norms. I would like to refer to one of the parenting customs saying that parents must love, take good care of and teach their children until they are fully grown, ready to get married and have their own family without leaving them behind for any cause. Children must also take good care of their parents when they get old. This custom ideally complies with Lao proverbs that say “bad parents raise evils, bad children go to hell”; “those who value parents’ teaching will be rewarded”; “while father’s favor is as big as a mountain, mother’s favor is as big as the sky and earth.” The above-mentioned customs related to family reveal the roles and duties of Lao family as well as depicting love and the strong bond which all members share with each other.

If we look at the Twelve Sisters Legend from the perspective of Lao customs, we can say that the story clearly shows us which action complies and which does not comply with the customs. Parents of the twelve sisters breached Lao behavioral norms by leaving their children in the deep forest while returning home and living together by themselves as they grew older. Because of their wrongdoing with the twelve sisters, the gods punished the parents with sickness which disabled them from living their lives happily. When they were too old to help themselves, the parents started to miss their children and decided to search for them around the area where they were left. However, they could not find their children because they had already transformed into ghosts and monkeys.

The Twelve Sisters tale further narrates that when the sisters were searching for their parents, they were caught by a giant lady who locked them up in a cave. The sisters managed to escape and later married a king before all of them gave birth to their child. Unfortunately, the giant lady was able to find them, took their husband and locked them up in a cave once again with their eyes removed. Due to their lack of sight and hunger, the twelve sisters were forced to eat their own children except for the youngest sister, who drank drops of water from the cave to try to save her only child. In the end, she was able to raise her child who later helped the twelve sisters, by finding food and returning their eyes. This part of the folklore emphasizes reciprocal love shared between the mother and her child which was also extended to their relatives. Therefore, everyone in the family should love and take good care of their children. Lao people believe that “having many children makes a family the warmest and happiest.” For this reason, Lao people always wish each other well with “having your house full of children.” In

the past, having many children was considered a good thing and the ultimate wish for all Lao people.

## **Romantic Love**

Romantic love based on Lao tradition is a love with freedom, i.e. couples have the freedom to choose their own love. However, the selection has to be in accordance with Lao customary rules. Men have to choose a good wife who is good at conversing, weaving, cleaning, and taking good care of her husband and children. This goes along with the saying that “having a good wife is like possessing invaluable jewels, while having a wrong one is like leading pigs to a pen.” Women also have the right to select a diligent and good husband who will always wake up early, work hard in a farm, plant more vegetables and raise more fishes. A good husband has to finish a number of tasks daily, namely checking out fish traps, fishing poles, fish nets and so on.

Apart from the above-mentioned social norms or customary rules which couples have to follow when choosing their love, they are also prohibited from practicing shamanistic love spells on someone. Love spells are cursed and forbidden. Lao people believe that this kind of love is temporary and will not last very long. Usually, couples will die together very shortly.

The story of the Twelve Sisters reflects unconventional love, when love is not formed by a free will, but rather from a shamanistic spell, for instance the love story of the giant lady, who casts a spell on the king to fall in love with her as well as the romance between Mr. Phouthhasen and Ms. Kanghi which is considered customarily wrong and prohibited. Therefore, love depicted in this story is not real love, but rather affection. Both the giant lady and Ms. Kanghi, while constantly running into troubles, could not keep their love very long. The story ended with separation and pain for the giant lady, Ms. Kanghi and Mr. Phouthhasen.

## **Inter-ethnic Love**

Laos consists of many ethnic groups who have been living in the country since ancient times. According to Lao history, the Lao-Tai ethnic group came to this nation after the Lava ethnic group. The Lao-Tai settled along rivers, which serve as convenient channels of communication. Because of their good location, they had better chances to farm rice and trade their products with others to improve their living conditions. In the past, the Lao-Tai regarded outsiders who lived in the forests and mountainous areas with different lifestyles and culture as bad people. The Lao-Tai called these outsiders ghosts or giants, because they violated their traditional norms. In the ancient times, Laos had a tradition prohibiting people from marrying across ethnicities, especially forbidding men from marrying Khmu women. It was believed that Khmu people should be considered as their siblings, because they came out from a gourd first, in other words they came to this land first. Thus, Khmu women should be respected as older sisters.



Based on Lao customary rules, women are housewives who will be in charge of preparing meals for their husband. Wives have their own set of rules to follow, for instance women have to cook and prepare meals for their husband; they should wait for their husband to eat first; and younger sisters cannot have older sisters prepare food for them. Having Khmu women who are regarded as older sisters prepare meals for others is considered a breach of custom which is believed to later cause unsuccessful, dangerous and unhappy lives for those who made Khmu women work for them.

The Twelve Sisters legend clearly shows belief in different traditions, for example the marriage between the giant lady and King Koutsalath as well as Mr. Phouthasen and Ms. Kanghi (daughter of the giant lady), which is an inter-ethnic love that causes a chaotic and unhappy life for all of them. Such love was unconventional and prohibited, later ending with a pathetic death.

## **The Love Story Affects Lao People in an Emotional Cycle**

An emotional cycle refers to actions that yield feelings of pity, sadness and happiness for human beings. The Twelve Sisters tale exposes 3 cases of wrongdoing that create such an emotional cycle. Each case clearly shows proper behaviors and wrongdoings, together with outcomes of each action. Here are the 3 cases.

### **The Case of Parental Love**

In real life, Lao people in society are generous to each other, especially to their family members. Historically, Lao family members have been firmly bonded together since love between parents and children is shared by blood, making it strong and inseparable. According to the Lao tradition, parents show their love, sympathy and support to their children until the end of their life. As long as parents are still alive, they will never leave their children alone.

Nevertheless, the opposite seems to be the case in the story of the Twelve Sisters. Their parents breached the Lao customary rule, and because of their selfishness and hatred towards the sisters, they decided to get rid of their children. They tricked the sisters to go out to collect vegetables in the forest before leading them into an empty and isolated area. The parents made sure they reached a place where the sisters would not be able to return. Then the parents asked them to go and take water for cooking using bottles of bamboo made for them by the father. The mother lured them down to a pond at the foot of the mountain before leaving the sisters there and returning home, just the two of them. The mother was still worried for her children as she kept looking back, while the father yelled at her to stop checking as they had already made their decision. They would not be able to feed themselves living with the twelve sisters.

The twelve sisters backed their way down to the pond with difficulty and took some time before reaching the foot of the mountain. The pond bank was a steep

slope. Older sisters had to slowly climb down to get water before handing over full bottles to younger sisters who were waiting at the top of the slope. However, the bottles had holes in them which let all the water leak and dry out before the sisters could return to their parents. The twelve sisters took turns fetching water, but could not fill the bottles. The younger sisters were so exhausted and hungry that they cried while asking their older sisters to take them back to their parents. The older sisters reminded them about their father's order, that they had to finish filling the bottles. They tried until it got dark, but still could not fill all the bottles. At that moment, there was an old owl who flew over and rested in a tree nearby. Feeling sorry for the sisters, the owl called out "mixed clay and grass can close the hole! Mixed clay and grass can close the hole." But the sisters did not pay attention to the bird and continued the same method of trying to fill all the bottles and run up the hill. When it got darker, the younger sisters suggested "we should try using mixed clay and grass to close the holes in the bottles as the bird said." They then tried it and were able to fill all the bottles with water eventually.

The twelve sisters held on tree branches tightly while carrying bottles of water when they climbed up with fatigue and hunger. Once they reached the place where their parents should have been waiting for them, they could not find them, only a track of bonfire. They put down the bottles and started searching for their parents around the area. They called for their parents and received no response. They thought their parents were killed by tigers and began to cry. Night time in the forest was so quiet that every sound they made echoed back to them, making them feel lonely. The twelve sisters hugged each other and cried out in desperation until because of exhaustion, they fell asleep.

In the morning, the sisters were woken by the jungle fowl crowing. They got up and immediately continued to search and call for their parents. They kept walking further and further into the forest from days to months and then years. They fed themselves with fruits found in the jungle. Banana leaves were used to substitute their torn clothes. Their skin became gloomy. Their body began growing hairs and they finally transformed into monkeys (as in The Legend of the Twelve Sisters told orally by Grandma Pae).

What shocks us in the story of the Twelve Sisters is that their parents did not love them at all, as they left their children in the dangerous forest where ferocious animals live. They tricked them to fetch water using bottles with holes, so that they could not fill them. They tried until they had run out of energy and started crying, until they were rescued by a bird who felt sorry for them and suggested that they use "mixed clay with grass to close the holes! Mixed clay with grass to close the holes!" Their calls for their parents echoed deep into the dark forest. They ate fruits to escape hunger, wore banana leaves as clothes, got darker and grew hairs all over their body before finally becoming monkeys. This kind of story creates an emotional cycle of amazement and compassion upon readers.

In addition, the Twelve Sisters Legend reveals a great love story between a mother and her child, as in the love given to Mr. Phoutthasen by his mother, Ms. La (the youngest among the 12 sisters). Although Ms. La did not have eyes and food to eat, she still strived to save and nourish her child as well as overcome a

number of difficulties to raise him. The mother could only drink drops of water from the cave just to produce enough milk for her child. When Mr. Phoutthasen was old enough to help his mother and his aunts, he went out to search for food in the wood to feed them. Feeling sorry for the small boy, a guardian spirit in the area created a rooster for him to compete in rooster fights and be rewarded with food to feed his mother and his aunts. This is an example of a great love the mother shared with her son and the son then shared with his mother.

### **The Case of the Love Spell**

A love spell is a shamanistic curse that forces others to love us. Therefore, this kind of love is forbidden in Lao tradition. The Twelve Sisters tale tells this forbidden love story in the form of the giant lady and King Koutsalath. Since the giant lady cast a love spell on the king, he unconsciously chased his wives (the twelve sisters) and children away. The cry in pain from being insulted and beaten by both the giant and the king gives readers a depressed and horrible feeling. In the story, the giant lady is described as having a big body, being ugly and with a dark face. She smelled so bad it was like when snakes slough off their skin, or someone who had not showered for several decades. However, she hid all of these negativities behind a spell so that she would appear to the king as a beautiful and tall lady with an oval-shape face, who had an incomparably pleasant smell.

Once the giant lady got busted, she could no longer keep the King with any spell. Her true self of bad looks and smell became to exposed to the King, and he could no longer stand her. Due to his resentment, he instructed his inferiors to punish the giant lady. This concluded the love story of the giant lady as she later painfully passed away. The moral of the story is that love which forms from a curse will not last long, and always ends with hatred and pain. Lao people have been retelling this story to date, in order to remind others that love spells are forbidden and should never be practiced.

### **The Case of Inter-ethnic Love**

Ethnicity refers to brothers and sisters who were born into the same group and share cultural identities. Therefore, inter-ethnic love is between people from different ethnicities and cultures. According to Lao history, Laos is a homeland for diverse ethnicities. The very first ethnic group who set foot in Laos was Lava. When the Lao-Tai ethnic group migrated south, they found that the Lava had already settled in the country. The battle for land then began between the two tribes, before the Lava lost their land to the Lao. The two tribes were different in terms of their appearance and culture. With such differences, the Lao discriminatorily called those who were different from them ghosts or giants.

Such racism yielded several traditional believes and prohibitions, such as Lao people believing that the Khmu were those who had originated first from a gourd. Thus, they should be older brothers or sisters. In ancient folklore, Khoun Bourom chose women who came out from a gourd as his wives. In addition, there was still

a rule prohibiting men from marrying women of the Khmu ethnic group as they should be regarded as older sisters who settled in this land first. Also, they should never have older sisters prepare meals for them. If people violated such prohibitions, their family would never prosper. The Twelve Sisters legend shows an unconventional love story between Mr. Phouthhasen and Ms. Kanghi, a daughter of the giant lady. At first, the giant lady wrote a message wishing Ms. Kanghi to kill Mr. Phouthhasen. Later, a yogi changed the message into “Ms. Kanghi loves Mr. Phouthhasen.” When they found each other, they fell in love and eventually got married.



## The Twelve-Sister Legend Has Been Remade to Reflect the Reality of Each Era

Throughout our study of the Twelve-Sister Legend, we have found that the tale both originated from and has been evolving alongside Lao lifestyle, and changing historical and social environment for a very long period. As social ideas are constantly shifting, the tale also changes in order to continue reflecting the social reality of each era.

### Rural Society Era

Rural society refers to life in rural areas in the era of Lane Xang Kingdom, when urban development was minimal. Rural households conducted an ordinary lifestyle of people who primarily farmed rice and searched for food in the forest to sustain themselves. People mainly lived their lives based on traditional customs, such as worshipping spirits, and complied with social norms by nurturing

relations among family members, teaching each other about family roles from parents to children, children to parents, husbands to wives and wives to husbands.

To sum up, everyone in the family had their roles and duties to fulfill. The Twelve-Sister Legend has been created and expanded since the rural society era to date, reflected in the content about relations between parents and children. Thus, the original folklore featured a story of a farming family with 12 children. The parents did not love their children because they did not obey them, and later left the children alone in the deep forest. They cried trying to find their parents until they finally became ghosts in the woods. The parents came back and lived happily at first. Nevertheless, they started to feel sick without anyone to take care of them. They then began to miss their children and went out to search for them before realizing that the sisters had become ghosts and wild animals. Finally, the parents passed away with agony.

### **Lane Xang Kingdom Era**

Lane Xang Kingdom Era refers to the period when the kingdom enjoyed stable development from the mid-14th to 17th century (Sila Vilavong, 1999). The kingdom was centered in Luang Prabang at first, later moving to Vientiane at the end of the era. At the point of establishing a capital city as an economic, cultural and social hub, a royal palace where royal family would stay was also founded. The Twelve-Sister story was passed down through oral story-telling and copying on manuscripts. Those who remade the tale adjusted its core story to fit well with the reality of the moment, causing changes in the main idea and contents of the story.

The main idea of the folktale at this time talked about 3 kinds of love, namely family love, romantic love and patriotism. Re-makers took the story told during the rural society era and added new ideas into it, by revealing more about a mother's love towards her children and vice versa. Readers then understood family love more clearly. Regarding romantic love, instead of turning into ghosts and monkeys, the twelve sisters were captured and locked up in a cave by an evil giant. The sisters managed to escape to the capital city, married to a king and gave birth to twelve children. The giant later captured them again. They were forced to eat their own children except for the last child who subsequently grew up as Mr. Posthaste. Once Mr. Phouthasen grew older, he helped settle conflicts in the palace. Patriotism is also reflected in this version of the tale through the story of an inter-ethnic marriage.

### **Modern Society Era**

The era of modern society is regarded as from December 2, 1975 to date. During this period, the Twelve-Sister Legend has continued to exist alongside Lao lifestyle, with the main ideas and contents remained mostly unchanged. The story now appears on text books with slight adjustments from focusing on inter-ethnic to class conflicts, and from moral to unrighteous conflicts.

## Study of the Twelve-Sister Legend of the Lao People

Lao people study the Twelve-Sister Legend via 3 types of literature, namely fiction, life tales and Jataka tales. Out of the 3 literatures, 2 were written in 2 forms of prose and verse.

### Fiction (prose and verse)

Features ghosts and god-like characters (Animism, Brahmanism, Buddhism)

- Describes geographic details of important places (Thao-Nang Mountain, Twelve-Sister Cave, the bird's nest, Mr. Phouthhasen and Ms. Kanghi).

### Life Tales (prose and verse)

- Family conflicts (husband-wife, parents-children)
- Social conflicts (different ethnicities)
- Moral conflicts

### Jataka Tales (prose and verse)

Cycle of birth and death (Meli/Kanghi died and were reborn as Manola; Mr. Phouthhasen died and was reborn as Sithon)

- 5 Buddhist Principles.

## Methods for Learning and Preserving the Twelve-Sister Legend of the Lao People

### Oral Transfer

- Story telling
- Singing
- Preaching

### Copying and Publishing

Many copies of the manuscript were found in the forms of prose and verse; some literature can be found in the digital library at Lao manuscripts.net:

- Vientiane version (copied in prose) named Mr. Phouthhasen, code 01 01 29 12 008 00
- Nonglamchanh version, Savannakhet (copied in prose) named 12 Sisters, code 13 09 25 12 003 00
- Phonthong version, Champasack (copied in prose) named 12 Sisters, code 16 06 08 12 001 00





Figure: Example of Copies of Manuscript



Figure: Story and text books

## Sculpturing, Carving, Drawings and Bending



Figure: Statue: 12 Sisters (Sivilay Temple, Pakxan District)



Figure: Sculpture: 12 Sisters with their eyes removed (Dongmieng Temple, Vientiane)





Figure: Sculpture: giant lady and Mr. Phoutthasen relaxed in garden (Dongmieng Temple, Vientiane)



Figure: Bending art: Mr. Phoutthasen is shooting a giant with arrows (Dongmieng Temple, Vientiane)



Figure: Model of Ms. Kanghi's womb (Dansoung Forest Temple, Pakxan District)

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## Primary Data

- Oral story-telling from Grandma Soulinthong aged 85 (interviewed on September 12, 2018).
- Photos taken (statues and sculptures) from Dongmieng Temple, Dongmieng Village, Chanthabouly District, Vientiane (February 20, 2018).
- Photos taken (statues and sculptures) from Dansoung Forest Temple (Danhin) and Sivilay Temple, Pakxan District, Bolikhamxay Province (March 15, 2017).

## 4 Being a Good Son is the Greatest Virtue

### The Twelve Sisters in the Cambodian National Language Textbook

VAN Sovathana

The Puthisen Neang Kongri is a popular legend in Khmer society. Both adults and youth know this legend so well that they can orally narrate it to children from generation to generation. This story is said to be correlated with a mountain in Ponror Commune, Roleaprear District, Kompong Chhnang Province. This mountain is shaped like a woman lying down; many have said it represents Kongri, a female Yaksa. This story is also known as Puthisen Neang Kongri, Twelve Sisters, Phnom Kongri, Rathasen or Rithisen, etc.

In the present day, we have both poetic and prosaic forms of the Story of Puthisen Neang Kangri, including:

- Twelve Sisters, Rithysen Neang Kangri, Poetic Words, Phnom Penh, Bookstore Kim Ki, 1953, pp.1-33;
- Neang Kangri, Poetic Words, Classic Satra according to the curriculum of the secondary school, Bookstore Seng Hounhout, 1960, pp.1-138;
- Puttisen, Phnom Penh, Buddhist Institute, 1959; and
- Cambodian Folktales, Part 5, Buddhist Institute, 2003, pp.98-100.

We can find the story in Dr. Khing Hoc Dy's book the Story of Puttisen Neang Kangri and study papers and article by him (Phnom Penh, Angkor published, 2015) for analysis and research. In this book, he mentions the following: 1) documents, 2) content, 3) source, 4) category, 5) date, 6) Puthisen in written and oral narrative literature, 7) the Puthisen story in Southeast Asia, and 8) analysis.

According to Dr. Khing Hoc Dy's book, the Story of Puthisen Neang Kangri was inserted into the modern secondary school curriculum in the second half of the 1950s. This book is now included in the eleventh-grade curriculum of Khmer literature. According to the preface, this book is about

*the culture, tradition, and literature basics of learning a variety of skills more deeply, such as summarizing, composition, and text analysis. This book will improve literacy knowledge in the students through popular literature, classical literature, modern literature, poetic, drama, songs, dancing, grammar, and the rich compositions of famous writers and poets.*

The purpose of this text was analyzed through the questions given in the article “Phnom Neang Kangri” (Quoted and edited from Khmer Folktales, Part 5, pp.98-100) in Khmer Literature, Grade 11 (Phnom Penh, Publishing and Distribution House, 2011), and answers in the book Lesson Plans by the teacher Neak Saly, 2017. For the text the Story of Phnom Neang Kangri, it is stated in lesson 1 that the authors “want the students to know about the Khmer’s thoughts/mindset and to learn more about the divided period of Khmer literature and the reality of the story, the development of literature, theme, time, issues, expression of opinions, and synthesis of writing, as well as prefixes.”

## Questions and Answers

The answers below were extracted from the section analyzing characters in the story and synthesis of Khmer Literature, Grade 11, which we have divided into three sections:

1. Analyzing characters
2. Commentary and value of the characters in the story
3. Synthesis

The answers were extracted from the book on teaching plans.

## Analyzing Characters

There are eight questions regarding the analysis of characters. As question 8 is primarily a grammar question, it will not be addressed.

Question 1: What genre is this story? Provide examples to support your answer (Khmer Literature, Grade 11, p.17).

Answer 1: This story is considered to be a folktale influenced by Buddhism as it does not include the author’s name. The story portrays the marvelous history of Kangri Mountain (Teaching Plans, p.31).

Question 2: Why were the eleven older sisters’ eyes both pulled out? Why was only one side of the youngest girl’s eyes (Neang Pov’s eyes) taken out? In your opinion, where did this influence come from? (Khmer Literature, Grade 11, p.17).

Answer 2: In a previous life, the eleven older sisters had taken out both fish’s eyes, so both of their eyes were also taken out. The youngest girl had taken out only one fish eye and that is why she had only one eye taken out during this lifetime. In my opinion, this story is influenced by the philosophy of Buddhism. There are three types of karma in Buddhism: karma in the past life with the present fruit, karma in the present with the present fruit, and karma in the present with the future fruit (Teaching Plans, pp.31-32).

Question 3. Can any ideas in the text still act as ideals for the next generation of children? Why? (Khmer Literature, Grade 11, p.17).

Answer 3. The ideas in the text that are still ideals for the next generation of children are:

- Doing a good thing and avoiding evil
- The consequences of sin for killing and for envy by maligning others
- Gratitude to parents (Teaching Plans, p.32).

Question 4. How does this story illustrate the attitudes of Cambodians? (Khmer Literature, Grade 11, p.17)

Answer 4. The thoughts in this story are as follows:

- Faith in the Lord: belief in praying for something;
- Faith in karma: doing something to get something done;
- Tradition: marriage must be held at the bride's house;
- Gratitude: children should be grateful to parents and supervisors; and
- Honesty: women should be loyal to their husbands.

Question 5: Why did Puthisen marry Kongri? How did the author portray the idea that Puthisen would not co-exist with Kongri in the future? (Khmer Literature, Grade 11, p.17)

Answer 5: Puthisen married Kongri because the hermit changed the meaning in the letter "if Puthisen arrives in the daytime, marry her in the day; if he arrives at night time, marry her at night."

The author portrayed Puthisen as unable to co-exist with Kongri because he wants the character Puthisen to fulfill his duty to his mother. In the meantime, his mother and aunts have suffered tremendously; therefore, the author's point of view is correct because he values honoring and showing gratitude to a mother as being greater than love (Teaching Plans, pp.32-33).

Question 6. In your opinion, was it right that Puthisen and Kongri were not able to live together as husband and wife in the end? Why? (Khmer Literature, Grade 11, p.17)

Answer 6. In my opinion, it was right that they were not able to live together as husband and wife because their love was not naturally formed, but was due to falsification in the letter. Furthermore, the superiority of the children's lives is linked to the parent's superiority. It is a child's duty to fulfill their role in caring for their parents when they are in need (Teaching Plans, pp.32-33).

Question 7. Learning the plot of the story (Khmer Literature, Grade 11, p.17)

Answer 7. The plot of the story

Time:

Once upon a time, subsequent/after, at night or daytime, when praying, when banishing their children, when the twelve girls were taken to serve Neang

Kongri, when the eyes of the twelve girls were taken out ... etc.

Place:

- The kingdom of giants, the kingdom of the female Yaksa Santhamea
- In the palace (the kingdom of King Preah Bat Rathasith)
- In the jungle
- In the cave where the twelve girls were kept (Teaching Plans, p.34)

## Evaluating characters in the story

There are four questions to evaluate the characters by consensus and paradoxical/opposing ideas as to the cause of Kongri's death.

Question 1. What is the first opinion on the cause of Kongri's death? (Khmer Literature, Grade 11, p.20)

Answer 1. According to the first opinion, the causes of Kongri's death are:

- Puthisen left without telling her; and
- Neang Kangri mistakenly thought Puthisen had abandoned her (Khmer Literature, Grade 11, p.40)

Question 2. What is the second opinion? (Khmer Literature, Grade 11, p.20)

Answer 2. According to the second opinion, Kongri's death was caused because her mother mistreated Puthisen's mother and her aunts, causing him to choose his mother and leave Kongri (Lesson Plans, p.40).

Question 3. What is the most conspicuous of opinions? What is their decision based on and why? (Khmer Literature, Grade 11, p.20)

Answer 3. The most conspicuous opinion is the second opinion.

- In this opinion the importance of gratitude for your parents and the fulfillment of duty as a child are valued.
- In this situation Puthisen had to choose his mother and aunts because their living situation was not good. Kongri is his wife, who lived comfortably and did not suffer like his mother and aunts (Teaching Plans, p.40).

Question 4. What factors are the author based on? Are these factors appropriate? Why? (Khmer Literature, Grade 11, p.20)

Answer 4. This analysis is based on the Cambodian point of view and the reality of the situation.

- Pondering and conscience
- Responsibility for the fate of the kingdom (to get rid of Santamear, Kongri's mother, for peace in the kingdom)
- The reality of his mother's suffering (Kongri is not suffering like his

mother)

These factors were considered appropriate for analyzing and answering the questions (Teaching Plans, p.40).

## Synthesis

In the synthesis, there are three questions that reflect the position of two different concepts. The first opinion supported Puthisen's actions and the second opinion did not.

Question 1. How many paragraphs are in this piece of writing? What are they?  
(Khmer Literature, Grade 11, p.23)

Answer 1. This piece of writing has three paragraphs:

1. Introduction
2. Body
3. Conclusion (Teaching Plans, p.46)

Question 2. What is each paragraph about? (Khmer Literature, Grade 11, p.23)

Answer 2. The point of each paragraph is as follows:

- a. Introduction:  
The history of Kongri Mountain
- b. Body  
Describes the causes of Kongri's death and provides two different opinions.

The first opinion:

- Her death was caused by Puthisen leaving without informing her; this led her to mistakenly think he was abandoning her.
- Puthisen did not specify the reason for his departure.
- Cambodians hold the attitude that a husband must be faithful to his wife.

The second opinion:

- Kongri's death was caused by her mother's intention to kill Puthisen's mother and aunts.
- According to Cambodians' attitudes, children must be grateful to their parents.
- His mother and his aunts were suffering in the cave.
- It was difficult for Puthisen to live with Kongri if his mother-in-law was his enemy and was trying to kill him.

Synthesis opinion

First opinion: does not support Puthisen's actions

- Kongri was mistaken in thinking that Puthisen abandoned her, which would have brought shame and disgrace. She cried until her death in the



middle of the jungle thinking that her husband was unfaithful to her.

Second opinion: supports Puthisen's actions

- If Kongri knew of Puthisen's plan to leave, it would not have worked because she was the daughter of Santhamear.
- At this point, Puthisen is showing his gratitude for his mother in her time of suffering.
- It was a very difficult decision to make in this situation.

c. Conclusion

- As an obedient child, one must be brave to protect one's parents.
- When saving lives, one must sacrifice and strive to find the best solution for everyone to have a happy life.
- Puthisen is the cause of Kongri's death. (Teaching Plans, pp. 47–48)

Question 3. What is the theme of this story? (Khmer Literature, Grade 11, p.23)

Answer 3. This story's theme is "Puthisen is the cause of Kongri's death" (Teaching Plans, p.49).

## Conclusion

According to the questions and answers above, the author of the book Teaching Plans provides an explanation that focuses on gratitude in the questions: 1.1 Analyzing characters, 1.2 Evaluating characters in the story, and 1.3 Synthesis.

For example,

### 1 Analyzing characters

In question 4 "How does the story illustrate the attitudes of Cambodians?" and in question 6, "In your opinion was it right that in the end Puthisen and Kongri were not able to live together as husband and wife? Why?" the superiority of the children's lives is linked to their parents' superiority. It is a child's duty to fulfill their role in caring for their parents when they are in need. (Teaching Plans, pp.32-33).

### 2 Analyzing characters in the story

In answering question 4, the author focused on the Cambodian attitude also seen in the answers for 1.1 and 1.3. The character needed to consider his conscience and his duty to repay his parents.

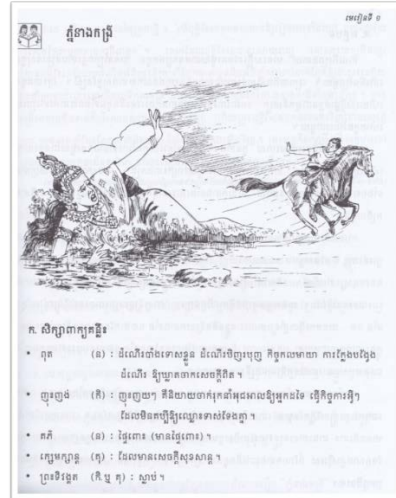
### 3. Synthesis

The author raised the second opinion to explain "Puthisen causing Kongri's death." The author did not support the first opinion of Puthisen's action, but instead supported the second opinion that "Puthisen was an obedient child and showed his gratitude to his mother while being tormented by Kongri's mother."



It was a hard decision for Puthisen to make to choose between his mother and Kongri, but he ended up choosing his mother.

From the aforementioned examples in the questions and answers above, the author focuses on the Cambodian attitudes of being an obedient child and showing gratitude to parents, and shows the value of these. Therefore, the theme of this story, which is embedded in Khmer society, is the value of an obedient child showing gratitude to their parents/guardian by sacrificing everything they can in order to repay them.



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## 5 Power of Tales

### How Narrating Stories Instilled Hope to Survive during the Pol Pot Regime in Cambodia

*PAL Vannarirak*

In *One Thousand and One Nights*, Scheherazade used the power of tales, telling tales to the king every night for 1,001 nights. Using this power, she saved young girls across the country from death.

Today, I discuss my own experience, which is similar to Scheherazade telling tales to the king.

I used to live with my family in Kompong Chnang province, around 1962 or 1963 during the era of the Kingdom of Cambodia. One night, my parents took my three siblings and me to a movie, which was shown on a screen in an open field. It was a black and white film entitled “National News Movie,” a documentary film explaining the situation in Cambodia and activities of the king, who was the head of the Kingdom of Cambodia. I was drawn to it, because I had never seen any films, which were a new form of art in Cambodian society at the time.

Until the kingdom became the Khmer Republic in 1975, many films were produced in Cambodia. These films were naturally colored. My siblings and I went to the movie theater in the provincial capital of Kompong Chnang. Unlike the Bassac or Yike theatres, the actors and actresses in films were so real, as if they were alive in a real world and very beautiful. They wore fashionable clothes, which made me think I would want to try wearing them too.

I do not remember which film I saw first, but I do remember they were all two hours or two and a half hours long. The two and a half hour films were usually Indian. My siblings and I always bought candies, watermelon seeds, pumpkin seeds, roasted peanuts, toasted lotus seeds, and sugar canes, and ate them while watching the films.

After watching the films, I retold their stories to the maids at my house or to my classmates. My classmates told me that I was good at telling stories, and that I made them feel as if they had watched the films themselves. I was not sure whether I was good at telling stories, but I remember that from a young age, I would tell people about the details of films, the books I read, and traditional theatres such as the Bassac and Yike and contemporary theatres, which I had heard on radio or seen on TV.

However, for 3 years, 8 months, and 20 days from April 17, 1975, the regime dressed in black ruled Cambodia. Then, the black clothes were like uniforms. Everyone in Cambodia was forced to wear this attire by the revolutionary regime. For the Cambodian people, the uniforms may have denoted a unified Cambodia. In those days, people were driven into a place full of tears, agony, blood, and tragedy. Furthermore, all organizations disappeared.

Under this regime, which cruelly murdered people, everyone was treated like animals, their human rights were ignored, and they were forced to remain silent. They had to erase all emotions and affections. They no longer had emotions as a child, father, mother, husband, or wife. They not only had to erase their emotions, but also abandon their traditional customs and beliefs.

In terms of work, people were forced to perform heavy labor in accordance with the “phenomenal” and “major breakthrough” policies. They worked from 5:00 am till noon, took a 15-minute break, and worked again from 12:30 until 6:00 pm in the evening. When there was moonlight, the revolutionary regime forced people to work from 7:00 pm until 11:00 pm or midnight.

The revolutionary regime, dressed in black, forced Cambodian people to eat porridge. They cooked a cup of rice into porridge for 10 to 20 people. They mixed the rice with the bases of banana trees, papaya trees, the Chinese morning glory, trunk of banana trees, and potatoes. Regardless of how much they stirred, they could not find any fish or meat in their soup. The only ingredients in the soup were a little of the fermented food made from fish called “Prahok” and a piece of the stems of vegetables.

With not enough food or nutrition, the Cambodian people began to think only of themselves. Even if there was something to eat, parents did not give it to their children, or vice versa. If they were able to find something to eat, they ate it themselves, whether it was a small freshwater shrimp, small crab, or clam. Some secretly dug the corn or potatoes they had planted, boiled and ate them, cooked and ate rice, or made soup with the chickens they had raised for human consumption. These people were acknowledged by the black-uniformed regime as “enemies who betrayed the revolution.”

The enemies who betrayed the revolution received the penalty of being sent to “learn,” which meant to be killed. Before being killed, they were tortured and interrogated by the revolutionary regime dressed in black about their personal history and the people they were associated with.

This cruel torture terrified the people of Cambodia, who began to fear their leaders. Thus, they lost the courage to do anything.

However, they had to put up with extremely hard work and were so hungry that they used the 15-minute noontime break the leaders in black allowed them to secretly go to the forest, pond, or field to collect grass, nuts, leaves, small fish, river crabs, clams, mice, and various types of small frogs. They cooked these and ate them, although they also ate them if they were alive or raw to relieve hunger. I was a student living in the capital Phnom Penh, and had never experienced such agricultural work. I was not good at finding small fish, river crabs, or clams.

However, I was able to obtain and eat river crabs and clams through a special method.

One day, I thought there was no hope or meaning in the life I had to live under the black-uniformed regime, and that I was resigned to wait for the day I would die. I was always very tired and hungry. To forget about my circumstances, I began telling the tale of 12 Sisters because it was from my hometown. My storytelling fascinated the people in my labor group.

The next day and day after that, they rushed back with food during the noontime break to listen to my tales. This happened almost every day. I secretly told the people in my group the stories of the books I had read or movies I had seen. Those listening to my stories were not necessarily sitting near me. Some lay down with their heads turned to me or sat with their backs to me, while others sat at the base of a tree facing different directions or lay down away from me. In other words, we did not look like we were interested in one particular thing. We did this to fool those watching us from afar. We had to do this so that no one else realized we were talking about certain things.

As described so far, the Cambodian people had no rights or no freedom to do anything during the black uniform period, unless they were ordered by the revolutionary regime. The revolutionary regime regarded those who told tales as human scum with reactionary views who betrayed the revolution. Betraying the revolution meant death. Furthermore, those who told the tales would not have been punished alone, because it was a crime worthy of death. As such, those listening to the tales would also have been punished.

I knew that I might get killed instantly if I did something like that. However, it was as if I, who told the stories, and my friends who listened did not care about how they may be betraying the revolution and die as a result.

What did we get in return? After those listening to my stories discovered that I was not good at finding small fish, they began to bring small river crabs or calms on occasion. Those small things became precious extra food for my family and me. As for those listening to my stories, their hearts were healed during the black uniform era and their fatigue or hunger eased by being drawn into the stories.

In Phnom Penh, plenty of so-called residential complexes were recently built in the suburban areas. I moved to my current place five years ago. In recent years, I have had fewer close relationships with my neighbors, which I used to have, and was lonely. However, two years ago, an elderly woman came and talked to me. She was one of the people who listened to my stories during the black uniform era. She said that she looked forward to my stories, which made me feel good.

## 6 Male Mountain, Female Mountain

### Local Topography and Oral Tradition in Laos

*HASHIMOTO Sayaka*

Perhaps because the film industry in Laos remains underdeveloped relative to its neighboring countries such as Thailand and Cambodia, the tale of the “Twelve Sisters” has never received a video adaptation in Laos, despite the story being equally well known there. This is not unique to the “Twelve Sisters”; Lao folktales in general have primarily been passed down and communicated among people through oral tradition.

One obvious key factor behind these folktales remaining primarily an oral tradition rather than passing into video or print media such as picture books is that Laos is a multiethnic nation, with different ethnic groups speaking different languages in the home - though the country’s literacy rate and TV ownership rate must also be heavily involved. According to data released by the Asia-Pacific Cultural Centre for UNESCO (ACCU) in 2008, the literacy rate for Lao aged 15 and older in 1970 was 39.4%.

Looking at Table 1, which displays the change in literacy rate over time, together with Figure 1, which indicates the literacy rates by sex and age, published in 2015 by the Lao Statistics Bureau, we can see that while the literacy rate among young people has been high in recent years, historically speaking, printed text would not have been an effective means of passing down stories. There are relatively few publications in the Lao language, and reading books is not a particularly well-established custom in Laos, though there have been recent efforts to promote an interest in reading.

Table 1: Adult literacy rate (% , ages 15 and older)

1970	1995	2000	2005	2011	2015
39.4	60.3	69.6	72.7	58.3	84.7

Sources: The information for 1970 is from the ACCU’s Excel download at <http://www.accu.or.jp/litdbase/stats/overview/ov03.htm> (as of December 4, 2017). The information for 1995 and later is from the UNDP’s Human Development Data (1990–2016), education/adult literacy rate (<http://www.hdr.undp.org/en/indicators/101406/> as of February 3, 2019). The information for 2015 is from The Lao Statistics Bureau’s “Results of Population and Housing Census 2015” (p.62).

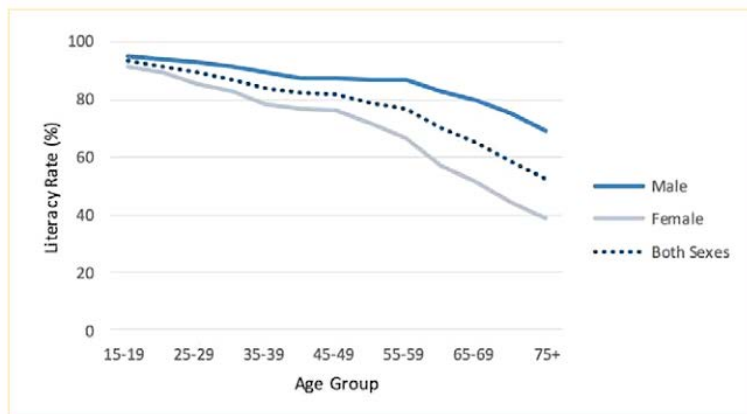


Figure 1: Literacy rate by sex and age group

Source: Lao Statistics Bureau, Ministry of Planning and Investment, 2015, “Results of Population and Housing Census 2015,” p.63.

The National University of Laos in Vientiane opened a Book Festival in 2016, referred to in Lao as the “Brain Food” Festival.

Also, based on data about Laos published in 2009 by the World Bank, only 30% of all households owned TV sets in 2000, and this percentage remained the same in 2007 [World Bank 2009: 234]. On a national level, then, so few people were in a position to receive video broadcasts that video would not have been particularly useful in the transmission of folktales. The number of families outside urban centers who use dish antennas to view TV programs appears to be increasing in recent years, but in urban and rural areas alike, viewers seem to mostly tune in to programs from neighboring Thailand rather than to domestic broadcasts.

Against this backdrop, the “Twelve Sisters” story has been passed down orally as a folk tale in the northern region of Luang Prabang under the name “Phu Thao Phu Nang,” or “Male Mountain, Female Mountain” (phu means “mountain” in Lao, while thao and nang are male and female honorifics, respectively), and those telling the tale have associated it with real-world places.

### “Male Mountain, Female Mountain”: A folktale of the northern region of Luang Prabang

Luang Prabang was once the capital of Lan Xang, the first unified Laotian kingdom, which was established by King Fa Ngum in the mid-fourteenth century. The town of Luang Prabang was added to the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1995. The heart of the city is a peninsula surrounded by the Mekong River and

its tributary, the Nam Khan, and the palace where the Lao royal family lived until 1975 stands at its center. Luang Prabang is the location most deeply tied to the “Twelve Sisters” story, and almost everyone from this city knows about the male mountain (Phu Thao) and the female mountain (Phu Nang) lying opposite one another along the Mekong River, which runs right behind the royal palace.

Interestingly, the positions of these mountains in people’s consciousness are slightly off. The positions of the male mountain and female mountain, as understood among young people in particular, differ from those that can be inferred from picture book illustrations. As I mentioned previously, there are no “Twelve Sisters” video adaptations in Laos, and so in the process of oral transmission people have presumably likened the story’s mountains to real mountains that fit their mental images of the story, and they remembered the story that way, ultimately giving rise to a divergent, although not far distant, idea of their locations.

Hints that this is a divergence can be found in the illustrations and photographs in books related to the “Twelve Sisters” story, as well as to the one and only Phu Thao Phu Nang picture book in existence. To the best of my knowledge, the only drawings of the story’s male and female mountains are the two below: an illustration in Treasures of Lao Literature (2000) and the final page of the Phu Thao Phu Nang picture book (2010). While there is some discrepancy between the two in terms of the shapes of the mountains, you can see that they both consider the male and female mountains to be overlapping each other. And although the details may be difficult to make out, The Legend: Chronicle of Luang Prabang offers proof in the form of conclusive photographs of the male and female mountains [Lao Academy of Social Sciences, Research Institute of History 2013: 13,16]. Looking at the real mountains in the local area with these images for reference, we can tell that the mountains overlapping in Photo 1 are



Figure:

(left) Treasures of Lao Literature, p.32.

(right) The picture book Phu Thao Phu Nang, p.28.





The Legend: Chronicle of Luang Prabang.

(left) male mountain (p.13)

(right) female mountain (p.16)

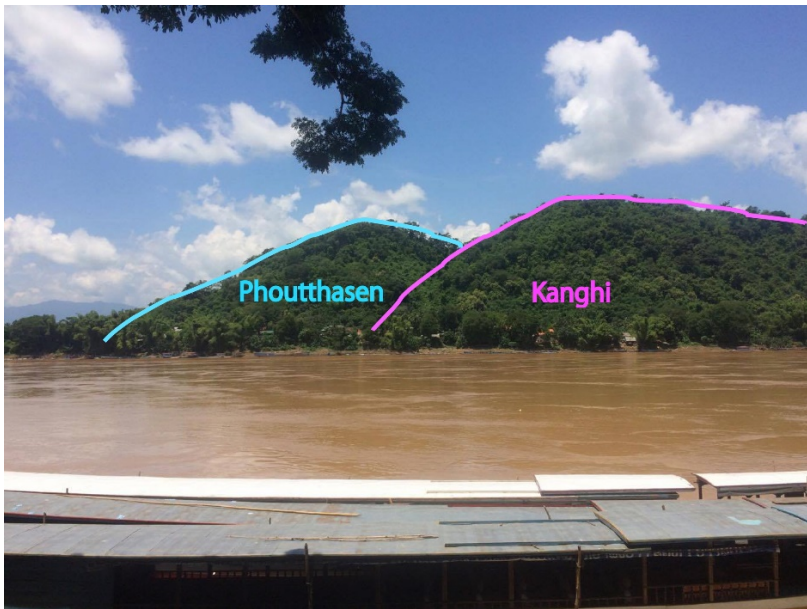


Photo 1: The real male mountain (Phoutthasen) and female mountain (Kanghi).

the male mountain (Phoutthasen, the man who became a mountain) and the female mountain (Kanghi, the woman who became a mountain)<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> There are various spellings for the male and female mountains, such as Putthasen, Buddhasen (male) and Kang Hee, Kwang Hi (female).





Photo Set 2: The male mountain (Phouthasen) and female mountain (Kanghi) as understood by young people.

When I asked people on the streets of Luang Prabang, on the other hand, I was struck by how often they would point to different mountains from those, when they told me where the male and female mountains were. This happened among young people especially. The relative positioning of these other mountains is seen in Photo Set 2. Although most of the time, little interest was shown in the male mountain, they would explain the basis for the overlapping mountains collectively being the female mountain as in Photo Set 2 along these lines: “You see the swell of a woman’s breasts over here, and that, plus the position of her head, means this is the female mountain.” One can certainly see what they mean: it looks exactly like the shape of a woman sleeping on her back. Yet the story goes that two lovers who shared a strong bond died one on top of the other and went on to become mountains. The male mountain and female mountain as identified by those young people seem situated too far apart to fit with that story; they do not convey the impression of a loving couple. However, the existence of those mountains that so vividly convey the characteristics of the female body, rather than any consistency with the story, may well be what has compelled people to tell the “Male Mountain, Female Mountain” story and pass it down all these years<sup>2</sup>.

There is another interesting point to note in terms of consistency with the story. At the conclusion of the story, the one who dies first is the woman, Kanghi, and it is the man, Phouthasen, who dies second, wailing at the sight of his wife’s corpse and falling dead across her feet. Therefore, according to the plot of the story itself, the female mountain would be in front of the male mountain. And yet,

<sup>2</sup> In the 2016 version of “Phu Thao Phu Nang” in a Lao second-year high school literature textbook, a set photo of the male mountain and the female mountain as identified by the young local people was printed. Therefore, in the near future, the perception among the young people in Luang Prabang will be legitimized. Also, at the “Traditional storytelling theatre” opened in 2014 in the city of Luang Prabang, “Phu Thao Phu Nang” story is spoken as a local folktale, and here too the perception of the young people is told to tourists. 10 years later, no one will no longer be able to recognize the position seen in Photo 1.

the mountains being described have the opposite relative positioning. Of the versions of the “Twelve Sisters” story recorded in print, some say that Phouthasen breathed his last breath as his body fell over the feet of Kanghi, but both in the version of “Phu Thao Phu Nang” printed in a Lao first-year high school literature textbook<sup>3</sup> and in the picture book mentioned above, a passage has been added that tells us that upon seeing Phouthasen’s head resting on Kanghi’s feet after his death, the god Indra descended to the human realm and reversed the positions of Phouthasen’s and Kanghi’s bodies, feeling that it would “cause misfortune to people in the kingdom if women were to be superior to men. Thus, he changed the position of the corpses: it was the woman who lay down at the man’s feet. Their bodies became the mountains of Phu Thao and Phu Nang.” This additional passage shows us a glimpse of both the religious nature of the Lao people and the relationship between men and women in Laos.

## Other places associated with the “Twelve Sisters” story

### Pha Tad Ke (a steep cliff)

This is where Phouthasen met the hermit before going to the ogress’s country.



Photo:

(left) The mountain in the center of is Pha Tad Ke.

(right) The side of Pha Tad Ke.

From here forward, any photographs whose sources are not cited were taken by the author in May 2017.

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<sup>3</sup> The source textbook contains a note that this story was excerpted from a 1960 middle school reading comprehension textbook (p.28).

### Had Mak Nao (the lime sandbar)

This is where the magical lime seeds sprouted, which Phouthasen threw while escaping from Kanghi.

According to locals, a sandbar once rose visibly above the water here, but it never appears any longer because the water level is now high year-round. Nonetheless, Had Mak Nao refers to an exact location in the local consciousness, and Pha Bat Tai Temple is used as the landmark for locating it when looking at the riverbank from the Mekong River.



Had Mak Nao

### Suan Then (Garden of Heaven) or Suan Uthinyan Nang Kanghi (Kanghi's Paradise)

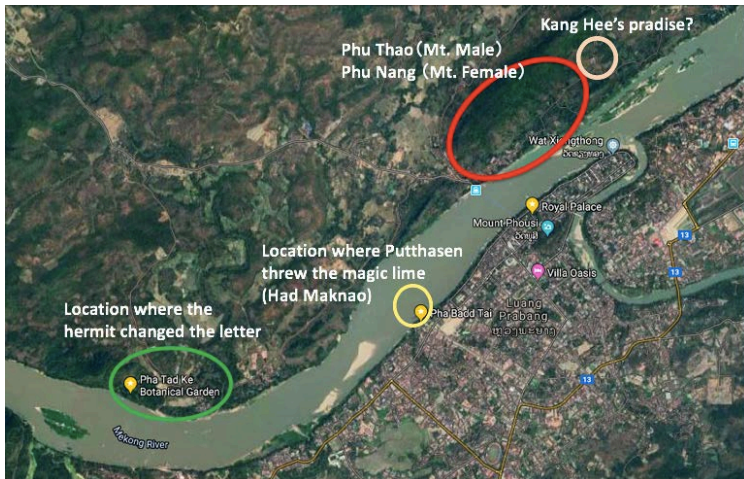
The previously mentioned textbook described this place as a present-day military camp in the Luang Prabang region, but no local residents have a precise idea of its location. When I asked the Department of Information, Culture, and Tourism in May 2017, I was told that they do not know where it is. The textbook also contains this passage: “It is said that this was once a garden of many fruits and vegetables as well as a wide variety of beautiful flowers,” and this is thought to be the garden where Kanghi showed Phouthasen all the magical plants. One local woman told me that Wat Nong Sakeo (a temple with a shining pond) was associated with the “Twelve Sisters” story, so perhaps this is passed down among some people due to the overlapping of its image with the image of the garden in the story.



Wat Nong Sakeo

### An overall picture of the locations involved

When you put the male mountain, the female mountain, and these three places on a map, you can see that their positions line up with the plot of the story.



A Google 3D map which shows an overall picture of the locations involved, created by the author



## Connections between the “Twelve Sisters” and the ogresses in Luang Prabang New Year’s festival

The Lao New Year celebration is April 13–15. Each year at this time, people visit temples across the country to pour water over images of Buddha and pray for good luck in the upcoming year. The old capital city of Luang Prabang holds the largest New Year’s festival in Laos, which goes on for a week. A two-day parade called Nang Sang Khan begins in the heart of the city on the second day, and features the women who were chosen in that year’s beauty contest. Two women dressed as ogresses (Nang Nyak) participate each year as well (Photo 3). The Ministry of Information, Culture, and Tourism organizes the New Year’s festivities, but according to its representative, the ministry do not ask these women to take part; they participate on their own initiative. Even so, these women who attend the parade in the same ogress outfits every year appear to be famous among both the townspeople and Lao tourists from other areas of the country who visit Luang Prabang to attend the festival; a photo of them is included among the New Year’s festival photographs in the 2014 publication “The Vivid Culture of Luang Prabang” [2014: 16]. The ogresses’ costumes also suggest an influence from the ogresses in a “Twelve Sisters” TV cartoon in neighboring Thailand.



Photo 3: Two women dressed as ogresses in Luang Prabang’s New Year celebration.

## The medium of puppetry

There is a type of puppet theater in Luang Prabang called “Epok.” This type of puppetry is said to have been created by a man living in Luang Prabang approximately 180 years ago, and legend has it that because his daughter’s name was Pok, it became known as “Pok’s father’s puppetry,” until over time the puppetry itself was called Epok [Ouvrard 2016: 21]. The tradition of Epok was practiced under the aegis of the Luang Prabang royal court until 1975, but the change in political system at that time made it difficult to keep the art alive. Puppet theater in Luang Prabang had fallen into deep decline by the time the Lao government enacted policies aimed at its revival in the early 1990s. However, in 2008 a new Epok troupe incorporating young people - Kabonglao, or “Puppet Lao” - began performing works based on famous Lao folktales and epic poems. In 2015, they presented a play based on “King Kabinlaphom and His Seven Daughters,” a story strongly connected to the Luang Prabang New Year’s festival, in collaboration with Vientiane-based object theatre company Khao Niew. In 2017, the same collaboration presented another play based on the Lao folktale “Sithon and Manola.”

As mentioned in the introduction, there are almost no video media works in Laos that depict literature or folktales. However, puppetry and stage works depict legends, folktales, and epic poems that have been passed down in Laos for ages, and they play a key role as media that go beyond text or spoken word to pair imagery with words. When I asked Chanpheng Singphet, the current director of the youth Epok troupe, “Won’t you make a play of ‘Male Mountain, Female Mountain,’ since it’s so deeply related to Luang Prabang?” I received the reply, “I’d like to, but it’s a tall order both financially and in terms of the work involved. We’d have to make at least twelve new puppets, and there’s a large cast of characters.” Perhaps in the near future, the first puppet theater production in Laos of the “Twelve Sisters” story will be performed.

## The Twelve Sisters’ wide dissemination throughout Laos

Up until now we have been looking at the connection between Luang Prabang and the “Twelve Sisters” story, but palm-leaf manuscripts (also called *bailan*) of the story prove that Luang Prabang is not the only area where the story was being passed down. Most of the palm-leaf manuscripts that provide key clues to understanding traditional Lao literature are housed in temples, and they have been studied by French and Lao people since the French colonial era. Research and preservation activities involving palm-leaf manuscripts stagnated during the Second Indochina War and the 1975 transition from imperial rule to a socialist regime. But the importance of literary works became recognized once again in the mid-1980s, and a project to restart research and preservation of the palm-leaf manuscripts scattered across Laos began, supported by funding from the Toyota Foundation (1988–1994) and Germany’s Federal Foreign Office (1992–2004).

The Digital Library of Lao Manuscripts (DLLM) project began in 2007, also with German funding, and built on the 1992 Preservation of Lao Manuscripts Programme's work collecting and saving data from 86,000 palm-leaf manuscripts in over 800 temples. During that time, approximately 12,000 palm-leaf manuscripts were microfilmed; the DLLM project digitized them and published them online in searchable form at the Digital Library of Lao Manuscripts, which went live in 2009 (<http://www.laomanuscripts.net/en/index>).

When I performed a keyword search of this digital library for “Male Mountain, Female Mountain” (“Phu Thao, Phu Nang”), there were no results, but searching for “Twelve Sisters” (“Nang Sipsong”) brought up 31 palm-leaf manuscripts. The regions where they are housed were displayed as follows:

- Vientiane Capital: 9 results
- Luang Prabang Province and Savannakhet Province: 7 results each
- Champasak Province, Khammouane Province, and Bokeo Province: 2 results each
- Sayabouly Province and Luang Namtha Province: 1 result each

The record for each search result displays both a primary title and an alternative title. Here are the title and alternative title results for all of the Twelve Sisters hits:

- Title: Phouthasen; alternative title: Twelve Sisters - 25 results
- Title: Twelve Sisters; alternative title: Phouthasen - 6 results

This suggests the possibility that “Male Mountain, Female Mountain,” the title used in the literature textbook and in the picture book, was not in use during the period when palm-leaf manuscripts were being recorded. Of these 31 records, the oldest palm-leaf manuscript whose year of creation is known dates to 1879 in Savannakhet Province. The next oldest are from 1890 (Luang Prabang Province) and 1897 (Sayabouly Province). These manuscripts, and the fact that the existence of the “Twelve Sisters” story in Laos was also documented by Auguste Pavie, a Frenchman who studied the Indochina region from 1879 to 1889, indicate the likelihood that this story itself has been told in Laos for ages. This is pure speculation, but I suspect that the nationwide establishment of the “Twelve Sisters” story as the Luang Prabang folktale “Male Mountain, Female Mountain” was cultivated later through formal education via materials like textbooks.

## **The southern “Male Mountain, Female Mountain”: the story of Thao Bachieng and Nang Malong**

The title “Male Mountain, Female Mountain” does not always refer to the Luang Prabang folktale. If you ask people who grew up in the area around Pakse, a city in the southern province of Champasak, “Do you know the ‘Male Mountain, Female Mountain’ story?” they will sometimes recount a completely different tale of tragic love called “Thao Bachieng and Nang Malong.” This is because Pakse also has mountains across the Mekong River from each other which are referred

to as the male mountain and the female mountain, and the oral tradition of “Thao Bachieng and Nang Malong” has been passed down there in connection with these mountains. Nonetheless, while that tale is like the “Twelve Sisters” insofar as it is a tragic love story ending with the lovers’ deaths, the tales have opposite themes: the “Twelve Sisters” story is about filial piety, whereas the southern mountain story is about a lack of filial piety. The parents of the main character, Nang Malong, want her to marry Thao Bachieng. She falls in love with another man, Thao Pasak, and abandons her parents to run away with him. Her enraged father curses them to death, and they die separately. Thao Bachieng, who had planned to marry Nang Malong, also dies of grief at her passing. The relationships between the story’s characters are shown in Figure 3 below. This tale did not actually include an ending where Nang Malong or Thao Bachieng became mountains, but presumably the fact that several places mentioned in the story exist in real-world southern Laos, in addition to several “becoming a mountain” phenomena already happening in the story, at some point led to a version where Thao Bachieng became “the male mountain” and Nang Malong became “the female mountain,” and then this version was passed down.

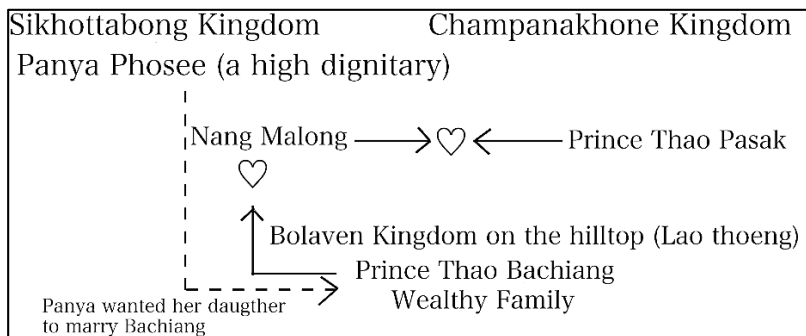


Figure 3: Relationship chart for the characters in “Thao Bachieng and Nang Malong”

Still, it is mysterious that two people who never loved each other in the first place became mountains facing each other across a river. Moreover, the pair who were in love, Nang Malong and Thao Pasak, died at a waterfall or river near the border with Cambodia. Yet in the male mountain–female mountain version of the story, Nang Malong became a mountain in the Pakse area, her parents’ presumed hometown, and was paired with the mountain of Thao Bachieng, whom she disliked. In Laos, filial piety is celebrated and a lack thereof is considered the greatest of sins. Perhaps this male mountain and female mountain have didactic significance, where Nang Malong continues to be punished for the terrible crime of betraying her parents even after her death. A very similar story to this one is



told in Luang Prabang. In that tale, called “Khoun Lou and Nang Oua,” Nang Oua ignores her parents’ marital intentions for her and takes her own life, and her lover Khoun Lou is so grieved by her death that he too chooses to die. The two rest forever separated on opposite cliffs of the Mekong. This story also strikes me as containing the moral that filial disloyalty in Laos will never lead to a happy ending.

## Conclusion

Stories are woven from many complex elements. In my view, what makes Laos’s stories so interesting, aside from the Buddhist thought which had taken root in people’s everyday lives, is in the relationship between ethnic Lao and the aboriginal population<sup>4</sup>. Both the “Thao Bachiang and Nang Malong” and “Khoun Lou and Nang Oua” stories in Section 6 above depict aboriginal peoples who live in a kingdom atop a hill. While aboriginal characters in both stories are in the position of being rejected as marriage prospects and fled from by (presumably ethnic Lao) women, they are also wealthy men in both stories, which seems to hint at something about the actual, or the historical, relationship between the ethnic Lao and the aboriginal population. Meanwhile, although the “Twelve Sisters” story at the core of this paper does not feature any characters explicitly depicted as aboriginal, the ogress as a non-human creature living in a different land could potentially be interpreted as representing a race the ethnic Lao considered Other. The ogress depicted in the “Twelve Sisters” is ultimately killed off, but whatever her reasons may have been, she did save the sisters when they were abandoned in the woods. The ogress’s own daughter, meanwhile, married the son of the youngest sister and gave him all her devotion. The story seems to be reflecting how, while the ethnic Lao considered people of different ethnicities as Other beings living in neighboring lands, the various ethnicities inevitably intermingled, building a complex relationship of alternating opposition and cooperation. Although I have not achieved a fully concrete analysis, I believe this research put me on the path toward deciphering stories about historical relationships between ethnicities from stories that are associated with real-world places.

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Kasuan suksathikan, Sathaban khonkua vithanyasatkansuksa hengsat (Ministry

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<sup>4</sup> Today, Laos is home to various minority groups that migrated there after the ethnic Lao people were present, but historically, the ethnic minority groups that appear most often in the royal family archives are those who lived in the region before the ethnic Lao arrived. Hence, I refer to the people discussed here as “aboriginal” for the sake of clarity.

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# 7 Princess Kongrey's Last Wish

## Cambodian Utopia in Ly Bun Yim's *Puthisen Neang Kongrey*<sup>1</sup>

OKADA Tomoko

The 1968 film *Puthisen Neang Kongrey* (12 Sisters), directed by Cambodian filmmaker Ly Bun Yim, won commercial success when it was released. After the end of the civil war, when the film was screened again commercially in Phnom Penh, Cambodia in 1994, a large audience packed the Vimean Tip cinema.

Recently, the film was screened at the 2012 Berlin International Film Festival. Later, it was digitalized in Tokyo and shown at the Osaka Asian Film Festival and Yebisu International Festival for Art and Alternative Visions in 2016. In 2017, the Khmer language version of the film was first screened in Japan when Cine Adobo<sup>2</sup> and the Japan Foundation Asia Center co-hosted a symposium and screening titled "Folktales and Films in Southeast Asia - A female ogress and a flying horse." Thereafter, at the 8th Cambodia International Film Festival in March 2018, three other works of Ly Bun Yim - *Sopasith* (1965)<sup>3</sup>, *Khmer After Angkor* (1972)<sup>4</sup>, and *Puthisen Neang Kongrey* (PNK) - were screened in a "Tribute to Ly Bun Yim." In the same month, PNK was also screened in Phnom Penh, Vientiane, and Bangkok in the symposia titled "Literature Film and Culture in Southeast Asia: Symposium & Screening."

As described above, opportunities to see PNK both in and outside of Cambodia

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<sup>1</sup> This article is a revision of "Ogonkino eigaga utsushidasu kambojiano kyokoto genjitsu" by the author, which was published in *the CIRAS Discussion Paper* 77, 2018, pp.57-71. [http://personal.cseas.kyoto-u.ac.jp/~yama/film/pdf/2017/cineadobo2017\\_057\\_okada.pdf](http://personal.cseas.kyoto-u.ac.jp/~yama/film/pdf/2017/cineadobo2017_057_okada.pdf) (accessed May 29, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> This study group aims to enjoy Asian films cinema and learn about Asian society through films by way of regional research. The president is Dr. Yamamoto Hiroyuki and its members are Japanese researchers specializing in regional studies of Southeast Asia.

<sup>3</sup> It is based on the 42<sup>th</sup> episode, "Sabbasiddhi Jātaka," of the Cambodian version of *Paññasa Jātaka*.

<sup>4</sup> It is a love story set in a rural village of the pre-modern era. It was produced at the same time as PNK because PNK took a long time to make the luxurious sets, like the throne room, and thus during set production, he shot *Khmer After Angkor* using the same actors. In all, PNK's filming took about a year. (Ly & Muan, 185).

have increased, and thus the film can be said to be a Cambodian national film, both in name and fact. However, there has been almost no analysis of the film itself, with the exception of Austin (2014), which refers to *PNK* to show policing of sexuality in the popular culture by comparing it with two of Norodom Sihanouk's films. Any existing literature on the film simply lists *PNK* as one of the works of the Golden Age of the Cambodian film industry or is focused on Ly Bun Yim himself.

In this paper, the modern aspects of Cambodia, which appear in *PNK*, are considered. First, the “12 Sisters” story in Cambodia is discussed. Second, *PNK* is described, including the influence of other works on it, which has never been noted before, and third, the Cambodian elements in the film are highlighted by comparing the film to the Thai language version. Fourth, tradition and modernity in the film is discussed. A conclusion follows, which suggests that *PNK* portrayed a vision of modern Cambodia that its king hoped to achieve.

## “12 Sisters” in Cambodia

### A story from the mountain in Kampong Chhnang Province

“12 Sisters” is one of the Buddhist stories contained in *Paññasa Jātaka*<sup>5</sup>, which is widely shared in the zone where Theravāda Buddhism is practiced in Southeast Asian, such as Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand. For Cambodian people, “12 Sisters” is not a written story, but rather oral lore about the Neang Kongrey Mountain located in Kampong Chhnang Province. The story focuses on Neang Kongrey - the beautiful daughter of the ogress - who, despondent over breaking up with her husband Puthisen - the king's son - finally collapses. Her remains are thought to have become the Neang Kongrey Mountain. The two villages near the Neang Kongrey Mountain are named the “place where Kongrey called for Puthisen”<sup>6</sup> and the “place where Puthisen dumped Neang Kongrey”<sup>7</sup>, respectively. The edible herb *Limnophila aromatica* grows in clusters naturally on the mountain; however, because this herb is considered to be the hair of Neang Kongrey, the local people do not eat it. The people in this area still believe that “the Neang Kongrey Mountain has a spiritual power and that something ominous will happen if a person visiting the mountain is insincere” (Bou, 2001).

As described, “12 Sisters” is a popular story of the tale of Puthisen and Neang Kongrey in Cambodia and is closely linked with the Kampong Chhnang Province.

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<sup>5</sup> It is a collection of 50 birth-stories of the Buddha that is considered to be apocryphal of Jātaka tales, the previous life of Buddha, was created by a Buddhist novice in Chiang Mai in northern Thailand in the 15<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> Century, and is not found in India and Sri Lanka (Fickle, 7-9). There is a variety in the number, titles, and content of the stories by region (*Ibid.*, 9-11).

<sup>6</sup> In Khmer, *kampong* means “port, docking place” and *haw* means “call.”

<sup>7</sup> In Khmer, *leng* means “divorce.”

In a park near the roundabout in the provincial capital stands a statue of Puthisen riding a horse and flying into the sky. There is also a statue of Neang Kongrey, who is trying to follow her husband even as she falls. Because Kampong Chhnang Province is known for manufacturing earthenware, clay stoves for household use named Neang Kongrey Cooking Stoves<sup>8</sup> are produced and sold in the area.

### Reproduction of “12 Sisters”

As for “12 Sisters” in Cambodia, Khing (2015) provides the most detailed version of the story. In addition to the oral and written form, “12 Sisters” has also been expressed in other forms.<sup>9</sup> For example, it has been performed traditional popular drama showcased in the Bassac and Yike theaters, masque theater, small-scale shadow play, and contemporary drama. Today, it is used as a theme in films<sup>10</sup>, karaoke music videos, pop songs, picture books, and comedy acts<sup>11</sup>.

There are two versions of the tale with distinct endings: a happy and a tragic ending. In the version with the happy ending, Puthisen takes back the eyeballs of his mother and his aunts, runs away from Neang Kongrey, returns to his mother and others, kills the female ogress, and becomes the king. In the version with the tragic ending, Puthisen goes back to Neang Kongrey after killing the ogress, only to find that Neang Kongrey has died, and he then mourns her death.

Regarding the text, multiple versions of Cambodia’s *Paññāsa Jātaka* have been found. Scholastically, “12 Sisters” is considered the 39<sup>th</sup> episode “Rothsen” of *Paññāsa Jātaka* of Cambodia. *Puthisen*, which was published in 1960 by the Buddhist Institute in Cambodia, is currently the easiest text to find.<sup>12</sup> Supposedly, this text was copied from a palm-leaf manuscript and is a long story consisting of 708 stanzas and written in traditional verse. In addition, the story is not related to the Kampong Chhnang Province.

### Overall Value of *PNK*

#### Significance in the Cambodian film history

Cambodians began releasing commercial films in the 1950s (Ly & Muan, 146-149). Considering that the films produced by Cambodians became talkies in the

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<sup>8</sup> The Group for Renewable Energy, Environment, and Solidarity (GERES-Cambodia) introduced the program in 2014. <http://www.pciaonline.org/geres>. (accessed May 29, 2018).

<sup>9</sup> The hero “Puthisen” is sometimes called “Rithisen” or “Rothsen.”

<sup>10</sup> There was another film released in the 2000s in addition to Ly Bun Yim’s work.

<sup>11</sup> A short comedy drama titled “Rithisen Neang Kongrey,” performed by a comedy group led by Yeye, was broadcast on television in March 2017.

<sup>12</sup> This text was used in the national language curriculum of the second year of high school from 1957 to 1975.

mid-1960s (*Ibid.*, 187), and that television was first broadcast in the country in 1966,<sup>13</sup> it is easy to imagine the popularity of *PNK*, which delights with colors and special effects, at the time of its release in 1968.

Until films became entertainment for the general public, the Bassac theater, which was introduced from the Mekong Delta area, was very popular since the 1930s. The Bassac theater takes traditional stories as a theme, and it was certain that audiences would support films based on these stories (*Ibid.*, 170). Once films were made in Cambodia, they became popular entertainment for families (Apsarama, 5), and audiences preferred seeing traditional stories in films. In an interview, Ly Bun Yim acknowledged this:

*...those stories<sup>14</sup> appealed to a wide audience of old and young people all of whom knew the story already and wanted to see it as a film. Also, some of those stories were required school reading so students liked to go see them since if they read the book it was harder to remember than if they went to see the film. Other people who weren't so interested in the film ended up going to see it simply because lots of other people were going to see it, so they went too. (Ly & Muan, 184)<sup>15</sup>*

As he pointed out here, Ly Bun Yim referred to the texts used in school curriculums a great deal and did not make major changes to those texts for story development for film.

The relationship between Cambodian traditional story films and the Bassac theater is similar to the relationship between Japanese historical feature films and Kabuki theater (Ginoza, 42). In the early stages of film, Japanese audiences could instantaneously understand the personal relationships and settings in the story (Kamiyama, 8).<sup>16</sup> These features were common in Cambodian films as well.

Ly Bun Yim was a producer, director, and cinematographer of *PNK*. As was

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<sup>13</sup> Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications of Japan Sekai-joho-tsushin-jijo Kambojia-Oukoku (World Circumstances of Information and Communication). <http://www.soumu.go.jp/g-ict/country/cambodia/pdf/855.pdf> (accessed May 29, 2018)

<sup>14</sup> This referred to traditional stories. He was answering the interviewer's question, "Why do you think that the public liked to watch films based on traditional stories?"

<sup>15</sup> Numano (2013,115-116) says that there are three utilities of a film based on literature: "We can complain about the difference from the original"; "We can see in the film what we cannot see in literature"; and "We can understand the story through the film, that cannot be read in about two hours."

<sup>16</sup> In early Japanese films, there were only two types of films: those that dealt with stories derived from Kabuki and Kōdan (traditional oral Japanese storytelling) and those that were new style films derived from newspaper and family novels (Ogawa, 2016, 194). This situation is similar to Cambodian films in its Golden Age.

common in Cambodian films at the time, love, sorrow, comedy, and action were included in one film (Ly & Muan, 171). Of the many numerous highlights in *PNK*, there are memorable low-tech special effects such as a huge female ogress, a talking skeleton, eyeballs that are hollowed out, flowing blood, a flying horse, a flying boar, and cracking earth. There are also several songs performed by popular stars from the Golden Age, such as Virak Dara, Sin Sisamoth, and Neang Kongrey, and Santemea's ever-changing modern fashion is memorable. During the Golden Age, many stars were born, and actors were typecasted as either a good person or a villain<sup>17</sup>. *PNK* was a film in which the audience could see all of those stars at once.

### Impact from other works

A review of *PNK* shows that it was influenced by earlier films. Ly Bun Yim said in an interview that he respected director Cecil B. DeMille (1881-1959), the master of the epic film (Bainbridge, 2001).<sup>18</sup> DeMille directed luxurious, spectacular entertainment works such as *Cleopatra* (1934), *Samson and Delilah* (1949), and *The Ten Commandments* (1956), with gorgeous and luxurious costumes and sets (Miyamoto, 2008). The exotic atmosphere of *PNK* may have been influenced by *Samsung and Delilah*, which is a color film with many scenes in a noble person's room. The costumes of the female protagonist Delilah consist of bikini-style tops made from fabrics embroidered with beads and sequins, long skirts, and shoulder cloaks, which are similar to Neang Kongrey's costume in *PNK*. In a scene where noble characters are relaxing, they pinch from fruits placed in a silver bowl. Similarly, in *PNK*, there are scenes where the King and Santemea are relaxing and eating fruit in the royal palace. Other props such as a long neck jug used in feasts held by Puthisen and Neang Kongrey are also associated with the Middle East.

*Lord Jim*, a 1965 film directed by Richard Brooks, is assumed to have influenced *PNK* to some extent. *Lord Jim*, which was filmed in Cambodia in 1964, was a commercial success, and even Sihanouk, who was the head of state and one of the leading film producers at that time, was interested in it (Osborne, 1994, 177-178). Ly Bun Yim might refer to the shooting in the Angkor ruins that used

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<sup>17</sup> This is similar to the Toei Company in Japan after the war, in which actors were clearly divided into those who play good characters and those who play evil villains (Yokoyama 2010, 222).

<sup>18</sup> In the 1950s, films from France, the United States, India, China, and Thailand such as *The Three Musketeers* (1953), *Tarzan and the Lost Safari* (1957), *Shiv Kanya* (1954) were shown in Cambodia (Ly & Muan, 2001, 144-145). Yvon Hem (1941-2012), a prominent film director said that he saw foreign films such as *Hercules*, *Tarzan*, *The Ten Commandments*, and *Waterloo Bridge* in the 1950s (*Ibid.*, 166). Ly Bun Yim, of course, had many opportunities to see films screened in Cambodia, as well as various films screened in Thailand and Hong Kong because he traveled there often during that time.

a large set and many extras of *Lord Jim*. The final scene of *Lord Jim* is the funeral procession of the chief village's son. All of the men with their red copper skin who were watching the funeral procession had red bandanas on their heads. In *PNK*, the burned squirrels wore red bandanas on their heads and red loincloths in the funeral procession. In the last minutes of *Lord Jim*, the camera panned up at the sky quickly after the death of the hero, which audiences may interpret as hope for the future. Similar camera work was done in the final scene of *PNK* when the camera panned up at the sky after shooting Neang Kongrey's palanquin.

### Types of existing media of *PNK*

Suzuki (2018) discusses the history of *PNK* and explains that the original film of *PNK* does not exist but that there are two other versions: one is dubbed in Thai on 35 mm film and another is a videotape in the Khmer language, the official language of Cambodia. Suzuki (*Ibid.*) reveals that based on the spread of reproduction technology from film to videotape since the 1980s, the videotape version of *PNK* seems to have been created in 1993. In 2016, Ly Bun Yim himself combined the Thai version film and the Khmer language audio into digital data for a Cambodian version; however, the running time of the Cambodian version is shorter than the Thai version by about four minutes.

As for the digital version of the Khmer audio, it is presumed not to be the original one at the time of its release in 1968. Some Cambodians feel that the king's words "to open a special conference" and Santemea's words "to sacrifice" would not have been used in the 1960s. When creating the Thai version, some parts of the Khmer audio are thought to remain.<sup>19</sup> The differences between the Thai version and the Cambodian version of the audio will be discussed later.

### Cambodian Elements in the Film

"12 Sisters" is a folk tale for people in Cambodia. It is a fantasy wherein the royals and ogress appear in the royal palace and ogress kingdom. However, *PNK* includes elements that are connected to the real world. For example, a blend of indigenous beliefs and Theravada Buddhism, which infiltrates Cambodian daily living, is evident. Cambodian cultural products are used throughout the film, such as the use of familiar music, including the string instrument tro and Chayam music, as well as games such as cockfighting, Cambodian chess, and Ongkunh throwing. Cambodian food and traditional ceremonies are also displayed, as well as Angkor Wat.

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<sup>19</sup> In Suzuki (2018, 75), Davy Chou points out that the original audio and the later-produced audio were mixed.



## Cambodian religious worldview

*PNK* contains religious references, as it comes from the story of *Paññasa Jātaka* as mentioned above, and it is evident that Puthisen is Bodhisattva. The name “Puthisen” comes from *Puthi*, which means “Buddha,” and the word *Sen*, which means “100,000/very much dedicated.” Austin (2014, 95) points out that Puthisen does not have much power like the king, but he has a masculine power that can overcome social difficulties to restore the kingdom to one of morals and justice. At the same time, Austin explains that Puthisen symbolizes modern ideal male images such as intelligence, self-discipline, stamina, determination, power, independence, and liberty (*Ibid.*). Thus, as Puthisen is Bodhisattava, he has such power without resorting to violence. When Puthisen’s mother confesses that she had eaten the babies’ flesh to survive, he says without any astonishment, “If I die, please eat my flesh.” It is similar to the stories where Bodhisattava saves other creatures and offers his life to feed others.

The king sees Puthisen, who is born in the future, chanting “there is no happiness higher than tranquility” in the eye of the youngest daughter of the 12 sisters. Cambodian people are very familiar with this phrase as it is one of the phrases frequently cited by monks in their sermons. It is found in Stanza 202 of the Happiness in Chapter 15 of *Dhammapada*, which is a canonical text in Pali: “There is no fire like passion. There is no evil like hatred. There is no suffering like the Aggregates of existence. There is no happiness higher than tranquility.”<sup>20</sup>

Puthisen particularly appears as Bodhisattva in the scene related to the eyes. As mentioned above, Puthisen is reflected in the eye of the youngest of the 12 sisters. The king demands that his vassals confirm that the 12 sisters were monsters: “Make sure of 12 sisters with your own eyes whether my judgment is correct or not.” According to *Paññasa Jātaka*, the reason that the eyeballs of 12 sisters are hollowed out is based on the consequences of their own deeds in their previous lives. In their previous lives, when they caught fish, the 12 sisters pierced the eyes of fish with a needle, but the youngest sister pierced only one eye of a fish. Because the 12 sisters became blind, they are unable to understand right and wrong, and eventually they eat their newborn children. Another example is when the king loses to Puthisen in chess. He asks Puthisen why he closed his eyes and points to the chess board. Puthisen answers, “As I am uneducated, I cannot see anything even if my eyes are open.” Therefore, the eyes can symbolize wisdom and knowledge. Finally, Puthisen retrieves the eyeballs of the 12 sisters, which were kept in the ogress’s kingdom, and he heals the sisters. Wisdom and knowledge were also given by Bodhisattva.

The religious view of the Cambodian people cannot be explained only by Buddhism. Spiritual beliefs also complement it. One of them is “Boramey,” which is a Khmer word derived from the Pali word “Pāramī,” which refers to a benevolent form of power (Bertrand, 151). “Boramey” are people, animals, things,

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<sup>20</sup> The translation is obtained from [http://ccbs.ntu.edu.tw/BDLM/en/lesson/pali/lesson\\_pali3.htm](http://ccbs.ntu.edu.tw/BDLM/en/lesson/pali/lesson_pali3.htm) (accessed May 29, 2018).

or lands that have magical powers and bring profits to people.<sup>21</sup> Puthisen is called “a child with Boramey” by his mother and aunts when he brings them food. Moreover, when he defeats Santemea, he is also called Boramey by the king. Puthisen is a special person with magical powers who brings profits to the people.

### Cambodian features and tastes

*PNK* includes some Cambodian features and tastes such as games, ceremonies, and Angkor Wat. Ongkunh is one of the most popular traditional games usually played around the Cambodian New Year in April.<sup>22</sup> Ongkunh is a fruit of the entada plant, which is a type of pea. Players are divided into two groups and throw three to five ongunh towards the same number of ongunh buried in the ground. Weak players usually throw first. In the film, young Puthisen lets the adult royals go first. While there are many versions of the game, in *PNK*, they play the Chak Ktek version. In Chak Ktek, after taking the first step, the players take two steps with ongunh placed on the top of their feet and shake their feet to throw the ongunh at one that is placed upright. If they drop the ongunh before throwing it, they must throw it again, with their tongues sticking out and their heads up.<sup>23</sup> In *PNK*, the players first decide that they will all stick out their tongues and keep their heads up, rather than doing the routine another time. The scene of the game is also depicted in “Puthisen” (1st edition, 1960), which was published by the Buddhist Institute as mentioned above.

As an example of Cambodian traditional ceremony, Puthisen and Neang Kongrey feed fruit to each other following the wedding scene. This mimics, in part, the “Wedding Night Ceremony,” which is a part of the traditional wedding ritual in Cambodia that takes place on the last day of the three-day wedding. At the ceremony, the bride and groom feed each other a mouthful of cooked rice and banana, which are offerings. Recently, other fruits have been added alongside bananas, such as grapes, and in some instances, the bridal party eats one fruit together at the same time.

Angkor Wat, also featured in *PNK*, is considered the royal palace of mankind. The audience can enjoy Angkor Wat in three dimensions from multiple perspectives, such as from the main pathway where one sees the five towers, the front yard off the main pathway, and the third gallery with its steep stone stairs. The second gallery of Angkor Wat was used in the scene in *PNK* where the king hears rumors about Puthisen from his vassals. Servants wearing red shirts and blue trousers line up on the stairs leading to the third gallery like patterns in the light grey-colored building. Three-dimensional, colored goddess sculptures are placed on the doors and walls of the royal palace, which are modeled after the goddess sculptures found in the galleries of Angkor Wat.

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<sup>21</sup> For more on pāramī or “Boramey”, refer to Didier (2004) and Guillou (2016).

<sup>22</sup> According to Dr. Sayaka Hashimoto, it is a national competitive event in Laos.

<sup>23</sup> As for the rules of the game, refer to the following: [http://www.cen.com.kh/culture/detail\\_khmergame/OTBkZTQwZWZhZGE](http://www.cen.com.kh/culture/detail_khmergame/OTBkZTQwZWZhZGE) (accessed May 29, 2018).

## Songs and music

The songs and music in *PNK* are also inspired by Cambodia. The audio of the Khmer language version contains two songs. One song is “Puthisen, My Sweetheart,” which expresses Neang Kongrey’s love to Puthisen who is going away and was performed by Virak Dara, who played the role of Neang Kongrey. The second song is “The Death of Neang Kongrey,” which reveals Puthisen’s affection for Neang Kongrey, which was composed and performed by Sin Sisamoth (1932-1976), who is considered Cambodia’s most popular musician and singer of all time. Because the prelude of the song is understood as funeral music, the audience understands that the parade on the screen is a funeral procession.

Cambodian elements are seen in the use of music. Two types of background music are used, namely western music and Cambodian traditional music. Yvong Hem (1941-2012), a prominent film director, mentioned that it was common to use western music in scenes where people felt anxiety, fear, or tension and to use Cambodian music in other scenes (Ly & Muan, 2001,174). Ly Bun Yim stated that in a sad scene, the Cambodian traditional string instrument tro, which is similar to the Chinese fiddle, is used (*Ibid.*, 183).

For example, in the scene where Santemea first appears and another in which Neang Kongrey meets Puthisen for the first time, the same western music is used. In the scene where the king’s servant follows Puthisen on his way home or when a hermit rewrites the content of a letter, different western music is used to provide a feeling of tension. A tro solo is played in scenes within the cave where Puthisen’s mother and aunts are confined and in scenes in which Puthisen is anguished. Moreover, in the scenes inside the royal palace both in the kingdom of humans and the kingdom of the ogres, music is played on traditional instruments known as the Pinpeat Orchestra, which is used in musical accompaniment to the Cambodian court dance and in religious rituals and includes big and small drums, small cymbals, xylophones, metallophones, and the gong.

At Puthisen and Kongrey’s wedding, symphony-style, festive western music accompanies the scene where the two enter the hall and walk to the throne. When they stand in front of the throne and sit down, a portion of “None Shall Sleep” from Giacomo Puccini’s opera *Turandot* is played for a few seconds. After that, the Cambodian music Chayam is played until the end of the scene of the wedding ceremony. Chayam is Cambodian traditional music played by a group of five or six people. The leader, who wears a clown mask or makeup, raises morale like clowns do by using a mixture of his natural voice and falsetto and the sound of his tongue, while playing a long thin drum adorned with ruffles, a small cymbal, and a small gong. Actually, Chayam is not played at Cambodian weddings, but rather on other festive occasions and during festival parades. The music is lively with fast rhythms and creates a cheerful atmosphere. In the film, the roles of the underling ogres, who were played by popular comedians at that time, played the Chayam clowns.

For sound effects, the tawav bird's singing should be mentioned. The audience hears it when Puthisen is returning to the cave on the rocky mountain where his mother and aunts are waiting. The tawav bird belongs to the cuckoo family, and it is named for its song, which sounds like “tawav, tawav.” This singing reminds Cambodian audiences of remote places.

### Sound and musical differences between Cambodian and Thai versions

The beginning part of the lyrics of “The Death of Kongrey” in the original film with the Khmer audio is “Poor sorrowful Meri” (not Kongrey), which is the name of the youngest sister in “12 Sisters” in Thailand. The opening credits are arranged in three languages—Khmer, English, and Thai—and the title is shown as “Puthisen and Neang Kongrey,” “12 Sisters Story,” and “Phra Rot Meri.” As Ly Bun Yim planned to screen it in Thailand,<sup>24</sup> the credits appear to have been prepared from the beginning of the film's creation.

As compared to the music used in the Thai version, the Cambodian elements in the Cambodian version are more distinct. Except for the two songs, the use of music in the Thai version is completely different from the Cambodian version.

In the Thai version, the two songs are the same as in the Cambodian version, except that the lyrics are translated into Thai.<sup>25</sup> In the Cambodian version, where the scene of Neang Kongrey's procession and the scene where Pethisen is looking for Neang Kongrey cross cut, “the Death of Neang Kongrey” played almost continuously in the foreground, after Puthisen hears the last words of Neang Kongrey from her vassal, holds her body, and leads the procession. At the same time, “the Death of Neang Kongrey” begins to play, with the following lyrics that correspond to the scene: “Neang Kongrey was surely a daughter of Ogress but her heart was unparalleled, extremely wonderful, like a heavenly maiden, May Kongrey sleep peacefully.” In order words, the audience can understand the scene with this lyric, whereas in the Thai version, it is played only in the scene of the funeral, and the volume is too low and the song is too intermittent to understand the lyrics.

The Thai version does not include any of the Cambodian traditional music, such as the Chayam, Pinpeat Orchestra, or tro solo, as accompaniment. In the scene of Kongrey and Puthisen's wedding ceremony, brass band music is used instead of Chayam music. The song of the tawav bird is also not included. Rather, metal and wind sound effects are used in the Thai version, which are not included in the Cambodian version. In the scene where Puthisen walks holding Neang Kongrey in his arms during the finale, symphony music is played, similar to that which is played during touching, happy endings in western films. This is because

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<sup>24</sup> According to an interview of Virak Dara, the commercial screenings were never held because of failed negotiations. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LPVRvsJ5vFg> (accessed May 29, 2018).

<sup>25</sup> At the beginning of the film, “Puthisen, My Sweetheart” with Khmer lyrics is played.

many types of western, upbeat, and major scale music are used throughout the Thai version.

The Cambodian flavor is faded in the Thai version because of the songs and music used, which makes the Thai version end as a cheerful fairy tale. It shows that even though the visuals are the same, the Cambodian and Thai versions are different films, mostly because of the different use of sound.

## Tradition and Modernity in *PNK*

Various aspects of the tradition and modernity of Cambodia are evident in *PNK*. For example, Austin (2014, 91-99) focuses only on Neang Kongrey's body, arguing that it reflects the contrast between the tradition and modernity of Cambodia. Here, we examine tradition and modernity in Cambodia, which was once a French-protected state that developed into an emerging country following independence. This is reflected in *PNK* in the bodies and actions of Neang Kongrey, Santemea, and the 12 sisters, as well as in the country's governance by humans and the ogress.

### Modernity appeared in the bodies of women

Female bodies were an indicator of modernization in Cambodia. When the country was a French-protected state from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century onward, intellectuals made proposals regarding women's clothes as a condition for Cambodia to become a civilized country. An article entitled "Development of Khmer Women,"<sup>26</sup> was published in the Cambodian newspaper *Nagara Vatta*. The article argued, "The beauty of today's Khmer women" is to wear "advanced" attire, which means wearing a traditional bottom wear, chong kben or sampot with a long hemline, a French-style blouse, and high heels, while holding a handbag with their hair bundled. The aim of *Women's Magazine*, launched in 1949, was to ensure that women were "properly" dressed. Here, "properly" means that both the traditional and modern styles are suitable (Ly & Muan, 2003, 17).

Following independence, clothing reforms were further facilitated on Cambodia's road to an emerging nation. In the 1960s, people had to dress according to modern fashion in advanced countries such as France (*Ibid.*, 11). A rule was enforced stating that people had to be properly dressed when going out, especially in urban areas (*Ibid.*, 12). The magazine *Our Nation* highlighted that women were not well dressed in earlier times and showed a suggested look with an illustration of a woman with short hair wearing a sleeveless low-cut blouse and ankle-length sampot skirt (*Ibid.*). Many enlightening books were published for women that advised on clothing. For example, *Manner Book*<sup>27</sup> states, "It is

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<sup>26</sup> No. 60, Saturday, March 5, 1938.

<sup>27</sup> The date of publication is unknown. However, based on the print type, it is presumed to have been published in the 1960s.

now the era of miniskirts, and thus, Cambodian women should wear a shorter Sampot skirt.” Furthermore, following independence, textile factories were constructed in Cambodia (Ly & Muan, 2003, 105), and people then had a wide choice of clothes and began to prefer western-style designs in urban areas. New designs were also incorporated into traditional wedding attire, clothes and cosmetic products were catalogued, and fashion shows were held, all leading to the commercial development of the clothing business (*Ibid.*, 106).

### **Those who embody tradition - the 12 sisters**

The attire and style of the 12 sisters, the heroines of the first half of *PNK*, represent tradition. After becoming the king’s wives, their clothes are identical to the attire of female royals of the Bassac theater, from the crowns to their clothes and hairstyles. As compared to Santemea, the 12 sisters seem particularly unsophisticated, conservative, and traditional.

The actions of the 12 sisters’ conform to their attire and style, which are conservative and traditional. They follow and respect their parents without doubting their parents’ decisions. Even after their parents abandon them in the forest, they do not hold a grudge against them; rather, after becoming the king’s wives, they worry about their parents. With the help of the king, they try to find their parents and attempt to never forgot them, no matter how badly they had been treated. Those actions and attitudes are common to the Cambodia traditional value of respecting one’s parents, as mentioned in the “Women’s Code” (*Chhap Srey*). The 12 sisters also seem to avoid change. Despite having their eyeballs removed and being confined to a cave, they never attempt to escape. Furthermore, they do not like that Puthisen moves back and forth between the cave and the outside world and oppose Puthisen’s new challenge to travel afar by order of the king.

The 12 sisters symbolize tradition and conservative values through their attire and style and the type of kingdom to which they belong. A kingdom governed by a human is a legitimate kingdom that has continued since the days of the Angkor Empire, as illustrated by using Angkor Wat as the royal palace.

### **From tradition to modernity - Neang Kongrey**

Traditional elements are found in Neang Kongrey’s words and actions. Even though Kongrey is Santemea’s daughter, she never shows her nature as an ogress. Although she is physically separated from her mother at a young age, she never leaves the ogress kingdom, maintains its existing set of values, and heeds the advice of her mother and the servants her mother trusts. She even accepts the marriage her mother arranges. At her wedding, she vows to her husband, Puthisen, “I will give you everything, even our army, our people, and myself.” As such, she is sincerely devoted to her husband. She cheers up her husband, who assumes the heavy responsibility of governing a kingdom and who is often anxious. She comforts him by taking him on a tour of the treasury of the ogress kingdom.

However, Neang Kongrey's attire is a symbol of modernity. The dress that she wears when she first meets Puthisen, who brings Santemea's personal letter, represents modernity rather than the contrast between modernity and tradition that Austin pointed out (2014, 94). In addition to a bikini-style top, Neang Kongrey wears a sampot, not the traditional long version, but a short one made of fabric with gold embroidery, which she wraps around herself like a miniskirt. The low-cut dress she wears at her wedding is not in the Cambodian traditional style. A knee-length one-piece dress she wears was a global trend in the period when *PNK* was produced. Furthermore, as Austin points out, the mechanical rotating crown prominently represents modernity on Neang Kongrey's head (*Ibid.*, 95).

### **Moving forward into modern times - Santemea**

Austin considers Santemea an example of a contemporary and independent woman (*Ibid.*, 96). In her analysis, Austin contends that Santemea manipulates men and women through her sex appeal, while securing economic comfort and social stability to raise her daughter (*Ibid.*, 96). However, concrete scenes and lines from the film are not cited as examples.

The beginning of the scene when Santemea makes her appearance symbolizes Santemea as a woman far removed from existing values. With blood around her mouth, she holds the head of a man in one hand. She then finds the 12 sisters and says, "They all look delicious," indicating her lust and ambition. Santemea, who was an ogress, has a large body, loud voice, and fangs sticking out of her mouth. This illustrates her tremendous authority and fighting power. The reason why Santemea transforms herself into a human and runs after the 12 sisters is to protect the ogress kingdom as its queen.

As for her body, after Santemea turns into a human woman, she appears with a gorgeous hairstyle and in a gorgeous dress, which differs in each scene. She changes clothes 12 times in the film, like a fashion show. Her attire, hairstyle, and types of and variety of accessories represent fertile and manifold modernity. Court ladies in the ogress kingdom wore a uniform combining a one-shoulder blouse and short skirt for ease of movement, which also represents modernity.

The ogress kingdom is a modern nation, as symbolized by mechanized gadgets such as the tool that rotates like a mirror ball and makes parties spectacular, board-shaped self-driving vehicles, and electric illuminations. Modernization can also be found in the people's behavior. The vassals sit with the queen Santemea and state their opinions. Neang Kongrey's wedding is a western-style wedding and is celebrated by people holding various positions throughout the country. In this democratic nation, people are allowed to interact with the queen and attend receptions at the royal palace, regardless of class or position.

### **Conclusion: From a Folk Tale to a National Story**



After the eyes of the 12 sisters are healed, the king's servant brings a gemstone and dresses that are appropriate for a king's wife for the 12 sisters, telling the king, "Now everything might be prepared to return to the royal palace." The scene changes when the king declares, "Let's return to the royal palace, now." However, an audience that is expecting the brilliant scene of a grand finale with the king, 12 sisters, and Puthisen going into the royal palace will be betrayed. Suddenly, a line of the king's vehicles come across the screen along with music that sounds like mourning. The audience sees the vehicles through five thin, bare trees.<sup>28</sup> When the people walking in the front of the vehicles arrive at the trees, the film crosscuts to the scene where Puthisen is looking for Kongrey and where the procession of Neang Kongrey's funeral started. The last five-minute scene showing Neang Kongrey's last words and Puthisen's participation in her funeral procession is the film's shining moment.<sup>29</sup>

Puthisen encounters the vehicle carrying Neang Kongrey's dead body. Then, knowing that Neang Kongrey died from the sorrow of separating from him, Puthisen tells the vassals to take weapons and defeat him because he was the enemy of Neang Kongrey, the Queen. The vassals discussed Neang Kongrey's wishes to comfort him:

*Her Majesty said that we should not have weapons and put you on the king's litter palm and take you back to the royal palace. Now it is very sorry the line became Her Majesty's funeral line. Her every effort finally have an unfortunate consequence. This is her last words. "If your Majesty comes back, Ministers and the people pledged their allegiance to their Majesty and welcome him as King."*

Because Neang Kongrey lived as a good daughter of her mother, she did not have her own will. However, because of her husband and her subjects, she gains her own power, breaks her promise to her mother, teaches her husband the secrets of the treasury, and leaves her final wishes. Whereas Santemea is a threat as a big, strong woman with a weapon, Neang Kongrey is a young and weak woman who does not express her opinion. In other words, Neang Kongrey is a symbol of a person who had not yet been given a voice. When separating from Puthisen, Neang Kongrey grieves only over their love, but in her last words, she considers

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<sup>28</sup>According to Kitaura, visualizing the vertical space can allow an audience to sense depth when a large group moves from back to front or front to back, such as scenes where soldiers are marching.

<sup>29</sup>In the verse text published by the Buddhist Institute, Puthisen returns to Neang Kongrey and finds her lying on a golden couch. "She was too furious to kill herself. An ordinary woman might strive to please her husband," he grieved, and then he orders those in the kingdom of ogres to make a fine coffin and to hold a funeral. Moreover, he makes Neang Kongrey and his two sons sit on the throne, while Puthisen goes back to the kingdom where his mother and aunts are waiting for.

her people and her kingdom over which she governs as Queen and hopes for a peaceful resolution. Puthisen is suffering and, in the face of Neang Kongrey's death, he aspires to atone for his errors through his death. In the end, Puthisen listens to the will of Neang Kongrey, who was the people's representative. He accepts the death of Neang Kongrey and participates in the funeral procession as a declaration of fulfillment of his mission. He does not ride the king's vehicle, which holds Neang Kongrey's dead body, and instead walks ahead with the followers and the people.

The story ends with a feeling that a new era will begin. Although the film does not characterize the story as a regional folk tale, there are conflicts between the kingdom of humans and the kingdom of ogres. Puthisen is suffering between these two kingdoms and eventually the story ends knowing that Puthisen will govern the two kingdoms peacefully. Austin (2014, 93) determines that "the mythical characters of *PNK* are thus outside of time in a fictionalized version of the nation of Cambodia as they play out roles that are directly linked to the welfare of the nation with Puthisen being the ultimate hero," and then refers to Viridi (2003, 31-32) about the impact of modern nation states on cinema.

In the 1960s, when *PNK* was produced and released, Cambodia was sometimes called "A Paris of the Orient" or "An Island of Peace," but it was actually politically and diplomatically unstable. Various things threatened Sihanouk: Cambodian intellectuals who learned Communist thought in Paris, the influence of the Cultural Revolution, the promotion of Mao Zedong thought, Vietnam and the United States, the other parties to the Vietnam War, the anti-monarchy, and people who were pro-American. The left and right wings in Cambodia completely separated in 1966 (Osborne 2004, 15-18), two years before *PNK* was released. However, at that time, Sihanouk also energetically worked on film production, which he had been passionate about since he was young, and he produced nine works between 1965-1968 (Osborne 1994, 178). As Sihanouk could not deny the threat in the real world, he may have focused on realizing utopia in the film world and sharing it among the people.<sup>30</sup> Sihanouk's film *Apsara* was set in modern Cambodia; "From start to finish, *Apsara* was indeed a 'fairyland', depicting Sihanouk's fantastical vision of a country Cambodia never had been nor ever could be" (Osborne 1994, 180). His film *Joy of Life* was also set in the same era, depicting adults' love of extraordinary luxury by examining a slice of the upper class. This was also a fantasy world to the common people. Meanwhile, *PNK*, with its richness in colors and its use of special effects, was a world that ordinary people could sympathize with, despite being a fairy tale. The kingdom that eventually appeared in *PNK* was a peaceful and rich kingdom, which is similar to the modern Cambodia that Sihanouk was aiming to build.

In conclusion, the study illustrates several aspects of modern Cambodia that are presented in Ly Bun Yim's *Puthisen Neang Kongrey* through an extensive elucidation of the film, including the analysis of characters from a religious perspective and a comparison of the film to the Thai language version, which has

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<sup>30</sup> Sihanouk films were free to the public (Ly & Muan, 172).

never been done before.

Further studies on *Sophasith* and *Khmer After Angkor*, which are the only two other existing Ly Bun Yim films, are needed in order to clarify the aspects of tradition and modern after the independence and the beginning of nation building. This will enable the people and the society not only to appreciate that period but also to ascertain why the films that include songs and depict the latest trends attract Millennials.

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Santamea with the “man’s head” held in her hand (©Ly Bun Yim)



Kongrey wearing the modern bikini top and knee-high skirt (©Ly Bun Yim)

## 8 Comical Thevada and Feminine Ogre

### Innovative Characters Reflecting Modern Thai Social Context

*HIRAMATSU Hideki*

This article focuses on two topics: (1) how the tale of the Twelve Sisters, which is a well-known folk tale in mainland Southeast Asia, is perceived in Thailand and (2) by analyzing its various versions, how this story has expanded in Thai modern media. In Thailand, Twelve Sisters has been depicted in movies, TV drama series, traditional literary works, and other media forms. In addition, this article examines the originality of the Thai film, “Phra Rod Meree,” by Sompote Saengduenchai.

### How the tale of the Twelve Sisters is perceived in Thailand

The folk tale of Twelve Sisters is very familiar among a wide audience, from children to adults, in Thailand; it has also been incorporated in school learning<sup>1</sup>. In Thailand, Twelve Sisters usually has two titles. The first half of the story is called Nang Sipsong (12 women), whereas the second half is called Phra Rod Meree (Prince rod and Meree). The title of Nang Sipsong is frequently followed by the subtitles of Phra Rod Meree and vice versa<sup>2</sup>.

Historically, Twelve Sisters was a favorite theme during the Ayutthaya period and appeared in several literary works in the form of verses. The stage drama, which emphasized the romantic aspect of the protagonists, has become especially popular. It is still of great interest in Thailand, and has been reproduced in various forms, such as movies, TV dramas, and music videos. Moreover, we can see its

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<sup>1</sup> The folktale of Twelve Sisters was resisted as Thai national heritage in 2015 (ศิริพร 2015:257).

<sup>2</sup> In Thailand, unlike Laos and Cambodia, there is a consecutive story of Twelve Sisters: Manohra, which has similar content as the story of Hagaromo Densetsu in Japan. However, Twelve Sisters and Manohra have presumably been derived from a different source. Therefore, we should be careful when putting these two stories together in academic debate. Therefore, this article does not discuss Manohra.



significance not only in the public field, but also in academic circles<sup>3</sup>.

However, when it comes to its origin, it is quite uncertain where this story comes from. The Thai tend to think it is of Thai or Tai origin, but the same story was found in Cambodia. Additionally, some parts of the story share similarities with folktales of Southern China, Malaysia, Indonesia, etc.

## Reception of Twelve Sisters in Thailand

The oldest written form of Twelve Sisters can be traced back to a Buddhist tale, Ratthasena Jataka in Paññāsa-Jātaka. Some public book authors even explain that the tale of the Twelve Sisters originates from a Jataka story (นางสิบสอง 2015).

Paññāsa-Jātaka was composed by a monk (or novice) in Chiang Mai around 300-500 years ago. However, recent research shows that this theory is nothing more than a supposition.

According to Peter Skilling, it is not the name of any particular set of Paññāsa-Jātaka. It is more likely a “general” name of several sets of Paññāsa-Jātaka composed in several regions of mainland Southeast Asia, including Cambodia, Laos, and Burma (Skilling 2005). In any case, once the tale of the Twelve Sisters was composed or edited as Ratthasena Jataka<sup>4</sup>, particularly as one part of Paññāsa-Jātaka, it was shared throughout mainland Southeast Asia. It spread as far as Yunnan, South China (one of Tai tribe), most likely throughout the Thai and Tai commercial network. We can now see various versions of this story in Tai regions such as the Tai Yai (Shan) version in Burma, the Tai Lue, the Tai Khuen, and even in the Thai tribe in North Malaysia.

Though we can understand the way the Thai and Tai versions were shared, there is another question about the origin of the story. Like one book author asks, was Ratthasena Jataka in Paññāsa-Jātaka the starting point of this story? Or was Ratthasena Jataka composed from nothing? Like Ex Nihilo Nihil? Given the general nature of Jataka tales, there should have been folktales that spread locally. Jataka tales are generally composed using preexisting stories; thus, Ratthasena Jataka should be no exception. Therefore, it is reasonable to think that the composer or editor of Ratthasena Jataka used some local sources available at that time.

My hypothesis of its origins is as follows:

Several motives seen in Twelve Sisters are derived from India (possibly South India) and Suvarṇabhūmi (present Thailand and other neighboring countries) by means of merchants and religious people travelling in commercial vessels,

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<sup>3</sup> See รัตนพล 2017

<sup>4</sup> In Thailand, there are two authorized versions of Paññāsa-Jātaka in the Thai language. Ratthasena Jataka is the 47th out of 61 stories in the prince Damrong version, but does not exist in Chiang Mai version (Zinme Pyinnyatha) of 50 stories.



because the two regions had a very close relationship since ancient times. Several motives were mixed with local motif (s) and, as a result, the “prototype” of Twelve Sisters came into existence.

After this prototype was composed or edited in Paññāsa-Jātaka as Ratthasena Jataka, the story was shared further. As a means of Buddhist preaching, the tale of the Twelve Sisters was scattered among Thai and Tai peoples such as the Sipsong Panna in Yunnan, Shan State in Burma, and others.

## “Major Motives” in Twelve Sisters

We can see the following major motives in Twelve Sisters

- I. change in message of letter
- II. three amulets
- III. escape from island of demons
- IV. flying horse
- V. escape from island of demons with flying horse
- VI. jealous queen blinds nieces

Motives I-V were found in India, I-II in Indonesia, II-III in Burma (not Shan State), and IV in South China (See Inada 1993:361-413).

Minor motives such as “three trials for abandoning children”, which is similar to some European tales also exist. According to Mihara, motive VI<sup>5</sup> is indigenous only to East Europe and the New Continent (Mihara 1976:367). Whether this assertion is valid or not, we can assume that it is possible that motive VI could also be indigenous to mainland Southeast Asia.

Thai writer Suchit Wongthet insists that the tale of the Twelve Sisters belongs to the Lao, and more specifically to the residents (Kammu) before the Lao (สุจิตต์ 2016). Considering that he created a dozen of book series of “Where X comes from” as a prolific writer and is of Lao origin, his statement is too biased to cite for academic purpose. However, admitting that Lao adapted this story from the former residents also means that before Tai (including Lao) settled down in their present habitant area around thirteenth century, the former settlers already knew this story.

It is possible that they were especially familiar with motive VI, which leads to another supposition that Mon (of Dvaravadi) and Khmer might have also been familiar with this story (motive) earlier than when the Thai moved to the Suvarnabumi area around the thirteenth century.

My hypothesis that this story could have been shared from India through the Dvaravati to the Thai remains valid, which helps us understand that some motives in Twelve Sisters are found not only in mainland Southeast Asia, but also in Indonesian folktales.

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<sup>5</sup> Equivalent to Aarne-Thompson type index:AT455.

## Various versions of the Thai Twelve Sisters

As mentioned above, various forms of the Twelve Sisters can be found in Thailand. They can be found in oral folk tales including Rike (rural stage show play), written literary works including classic verse literature from the Ayutthaya period, and modern interpretations in media works including movies, TV drama series, TV animations, music videos, cartoon books, and more.

In one unique interpretation of the Twelve Sisters, the heroin, Meree, is described as half Yaksha (ogress) and half human (นางสิบสอง 2015). Unlike the usual story, Meree is not the queen ogress' real daughter. The jealous queen had adopted one twin baby from her friends (Yaksha, husband of good deed, and his human wife) in exchange for “yawning mango and yelling lime,” which is very rare and beneficial to pregnant women.

Interestingly, “yawning mango and yelling lime” is a real fruit in Thailand, available mainly in the country. There are several important sites of the Twelve Sisters' tale, such as the cave of Chonburi province in the central part near Bangkok, in which 12 sisters were detained by the jealous queen; Phattalung and Trang in the south; and Phitsanulok in the north. Besides several locations in Thailand, they also have their own locations for this story in Cambodia, Laos, and the Shan state (Burma). Further comparative studies are needed to analyze the similarities and differences between the various versions of the tale of the Twelve Sisters.

## Expansion of Twelve Sisters in modern media

New interpretations and adaptations of the tale of the Twelve Sisters are still being produced in Thailand today, one being a TV sitcom drama (Channel 3, 2017). Very recently, a music video of Twelve Sisters, sung by the famous Kuratee-Kuratai R Siam, has hit the chart in Thailand.

The first film on the Twelve Sisters was shot by Phra Rod Meree in 1968, but this 16 mm. film has not been found so far. The famous Cambodian film on the Twelve Sisters was made in 1972 by Ly Yim Bun. If the 1968 Thai version is found in the future, we could find a relation between the two films.

The second film of Twelve Sisters was produced in 1981 by Sompote Saengduenchai. Born in 1941, Sompote is one of the most widely recognized Thai film director, special effects creator, and producer. In 1962, he received a scholarship to study filmmaking at the Toho Company in Japan for two years. He had an opportunity to work with Eiji Tsuburaya and study special effects (Tokusatsu). After coming back to Thailand, he founded Chaiyo Studio and produced many distinguished special effects-based films including Hanuman vs. 7 Ultraman (1974) and Hanuman and the Five Riders (1975)<sup>6</sup>. He is now living

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<sup>6</sup> Jumborg Ace & Giant (1974), Kaki (1980), Kraithong (1980), Crocodile (1980),

in the Ayutthaya province and owns “Ultraman Land” with numerous collections of objects related to the Ultraman series.

He was also the producer and technical director for the film “Phra Rod Meree” (1981). Besides contributing to the introduction of Tokusatsu, which was very significant in Thailand at that time, he also showed unique interpretations of this story. One of them is a remarkable character of a transgender ogre (M to F). He (She) was given breasts by a Thewdā (divine, P. devatā) to provide milk to a baby prince (hero Phra Rod) on behalf of his mother, who was detained in the cave. In this film, the Thewdā was bizarre-looking, unlike the general image of the Thewdā.

The transgender ogre and half-naked, middle-aged Thewdā helped the hero throughout the entire story. This playful image was very original and could not be found in any other folktales of the Twelve Sisters. Moreover, the hero, who always needs help from others, could be a representation of young people in the contemporary society.

There are other unique aspects of this film. The jealous queen ogress in human disguise wears a berry-like costume and dances during the ascetic practices in the forest. This beautiful, sexy figure<sup>7</sup> transforms herself into the ugly giant ogress when she fights the enemy. Needless to say, in the scene of transformation of the queen ogress, the producer used the extraordinary technique of Tokusatu.

## Concluding Remakes

In Thailand, the tale of the Twelve Sisters has been widely shared and is popular till date. Some books mention that the Twelve Sisters is a masterpiece of vernacular literature, while Ramakien (the Thai version of Ramayana) is a masterpiece of court literature (กรมศิลปากร 2009:13). Unlike the authorized, strictly preserved Ramakien, new interpretations and adaptations of Twelve Sisters continue to be produced in the public sphere.

Sompote Saengduenchai created one of the best examples of the very unique and free-minded interpretation of this story. As society changes, the production of another unique interpretation of Twelve Sisters can be expected.

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The Noble War (1984) etc.

<sup>7</sup> An ordinary, female ugly ogress disguises herself as a beautiful woman in classic Thai literature. In films she often disguises herself in both a beautiful and sexy figure.

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## 9 The Blooming Season

### Thai Short Film

*Chalida UABUMRUNGJIT*

The contemporary concept of independent film, established in the 1990s, refers to some of the aspects of the filmmaking process; independent films are characterized by their mode of production, which is outside the mode of industrial assembly line-like Hollywood studios, and content, which attempts to surpass the expectation of mass film production. This term might imply that a film was made with an extremely low budget and does not rely on substantial support from big film companies. However, it is interesting to apply this notion to the context of Thai films.

The first short film festival organized by the Thai Film Foundation took place in 1997 and was a competitive festival that showcased short films made by both students and non-students. The festival opened up a new arena for independent filmmakers to explore and expand their creativity.

Since its first year, one of the most prominent types of film shown in the festival was student-made films that had been made as part of their studies. Although formal filmmaking education had begun in the 1970s, it was characterized by a notable problem: most institutions aimed to produce labor for the film industry, so the curricula focused on craftsmanship. Meanwhile, limited university budgets made it impossible to have up-to-date equipment that could enable students to develop the skills that would be necessary after graduation. As a result, most student-made films were focused on the development of production skills while trying to satisfy the requirements of the school or instructor. These circumstances became the frame that shaped students' work and, in some cases, the influence of the instructor might have been significant enough to censor the student's work.

The first festival occurred near the end of the 16mm era, when the film labs that processed student films were closing down. Video editing labs were only available for commercial use, so it was still costly to use video technology. It was even harder for filmmakers who did not belong to a film institution. Some production houses encouraged staff to make short films as a skill-enhancing exercise. The Bug by Nawajul Boonpaknavik, which won the first Pestonji award for short films, was produced in this manner. He worked at Siam Studio, a famous production house at the time, and used the equipment and the crew of the company.

We characterized films according to the themes they share. Most of them include taboo themes or themes that were difficult to portray in mainstream media. One benefit of short and digital films is that they are not considered “films” under the censorship law and, since circulation is so minimal, authorities rarely exercise control over these works.

It would not be right to discuss independent films without referring to Apichatpong Weersethakul. Both his talent and opportunities are exceptional. On one hand, he understands the system of non-mainstream films, which is common outside Thailand and influenced Weersethakul during his studies abroad. On the other hand, he had a strong will to make films his own way. His films challenge both public taste and social propriety. He is an inspiration for many young filmmakers.

In the beginning, many people made short films simply to establish a bridge to the film industry, but now, after many have had a chance to make their features, they have realized the difficulty of working in a studio setup. Many filmmakers are tending to be more conscious of the potential of independent film.

The symbol of the Thai Short Film and Video Festival is an egg, which represents giving birth, as it is considered the birthplace of talent and independent spirit.

## Changing modes of production in Thai cinema

There is evidence to suggest that Prince Sanbhassastra, a younger brother of King Rama V, began to make his own films and screen them in his palace in 1900. He mainly shot footage of the royal activities of King Rama V and other state occasions. He was called the father of Thai cinema.

In 1922, Prince Kamphaengphet, head of the Royal State Railway Department, was an amateur filmmaker with a keen interest in the film industry; he also founded the Royal State Railway Film Unit, which was responsible for producing and disseminating Siamese films. This film unit was among the world’s first state filmmaking organizations. The unit also helped Henry Alexander McRae, a filmmaker from Hollywood, who travelled to Bangkok to make a film called *Nangsao Suwan*, or *Suvarna of Siam* in 1923.

In 1927, the Wasuwat brothers made their first feature film, *Chok Song Chan* (Double Luck), which was screened as the first indigenous Thai feature film. In 1930, Fox Movietone News dispatched a crew to Siam to shoot news films using the sound technology. The Royal State Railway Film Department assigned its Film Unit to provide assistance to this crew. Luang Kolakarn Chenchit, one of the Wasuwat brothers, observed the new technology at work. In 1932, the Wasuwat brothers began making their first feature film using this novel sound technology called *Long Tang* (Gone Astray) under the company name *Srikrun Sound Films*.

The immediate popularity of sound films became a problem for unscreened silent films. In 1931, Sin Sribunruang—known also under the pen name *Tid Khiew*—experimented with live narration by borrowing the oral narration style

of khon (masked-dance) to narrate an Indian silent film. This new narrative style proved immediately popular, giving rise to an important profession in the film industry.

Cinema revived after the war. Filmmaking was immediately revitalized. During this period, filmmakers would shoot on 16mm reversal stock and employ voice artists to narrate the dialogue in the manner of a live performance with other sound effects. It would become a popular format until 1970s. The 16mm era produced two of the most notable stars in Thai cinema: Mitr Chaibancha and Petchara Chaowarat. From 1957 until his death in 1970, Mitr appeared in a total of 265 films.

Rattana Pestonji founded a sound film studio called Far East Films in 1953, the name of which was later changed to Hanuman Films, on Witthayu Road in central Bangkok. Throughout his life, Rattana was passionately driven to transform the standard of Thai filmmaking to one of international recognition using 35mm sound in film technology.

Mitr Chaibancha's untimely death in 1970 defined the end of the 16mm era. Consequently, the number of 35mm Thai sound films increased. The recording-breaking success of two 35mm sound films, both released in 1970, put an end to the 16mm "dubbed" convention. One was Monrak Luk Tung, a luk tung musical directed by veteran Rangsee Tassanapayak, who had made hundreds of films during the 16mm era. The other was the poster artist Piak Poster's groundbreaking debut, *Tone (A Man Called Tone)*.

With the transition to the 35mm sound system, the film production process became considerably more complicated. At first, filmmakers had to send their negatives to Hong Kong or Tokyo for processing. From 1981 onward, Thai filmmakers no longer had to send their negatives abroad because local labs had upgraded their equipment.

In 1990, the government of General Chatichai Choonhavan supported the establishment of the Thai Federation of National Film Association to replace the existing Thai Motion Pictures Producer Association.

Multiplexes were established in Bangkok shopping malls in 1994, revolutionizing film exhibition with their technologically advanced projection and sound systems. In the 2000s, the physical materiality of film has already given way to digital electronic technology. In 2010, almost all the film labs in the country closed down, and by 2014, all film projectors in the cinemas were replaced by DCP projectors. Thus, the mode of film production and distribution has changed forever.



## 10 Aspiring for the Next “Golden Age” The Growing Industry of Cambodian Films

*DOUNG Sarakpich*

In this chapter, I would like to show (1) Current situation of Cinemas in Cambodia, (2) Situation of Cambodian young filmmakers and (3) Recent Cambodian commercial films.

I would like to make a few remarks on FIL-K Entertainment before turning to the above points.



We started the Post Production studios called Filkhmer Studio in August of 2015, developed by a Japanese producer / director Satoshi Sugano, who has more than 25 years of experience in production. Since then, FIL-K Entertainment offered a lot of post work for many Cambodian films with our international standard skills and knowledge.

In FIL-K Entertainment, I am a studio producer managing sessions in our studios as well as a Producer/Director/Scriptwriter for Khmer Localization (Dubbing and subtitling) projects. I directed the localization for foreign Films and TV shows, such as Japanese animation Doraemon and Shin Chan, US animation film SING and Despicable Me 3. I also made all Khmer subtitles from translations for Japanese Film Festival - Cambodia 2015.

We have a 7.1ch Sound Studio for sound design & mix of films using industry standard software; Pro Tools HD. Our studio became the first commercial postproduction facility in Cambodia with the 7.1ch sound capability. Another sound studio (stereo sound) has a recording booth and worked for many narration, voice over, dubbing and ADR sessions.



Not only for sound work, our studios are available for picture Editing, Visual Effects and color grading using Final Cut Pro, After Effects and Davinci Resolve. DCP mastering is also available with us. We have made and delivered more than 150 DCPs especially for the Japanese Film Festivals in Southeast Asian countries.

In 2017, we started sales agent works to introduce Cambodian Films to Japan. We had our own presentation booth at TIFFCOM, Tokyo and “The Forest Whispers” was selected at Osaka Asian Film Festival 2017 and made the Japan premiere there with the main actress Duch Lida.



We believe that we are now taking an important part of Cambodian Film Industry and are making it to the next level.

## Current situation of Cinemas in Cambodia

### Cinemas in Cambodia

Before Cambodia suffered under Khmer Rouge, the pre-1975 era was called “Golden Age” of Cambodian Cinemas. It was the “Golden” time not only for cinemas but also for glorious arts and culture. There were numerous cinemas in Cambodia. The capital city, Phnom Penh had over 30 cinemas. The number truly reflects the remarkable period.

The “Golden Age” was totally gone after the war. Until 2011 Cambodia had only a few local cinemas that release local films, mostly ghost horror films. Cinema Lux was one of the survivors in Phnom Penh and was nicknamed “Ghost

Theater” from the films they showed and the old facility itself.

The first Cinema Complex, Platinum Cineplex came to Cambodia in late 2011. The second cinema Complex, Legend Cinemas also came right after Platinum in 2012. Major Cineplex came in 2014 at AEON 1 shopping mall.

After 2019, 6 new cinemas (28 screens) opened in Cambodia.

Today, in April 2020, we have 15 cinemas and 78 screens as the total in Cambodia. 10 cinemas and 52 screens including 4DX and IMAX are in the capital city, Phnom Penh. The other 5 cinemas (26 screens) are in Battambang, Siem Reap and Sihanoukville.



According to Pu Prom Entertainment, a Cambodian film promotion and distribution company, the films shown in Cambodian cinemas in 2017 were 40% from Hollywood, 40% from Thai or other Asian countries and 20% from Local, Cambodia. The ticket price is different depending on the movies, cinemas, weekdays or weekend and 2D, 3D, 4DX or IMAX. The average ticket price for 2D movies is about US\$3 to US\$4. For 3D movies it is about US\$5 to US\$6. 4DX is US\$10 to US\$12 and IMAX is US\$9 to US\$10. Some special luxury halls or seats, called VIP cost US\$14 to US\$25.

### Movie Distributors in Cambodia

So far we have 2 major film distributors in Cambodia, WML (Westec Media Limited) and Sabay MVP.

Westec Media Limited (WML) was incorporated in 2011 as one of the first distributor of films in Cambodia. The company's first released movie was Transformers: Dark of the Moon (U.S.) in 3D and 2D format. Since then WML has quickly grown to be the largest distributor of theatrical content in Cambodia with around 90 titles released per year. These titles are drawn from some of the best studios and distributors in the world including Hollywood studios such as



Universal Studios, Paramount Pictures, 20th Century Fox, Walt Disney Studios, Sony Pictures and Warner Bros. They also release Thai movies from studios such as Sahamongkul Film, Phranakorn Film, and more.

In 2013, WML ventured into supporting local film production. Since then they have funded and released Cambodian movies such as The Two Tiger Girls, Run, Hanuman and Jailbreak.



They promote movies to audience through their Facebook page, display in cinemas, tuk tuk display and also their Jaikon app, which is for film streaming and data base.



Sabay MVP was established in 2011 to license films in Cambodia. Later in 2012, a partnership was formed with Multivision Plus, an Indonesian company active in many Asian. Sabay MVP also brings quality contents from Hollywood studios and independent studios. They develop local talents, too, in order to take the Cambodian market to the next level.

They promote movies to audience through their Facebook page, Digital Sabay magazine and some banners at cinemas.



Distributors need to get the permission to release films from the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts. The Ministry provided the permissions for over 200 movies to release in Cambodia every year. According to the Ministry, in 2016, 33 Cambodian films and 184 foreign films were released. In 2017, 30 Cambodian films and 185 foreign films were released.

Modern Cinemas came to Cambodia late compared to other countries. But we now have many opportunities to watch good films at cinemas. This fact leads us to the possibility and the capability to make good Cambodian film as well.

## Situation of Cambodian young filmmakers

Cambodian, became to be able to reach to good films in this decade and also good quality film shooting became much easier and cost less after photo cameras started to have movie recording function. In Cambodia, just like in other countries, the number of young filmmakers increased year by year. According to Pu Prom Entertainment, they mentioned about Cambodian film promotions and distribution companies, “we now have about 500 of young filmmakers in Cambodia. Most of them are in their 20 to 25-year-old age. Usually they make short films. Their films are mostly films on social issues such as environment and education, as well as entertainment short films and Music videos”.

## Where they learn filmmaking?

In Cambodia, there is no film school yet but there are some schools, workshops



and NGOs who teach how to make films or have chances of film production. So Cambodian youth can learn about making films at those places such as PSE, BBC Media, Bophana Center and Kon Khmer Kun Khmer workshop.

### **PSE (Pour un Sourire d'Enfant)**

“For over twenty years, PSE has been operating in Cambodia to help children escape destitution and provide them the skills required to get a job. It has been recognized by the Cambodian authorities. The charity respects the country’s traditions and culture and collaborates closely with Cambodians.” (<https://pse.org/>). PSE teaches all rules of film such as Directing, writing, editing, Camera and etc.



### **BBC Media Action**

According to the BBC Media Action, “Since 2003, BBC Media Action has worked in Cambodia. Using media to improve health, projects have tackled maternal and child health issues, HIV and AIDS and malaria. BBC Media Action’s work has a particular focus on using TV, radio and online media to reach young people in Cambodia.” (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction>)

Their TV program, Loy9 helped getting young people involved in local and national decision-making. And another program, Love9 helped young people to learn about sexual and reproductive health issues. Also their TV program, Klahan9 is currently working to improve young people's employment prospects. Their young staff can learn film making by working on the production of those programs. They seem to like making short films on education and social environment.

### **Bophana Audiovisual Resource Center**

According to the web site, the Bophana Center is an audiovisual center in Phnom Penh and the main purpose is to restore, protect and enhance the Cambodian audiovisual heritage.

The Center was co-founded in late 2006 by leu Pannakar and Cambodian-French filmmaker Rithy Panh. Rithy Panh is the most prominent filmmaker in Cambodia and he received the top prize of the “Un certain regard” competition at the 2013 Cannes Film Festival for his documentary The Missing Picture.

The Bophana Center is an official member of the International Federation of Television Archives (FIAT) and the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAPF).

The Center is trying to gather all movies in Cambodia. In order to try to

understand, to try to give a name, a soul, a face and a voice to those whose had been deprived of them. The Center has collected more than 3,500 audiovisual items about Cambodia, starting from 1899 so far (<http://bophana.org/>). Students who learn at the Bophana Center are mostly making documentaries and fiction films on social issues.



### **Kon Khmer Koun Khmer (Khmer Films, Khmer Generations)**

According to Kon Khmer Koun Khmer web site (<http://www.cambodianallianceforthearts.com/kon-khmer-koun-khmer-film-group/>), the organization was established in early 2009. It was initiated by Davy Chou, a Cambodian-French filmmaker, now famous for his work *Golden Slumbers* (2012) and *Diamond Island* (2016) but at that time he was a self-taught film-maker and the sole instructor of the team, who took full initiative to ensure the work progressed smoothly. Most of members are students from local universities such as Royal University of Phnom Penh, Royal University of Fine Arts, Limkokwing University, Lycee Descartes, Mith Samlanh organization etc.

After a half year of intensive training alongside by Davy Chou, Kon Khmer Koun Khmer completed *Twin Diamonds*, which is the first film in Cambodia produced entirely by students and released in 2009

Davy Chou continues helping for Cambodian young filmmakers to make their short films. He also established his own film production called Anti-Archives in 2014. His first feature film *Diamond Island* won many awards at international film festivals. The young ones who learned film making under Davy Chou started making their own short films.

### **Difficulties for young filmmakers**

I have interviewed with many Cambodian filmmakers about making films in Cambodia. Some told me that they always face to difficulties even before they start. They complained that they don't have enough budget, don't have much time because they are still students. They continued that as they don't have their own equipment and there few shops that sell those equipment, they need to rent from other studios or productions that already have equipment. Making short films in Cambodia normally take 7 – 10 days for shooting. The average budget for making a short film is between US\$500 and US\$2000.

Moreover it seems like the Censorship system is also giving them a hard time.





They need to have permits for shooting films from the Ministry of Culture. The Ministry' Censorship bans scenes or contents of political issues, too much sexy exposure and wrong describing of religions and traditions.

After they completed their films, they try to show their films to public by applying to local film festivals such as Chaktomuk Short Film Festival or simply by posting their films in digital social Medias like Facebook and YouTube.

For Cambodian young filmmakers, there is almost no way to get their budget back by showing their films. They told me that it is very hard to continue making films because they always need to start earning cash or getting sponsors first for the budget. But I believe that this kind of situation is more or less the same in any countries for young filmmakers.

## Recent Cambodian commercial films

### Entertainment films

In recent years, horror films and comedy films that were made in low budget have become popular as Cambodian entertainment films, especially among young audiences. Typical Cambodian horror films have a ghost story, old mythology and some kind of “revenge” in the story. In Cambodian horror films, characters suffer by extreme gory violence.

The local productions that make horror films often use comical situations, side stories and sub characters in it. We may call it “Horror Comedy” but, in my opinion, it easily ends up like “not scary and not fanny, either”. The low quality visual effects, which was one of the result of their low budget, also doesn't succeed entertaining audiences.

You may ask why those Cambodian “Horror Comedy” films are still popular among locals even their quality is not good? I think that it is because we don't have any other kind of Cambodian entertainment films to choose. We rarely have Cambodian SF fictions, action films, pure Comedy, pure Horror, Suspense, Mystery, etc. I think that it is time for local productions to try to make other kind of entertainment films. I have realized that now we can see many good entertainment films from U.S., Europe, Thai, Korea, China or Japan at cinemas. I also have realized that those foreign entertainment films were made with much higher budget. But I think that local productions should try to prove they CAN entertain locals with their entertainment films.



Actually in these 3 years, we had some Cambodian entertainment films that are not “Horror Comedy”.

### **The Forest Whispers (2016)**

Directed by Jimmy Henderson, Produced by Rock Entertainment.

This “Dark Fantasy” is set in a mountain village and succeeded to become one of the well-made Cambodian films. The visual effects by the local effects team also succeeded to prove Cambodian films can have international standards in visual effects. This film was also shown at Cambodian Film Festival in U.S. and Osaka Asian Film Festival in Japan.

### **Jailbreak (2017)**

Directed by Jimmy Henderson, Produced by Kongchak Pictures.

Jimmy Henderson directed another film and it became a big success as a Cambodian Entertainment film. This Action film succeeded to prove that Cambodian entertainment film can be successful in terms of profit. This film was selected in many international fantasy film festivals and was sold to NETFLIX.

### **Mind Cage (2018)**

Produced and Directed by Amit Dubey.

This Suspense film succeeded to prove that ghosts are not necessary to scare Cambodian audiences.



These 3 films are directed by non-Cambodian directors. We may have to say that we need still more time for Cambodian filmmakers to be able to make good quality entertainment films.

## Art-House films

Cambodian films became internationally recognized in Art-House films first.

### The Missing Picture (2013)

Director by Cambodian French director, Rithy Panh, who is the co-founder of the Bophana Center. It was screened in the Un Certain Regard section at the 2013 Cannes Film Festival where it won the top prize in the section. It was also screened in the World Cinema section at the 2013 Cinemania International Film Festival where it won the Grand Jury Prize. It won the Lumières Award for Best Documentary at the 21st Lumières Awards and was nominated for the César Award for Best Documentary Film at the 41st César Awards.

This film was nominated for the Best Foreign Language Film at the 86th Academy Awards. Approximately half of the film is news and documentary footage, while the other half uses clay figurines to dramatist what happened in Cambodia when Khmer Rouge came to power. Rithy Panh became the first and most known Cambodian filmmaker among international film market.

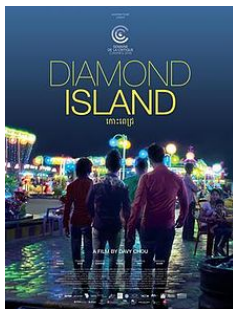
### Lost Loves (2010)

Before Rithy Panh, in 2010, Cambodian director Chhay Bora made Lost Loves. This film describes struggles of a mother under Khmer Rouge. Chhay Bora and his wife Kauv Sotheary, by whom this film was written and starring, proved Cambodian filmmaker, can make international standard fiction film. Lost Loves was selected as the official entry of Cambodia to the best Foreign Film at the 85th Academy Awards.

### The Last Reel (2014)

Another Khmer Rouge related story fiction, The Last Reel (2014), became internationally successful. It was written by Ian Masters and directed by Kulikar Sotho under her film production, Hanuman Films. This film won many awards at international film festivals and became successful to have Cambodian films recognized among international market since The Missing Picture.





### **Diamond Island (2016)**

Diamond Island is a 2016 drama film directed and co-written by Davy Chou, who is the initiator of the film workshop, Kon Khmer Koun Khmer. The film is a co-production between Cambodia, France, Germany, Thailand and Qatar. The film features a cast of debuting actors after over five months casting in the streets of Phnom Penh and on Facebook. The film was screened in the International Critics' Week section at the 2016 Cannes Film Festival where it won the SACD Award.

This film proved international audiences that Cambodia has a good quality fiction rather than Khmer Rouge story.

### **First they killed my father (2017)**

It was directed by Hollywood star Angelina Jolie. This film screened at the Telluride Film Festival and 2017 Toronto International Film Festival, and was released worldwide on Netflix on September 15, 2017 to positive critical reception.

Pu Prom Entertainment told us “The production period and budget for Cambodian commercial films are different by film by film, but it seems like Cambodian films spend average 15 to 30 days for their shooting and their average budget is around US\$45,000.”

It is a very good sign for Cambodia films starting to have opportunities to show their movies internationally. I believe that Cambodia films' the second “Golden Age” has already begun.

# 11 For the Development of Lao Film

## Film Archives and Film Industry in Laos

*Dethnakhone LUANGMOVIHANE*

### History of film archives in Laos

Lao film archives were officially established under the name of the National Film Archive Center. Some officials, who had studied abroad and were very concerned about the value of film heritage, proposed the establishment of the Center to the approval of the Ministry of Information and Culture in 1991. Initially, its main functions were managing and conserving the film/video archives, and providing footage for public services. Films were collected from various places, to be stored in the film vault. The number of films in the collection reached 1,038 Laotian films of 3,000 titles in 16mm and 35mm formats. These newsreels, documentaries, and feature films covered aspects of lifestyle, economics, and politics, and they were produced during the war against imperialism. After the collected films were transferred to the vault in Vientiane, the following step was to restore and catalogue the films. All these films are in valuable heritage for archiving.

Three years later, in 1993, the National Film Archive Center and the Video Center were combined under the name of the National Film Archive and Video Center, with the responsibility of producing and archiving films. The new Center ran until 2008 and was later upgraded under the name of the Lao Cinema Department. Currently, the film archive is under the Film Archive Division of the Lao Cinema Department.

### Policies on film archives

The films comprise invaluable national heritage, particularly as records of political, social, and military events; and the aftermath of the war. People from all strata of Lao society are included in the films, such as political leaders, revolutionary leaders, soldiers, and artists. The collection has an enduring influence on Lao society, and the films are widely used in television programs, mobile cinemas, and in the production of new documentary films. They are screened on important national days and used for educational purposes so that the Lao people can commemorate the experiences that have shaped their identity and nation. Therefore, the Party-State regards these films as historical and informative

educational resources, especially for the new generation, in propagating the knowledge on how the Lao People's Democratic Republic declared its independence and establishment on December 2, 1975. This is one of reasons why the Party-State agreed to establish and support the Center until now.

### **Current Lao Film Archives**

During the life of the National Film Archive and Video Center, from 1991 to 2006, all films were stored at a temperature between 18°C and 20°C and relative humidity of 60-85%. These temperature and relative humidity levels negatively affected the quality of the films; therefore, the government agreed to construct a new two-story film vault, with temperatures between 10°C and 12°C and relative humidity of 30-35%. The construction of the vault was completed in 2006, and it was officially opened the same year. Currently, there are 12,000 reels of film; 1,036 reels of microfilm; 50 reels of Hi8 cassettes (Lao musical instrument database); and 200 reels of cassettes in other formats.

Film archivists are responsible for the restoration and conservation of films, and their main tasks are as follows:

1. Checking the air conditioning system and the relative humidity machine every day to ensure they are working properly.
2. Inspecting the quality of films every two to three months. They must be cleaned and rewound to avoid sticking. Whenever a film is taken out of the vault, it should be left at the transit room for 12-24 hours (2-3 hours for video cassettes.) If fungus is found during inspection, the film must be separated and digitized. If vinegar syndrome is encountered, the film must be separated and put into a plastic bag.
3. Cataloguing  
All films stored at the vault must be catalogued, with detailed information on content, their duration, and a number.
4. Restoration  
When the damaged or torn film was found, it will be cut off the damaged point and connected it with master tape.

The Neo Lao Hak Xat (or Lao Patriot Front)'s collection of 1,200 titles in 450 reels, consists of newsreels and documentary films shot and produced between 1955 and 1980, was registered in the MOWCAP in 2014

### **Public access**

The film collection in the vault is an invaluable heritage of Laos and has an enduring influence on Lao society. The films are widely used in television programs, mobile cinemas, and in the production of new documentary films. They are screened on important national days and festivals, and are also used for educational purposes. They cover a range of topics such as history, culture, and lifestyle, so that the Lao people can commemorate the experiences that have

shaped their identity and their nation.

There are four channels of access to these films and the information they contain:

1. Lao TVs: A regular program airs twice a week on Mondays and Wednesdays; and other programs air on important national or special days.
2. Mobile Cinema: The Mobile Cinema Unit of the Film Archive Division has an annual plan for screening the newsreels and documentary films at organizations, schools, colleges in central and local places, and especially in remote areas of the country.
3. DVD distribution: The DVDs of newsreels, documentary films, and feature films are available at the Lao Cinema Department and through mobile distributors who sell the DVDs. In 2017, 50,000 copies of DVDs were sold.
4. Internet uploads: Some footage was uploaded to the internet and can be watched for free.

### **Limitations and Constraints**

Lao Film Archives has many budget, equipment, and personnel limitations and constraints. There are not enough personnel and technicians. None of the personnel have been educated in the field of film archives. They are almost educated through intensive workshop and on the job training. Air conditioning did not work for weeks, and there was no technician available to repair it, which is very dangerous because the temperature of the film vault needs to be properly controlled at all times. Moreover, there is no equipment or machine to digitize some films for easy public access.

### **Achievements**

- Despite limitations and constraints, Lao Film Archives has achieved many things since its establishment in 1991:
- Upgrade of the standards of the film vault in 2006;
- Provision of public access through mobile cinema projections, TV channels, and DVDs;
- Registration of the Neo Lao Hak Xat collection in the list of MOWCAP.

### **Vision**

Propose a project budget and submit to government for training the personnel in the field of film archives including training the technicians for film vault control; finding support and aid from overseas for short and long-term training on film archives and for the equipment to digitize films and burn DVDs; and improving the online channels of public access, such as YouTube and Facebook, to attract viewers.



## The Current Situation of Lao Film

The current Lao Cinema Department is derived from the Film Division of the Lao Freedom Front, which was officially established in 1958, even though the role of the Lao Cinema Department had been played earlier than its official establishment. Its role has changed over the years as a result of political, economic, and social factors. For example, during the period of the fight for independence, before 1975, several numbers of newsreels and documentary films were produced to propagandize and mobilize people to fight against enemies and for independence.

Film titles and contents were implicated with cruel enemies and henchmen who had committed war crimes against the stronghold of the revolutionary movement, caused the loss of the lives of common people, and the destruction of houses, schools, monasteries, etc. On the other hand, the films showed the brave combat of the revolutionary forces, as well as the lifestyle of the common people living in the liberated zone.

After the country's full independence in 1975, film work faced periods of growth and decline, from 1976 to 1993. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, film work was improved and supported by the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) and the Government of Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) in terms of organizational structure, personnel, and subsidies to develop and meet the audience's entertainment demands while educating them along the political line of the Party-State. In the late 1980s, especially during the initial years of the renovation policy, film work continuously developed and was popular. However, unfortunately, the Cinema Department was dissolved and replaced with the State Cinematographic Company that was responsible for all film works including their production, import, distribution, and all related expenses.

The company ran for about four years, and lost all its capital. In the end, it was bankrupt and abolished in 1993. During the time of the State Cinematographic Company, foreign film products were spread around the country in video cassette format in parallel with the illegal and unregulated increase of video shops. Due to budget shortages, no Lao films were produced and there were no improvements in Lao film work. The Lao audience was exposed to more foreign films, such as Thai films, that private shops were illegally importing, and they were not dubbed with Lao language like they used to be in the past. In 1991, the National Film Archive and Video Center was established under the Ministry of Information and Culture, and became responsible for preserving, producing, and distributing film and video. Later, in 2007, the Center was upgraded to the Cinema Department under the same Ministry of Information and Culture and became responsible for producing; distributing and controlling; and preserving film works.

Even though the popularity of Lao film works increased and decreased between 1976 and 1993, film was still an important medium for the Party and government to propagandize and educate people in participating in the two strategic tasks of protecting and building up the nation in a new period. Film is an important tool of the Party-State in attaining objectives of its political ideology and policies.

## Policies on Lao Film

By 1993, the renovation policy had been in execution for seven years, and it had been two years since the Fifth National Congress of LPRP was held in 1991. Therefore, to disseminate the National Congress of LPRP's resolution related to the information sector of the Ministry of Information and Culture, the Political Bureau Committee of the LPRP Central Committee issued a Decision on Increasing the Party's Leadership and the government's management in the mass media (No 36/PBC, dated June 19, 1993) in the new period. The decision defined policies related to the production and development of mass media, functioning as a point and strict means for the Party-State in disseminating guidelines, policies, laws, and regulations; educating the public with ideological politics and histories of the nation, revolution, victories, and achievements of implementing the renovation policy; motivating and encouraging them to contribute to the two strategic tasks of protecting and developing the nation, as well as building up and expanding the people's democratic regime; and constructing the basic aspects of socialism step by step.

The year after the decision related to mass media was issued in 1993, on October 1, 1994, the Executive Board of the Central Party Committee of LPRP issued a Decision on Culture Work in the New Period. It stated the need and importance of national culture, as the most valuable heritage, belief's relied bases of society and factor ensuring the sustainability and existence of the Lao nation. The Decision recognized that culture ushers the entire population of a country to have the unity and solidarity necessary for protecting and building up their nation. It stressed that a nation that cannot protect its own culture or does not protect it well enough, may disappear, be dominated by others, or become the shadow of other nations. Therefore, protection of culture meant the protection of the nation.

This latter decision was another film production tool besides the former decision on mass media and was about "tightly managing film-video work and improving the film sector." The Party's policy intended to tightly manage film-video work, because film is a cultural artifact that both reflects and affects the culture and the sense of the audience. Since the Party-State regarded culture as a major factor affecting the sustainability and existence of the nation, it was necessary to have policies to ensure tight management of all aspects of film and video works including their production, distribution, and import, while improving the film sector in terms of content, materials, and techniques. Film is a kind of mass media which plays a key role as a vehicle of preserving, transferring, promoting, and developing culture. Therefore, according to the policy described in the latter decision, film production should be contained not only about the culture but also be connected to the Party-State's guidelines and policies, especially about the two strategic tasks and the integrated renovation policy.

To disseminate the mass media-related policies of the Party, the Ministry of Information and Culture issued the Regulation on Film and Video Cassette Management, dated September 27, 1995.

In 2014, the Government of Lao PDR issued the Decree on Film to define the principles, rules, and measures for the management and monitoring of the

implementation of activities related to cinema, to ensure the rights and obligations of organizations, entities, and individuals participating in activities related to cinema; to ensure the systematic and equal management and monitoring of cinema throughout the country; and to ensure that cinema contributes to the preservation and promotion of the cultural heritage of Laos and the Lao people in a sustainable manner.

## Film production

In the past decade, productions mainly came from the government sector, namely the National Film Archive and Video Center and the Lao Cinema Department. Later on, filmmakers who used to work for the government started their own business (Lao Art Media) to produce films, resulting in an increase in the number of film productions. Nowadays, the number of filmmakers and production companies are on the rise.

Since the Lao Cinema Department was re-established in 2008, the number of filmmakers has gradually increased. Some of them produce on behalf of production companies (e.g., Lao Art Media Company, Lao New Wave Cinema Company, Kheohaeng Production Company, TK Entertainment Company, Miracle Company, Mind Media, and Lao Film and Television Center). There are also independent filmmakers most of whom are young and passionate about filmmaking. There used to be one film release per year, now, we have three local title releases per year. The Anniversary, released by the Miracle Company, was on theatres for four weeks. Hong Ham Tao was released by the Kheohaeng Production Company which previously released successful films such as the first and second versions of Really Love. Dearest Sister, released by the Lao Art Media Company, has participated in many festivals around the world and guaranty with winning many prizes. Moreover, we have the two very honorable and special films from China that were shot in Laos, Dokchampa Ban and Beautiful Affection.

## Film Screening

In Laos, we have two types of film screening: mobile film projection and theatre film projection. The first type is usually conducted outdoors at night. Most documentary films will be projected by the Mobile Film Projecting Unit of the Lao Cinema Department and some private sector actors. This kind of screening is still popular among audiences in remote areas. The second type of film projection is run by private sector actors. Now, we have three theatres with thirteen screens, projecting in DCP format. Two of the theaters are located in the capital, in Vientiane, and the third is located in Pakse. Besides the three theatres projecting in digital DCP format, we have two old theatres, one located in Vientiane and the other in the Savannakhet Province. There is still more potential for companies to build more theatres located both capital city and provinces, especially in Vientiane, Savannakhet, Champasak, and Luang Prabang Provinces. All film to be screened in theatres will be imported by two film distributors,

namely, the MVP Company and the Westec Media Company. Ticket prices range from 16,000 to 48,000 Lao kips (2 to 6US dollars), and the number of customers are increasing among young people.

## **Cooperation**

Due to many limitations in film work, we regard cooperation as the key to developing Lao film. One of the outstanding ways of cooperation is to organize film festivals with foreigners. Currently, we have three main festivals: The Luang Prabang Film Festival held at the Luang Prabang UNESCO World Heritage Site in the northern part of Laos; the Vientiane Film Festival located in Vientiane, in the central part of Laos; and the Champasak Film Festival held in the Champasak Province in the southern part of Laos. These festivals have created many opportunities for the development of Lao film such as training for young filmmakers, provision of a stage for filmmakers' products and places for exchanging filmmaking experiences. We are also in cooperation with fraternal countries, neighboring countries, ASEAN countries within the framework of Film ASEAN, and others to co-produce, and exchange lessons and training.

To be honest, in terms of film development, Laos is so young in all aspects of film work.

## **Film Exhibition**

Since Lao film is very young, it is working hard and trying its best to publicly promote itself, by attending exhibitions and special events to raise awareness of film among Lao people and to attract foreign filmmakers for cooperation as a way to improve and develop Lao film.

## **Limitations and Constraints**

Lao film is facing many budget and funding limitations and constraints for film works, especially for film production. Besides, there is shortage of film staff and filmmakers working to promote, manage, and produce films. In addition, upgrades are needed in terms of technique and equipment, etc.

## **Vision**

To develop Lao film, there are plans to improve the Decree of Prime Minister on Film to Law on Film, promulgated by the President of Lao PDR; train the staff; upgrade equipment; disseminate related laws to the public; encourage and enhance the local and foreign investors to produce films and build more movie theatres; promote connection with other countries for cooperation and assistance in the fields of human resource training, equipment, and production.

## 12 **Boosting Passions for Making Stories**

### The Short Filmmaking Scene in Laos

*Athidxay BOUANDAOHEUANG*

I, Athidxay Bouandoheuang, or known as Ding by my friends, am currently a Director of company Mind Media and a co-founder of Lao New Wave Cinema (LNWC) Productions Co., Ltd. and the Vientianale film festival.

I have accumulated experience in the film industry since 2009 when I started working with other Lao film directors, some of whom studied film abroad, until the present. The Lao film industry is about to rise. I think this industry is gradually improving in various ways, such as the number of production teams and production budget.

Currently, watching movies is becoming more popular among Lao people, compared to 2009-2015, when LNWC started making movies. Most of the works at that time were documentaries about the life of Lao people, environment, gender equality, and Lao education, supported by international organizations. Sometime around 2016 after the Vientianale Film Festival, the diversity of content increased, including performance, comedy and romance were added to documentaries, and some creators started using special effects and animation for their works.

Nowadays, we can see many different types of short clips created by young generation with special techniques through online media such as Facebook and YouTube. Along with this trend, the diversity of production teams has increased compared to 2009.

At first, the films shown at the Vientianale film festival were mostly in music videos and documentaries while short films were in the minority. But in 2017, most of the entries were the latter. Forty short films were sent to compete in the 2017 Vientianale, which was the biggest number we have ever had before and even including the following year. This number exceeded our expectations. The producers and directors have been increasing each year since that time but despite the rise in new directors, many of the production teams are still very much at the amateur level. Most of them were students at the Faculties of Letters, Mass Communications, and Fine Arts at National University of Laos (NUOL), mostly in their first and second years, who have recently started sending their work to our festival. I understand that they do it because they are passionate about making

films and want to see the results of their work through the competition but I think their skills are not yet good enough.

With regard to the equipment these days, there are a wide variety of equipment thanks to modern technology. The DSLR camera used by all teams can deliver sufficient quality, albeit less expensive. Some teams use smartphone apps to improve their works at the shooting stage. It could be said that Lao people now can easily access high technologies to make a high-quality film.

Some teams attend MOJO seminars and workshops, which use smartphones to shoot documentaries and short films. We are currently in an era in which smartphones are a part of life's essentials and while various apps can be downloaded for free so it is easy for new filmmakers to learn how to get started shooting video and stills. Everyone is already taking selfies and recording events to share with their friends most commonly through social media. This is the process by which they get started.

Budgets for production are extremely low. As for equipment, people use what they have so budgets are minimal. They mostly spend it on the food and transportation fee while they shoot the film. In the case of students in the first and second year of NUOL, when they want to make a film, they discuss things among themselves and find friends to help them out for their production and the results of their work will be sent to the competition. It is important for them to make a team to start off making a film. New directors usually get together as a team, and everyone contributes some money to create it. Now we can see a lot of works created by people from a new generation on YouTube or on Facebook. Their work still has some issues that need improvement, but many teams do a good job, some of them are even becoming good models for the Lao film industry.

The biggest issue in the Lao film industry is the budget. To make high-quality movies, we need a good writer, a good photographer, and experienced staff, for example. If the budget is small, we cannot afford to hire those professionals to improve the quality of movies. It won't become an industry because nobody can earn enough money from it to live. Right now, people make their own movies because they have a genuine love for doing that. It will work temporarily but it won't sustain. The first generation of filmmakers wants to see a bright future so they do it with a long-term vision of the Lao film industry. But the young generation does not have the patience to deal with the present predicament which can possibly cause their passion to diminish in no time.

Currently, what we can see in the Lao films is mainly the efforts to make the audience laugh or to show the beautiful camerawork. If we only have these kinds of films, it will be a problem in the future. Shall we accept that Lao films be limited to comedy and farce? Or shall we create influential movies that bring changes in our society? This is the current question of the Lao film industry.

Based on my own experience, whether you are new or old, and whether you want to make a high quality movie or not, if you study the market and continue to develop your abilities, you can raise your ability to the level of neighboring

countries. As a member of Mind Media, Lao New Wave and the Vientanale, I give my encouragements and support to the people who are studying this field.

Since 2009, we have been trying to provide short-term 3-5 days or one month training courses. But the problem we are facing at this moment is that the trainees do not know what they themselves want to do.

Having finished the entire workshop program, they still don't know what role they want to play in the team or in the film industry. We cannot be sure if they want to be writers, photographers, audio managers, or if they just want to have something to post on their Facebook to brag about.

This kind of attitude discourages directors and teachers from continuing the trainings because the trainees themselves do not have a clear understanding and goal as to what they really want to do.

Maybe the trainees also are uncertain how these learning can improve their lives in the future or simply if these truly can benefit them in general.

Looking at this situation from another point of view, I think teaching new producers about my own achievements and mistakes provide a good opportunity to adjust my training approach. And if some of them are able to use what they've learned from the workshop to enhance their lives to some extent, as like becoming an editor or a freelance photographer, or working in media production would be nice. These people are a minority but I take pride in the fact that at least, what we have been doing isn't completely pointless for the trainees who wish to learn to improve their own lives.

To promote the growth of Lao film, our team is trying to hold film festivals and film showings in cities and throughout the countryside. Currently, the Vientianale and our mobile team is about to set off for Vientiane province, and following that, we shall be visiting Luang Prabang and Oudomxay. We have been working closely with the Department of Cinema in order to promote understanding between us about the Lao film production processes and what kinds of films are being produced, and we are trying to find the way how everyone can get involved and cooperate. What we are trying to concentrate on at this moment is to have everyone watch and enjoy Laos films and be proud of them.

We are therefore showing and disseminating the films of the new generation as much as possible. Although we can post their works on Facebook, it's useless for a lot of people who still do not use such platform and even though we have a lot of short films to show, we are not able to screen them in movie theaters. So then, we are trying to create this opportunity and disseminate all short films for everyone to see and enjoy.

What we are doing right now with short films is a form of trial. We, including new producers from the next generation, have this kind of opportunity to create something, practice, develop, and experiment with what we believe and find out what we truly want to do. This is quite important for us and we must make our best effort to create a greater variety of content for films. We should avoid just following the most popular film trend but rather give audiences alternative film



choices. The filmmakers have to make a range of contents for viewers to be able to choose; otherwise, we will end up on the same old trodden road that everyone followed. And Lao film will have no identity and no options to develop.

In the following years since 2018, it will be the era of a short film. Short films can go far because people will not be watching long films anymore. Therefore, short films can take the limelight and the opportunity of participating in international film festivals with your own short films will be greater than that for long films because you do not need much investment, budgets, or people; you just have to put your heart into developing the content of the story.

We have once talked to teams of scriptwriters and producers of the new generation. When asked why there were no good Lao stories, the old generation of scriptwriters said that there were full of good ones; it's just that the new generation did not read the good old stories. For example, the new generation of filmmakers do not study those stories and they do not read books; they just take a story which can be made into a film and proceed with it. Perhaps they think, "why do we need to sit and think about stories?" The easiest way is to read a good existing one that the older scriptwriters recommend and to adjust it into something which matches the modern age. Another method for the new generation of film students is to be innovative and creative.

### **Question from a young student (23 March 2018):**

Q. I want to ask whether anyone in Laos is starting to produce long films and what the situation is these days?

A. We have many companies - five or six at present - which are investing in long films. And there are many stories being produced by the following companies. Lao New Wave Cinema has created about five films, and Keoheng Production has produced three comedies, Miracle production has produced one, and TK Lao has produced two. Over the last five or six years, almost ten Lao films have been produced, not including those we worked with foreign producers; Lao Art Media collaborated with Brunei and Lao New Wave Cinema collaborated with Japan.

Lao Art Media, for example, has many productions that they have done overseas. It is important to know what kind of Lao films are becoming popular in the world now. Everyone wants to see the perspective of Lao people and how it can be presented in a Lao storyline. In the film festivals, many people love to watch films like those which were produced by a female director, Mattie Do. Her works have been shown at many festivals across the world.

### **Comment from another filmmaker, Xaisongkham INDUANGCHANTHY:**

I simply want to add to what Athidxay just said - as for the current trend in long films in Laos, although the main producer was Lao Art Media in the past but now many companies have played a role in production. But you might feel that the

number of productions remains low - there may be one or two films per year and the budget is low. I think that the latest two or three films have used a production budget of \$10,000-20,000 to make a long film. Compared to the budgets used in other countries, this is extremely low.

One reason why producers try to create long films on a low budget is that they could earn little return on their investments. In Laos, the channels through which we can earn money are two places in Vientiane and one more in Champasak, which are both running normally but I think that the one in Savannakhet has closed now. Therefore, we create films on a low budget to prevent it from causing serious damage to us. This is the main reason not only for making short films but also for long films.

Its content is growing now in dramas, biographies, and horror stories, but tends to emphasize comedy more than others. The diversity of our contents is quite limited compared to other countries. Another positive trend is that, in the Lao film industry, we are starting to cooperate with other countries, but a few years ago, it was only Thailand. Now we are no longer confined to Thailand but are working with Brunei, Japan, European countries and the United States, and this will become more and more active. I think it is a positive trend because things will keep improving. And many directors are trying to bring projects into other countries in order to get a production budget for their projects. Such a move is a good opportunity to improve their films.

In Laos, we only have one source of budgets - the Laos Filmmaker Fund, a fund which finances film productions and this is another trend I have noticed.