

PHRA RAM CHADOK AS THE ATTALAKSANA LITERATURE OF LAOTIAN PEOPLE*

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Abstract

The importance of Phra Ram's Account or Ramayana is not limited to mainland India, but has extended into other lands which have been influenced by Indian culture, such as Thailand, Laos, Myanmar, Kampuchea, and Indonesia. Each of the lands mentioned above possesses her own version of Phra Ram's Account, each describing similar heroic deeds, especially the victory in the war against the unrighteous, the cause of which stems from the abduction of Nang Sida, the beautiful wife of Phra Ram. The differences in these accounts lie in the behavioral details of characters, or additional themes and episodes which vary according to the social values and other ecological elements of each nation.

The public interest in *Phra Ram's Account*, or *Ramakian* as most Thais know it, is high. *Ramakian* has become the national literature, the ornament of the Thai kings to the present. It is, therefore, no wonder that almost all aspects worthy of study concerning the *Ramakian* have been worked on, such as the sources, expansion, and local variations, while it is true that certain other aspects have not been much studied, especially foreign versions which have been influenced by

the original *Ramayana*.¹ The Laotian version, for example, contains highly interesting essential points, because of its being the only version in which the hero or Phra Ram is regarded both as a Bodhisattva and at the same time a national hero. As a matter of fact, *Phra Ram's Account* in the Laotian version is a *jataka*. On the other hand, the study of this Laotian *jataka* has not been seriously taken up by any Thai scholar, and those which touch on the topic have so far done so only rather superficially. Therefore, this is the starting point for research on the "Phra Ram Chadok: A Laotian Version of Ramayana."

The benefits to be gained from the study

1. The extension of the limits of knowledge on *Phra Ram's Account* in other versions outside Thailand, and in this case the full Laotian version, instead of the abridged version.
2. The result of research on the study of the primary document previously unknown to scholars.
3. The possibility to make a direct comparison on the knowledge gained from the research with the Thai *Ramakian*, which will enhance knowledge and understanding of this topic.
4. The direction or the procedure to study literature from the primary source.

Summary of the main story

The study of the *Phra Ram Chadok* in Thailand has been limited, probably due to the fact that access to the single original copy was very limited on the one hand, and to the impression that the copy had already been lost, on the other. In 2474 B.E., Phra Voravongther Krommamuen

* The term "Attalakšana Literature" in this article means a literary work specifying the identity of the majority of the people of a particular country.

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¹ See the Master's Degree thesis by Somphorn Singto entitled "The relation between the Valmiki's Ramayana and the Ramakian of King Rama I."

Phithayalabh-phruethiyakorn requested Phraya Sunthornthepkichcharak (Thong Chandrangsu), the governor of the province of Roi Et at that time, to make a search for the Laotian copy of this work. When the copy was found, it was transcribed into Thai characters and typewritten despite its extreme length totaling 43 bundles.

Although the original had been transcribed into the Thai script, the *Phra Ram Chadok* continued to be known within a limited circle because of the length of the work. In 2476 B.E., Luang Sri Amara Yan (Chaisri Sri-Amorn) and Phra Saraprasert (Tri Nagapradipa) worked together in making an abridged version of this *Phra Ram Chadok* for free distribution at the cremation ceremony of the mother of Luang Sri Amara Yan, and the work was entitled *Phra Ram Chadok*.² From that time on, the condensed version of this *Phra Ram Chadok* became available among a limited number of Thai scholars. When Sthirakoses wrote “*Upakorn Ramakian*”—A supplement to the Thai *Ramakian*, he also used this condensed version just as other writers had. As time passed, the original copy of this *Phra Ram Chadok* was finally lost in oblivion. In this research work, the researcher used the original copy,³ the source of the shortened version of Luang Sri Amara Yan, now more than 75 years old.

² *Phra Ram Chadok Chabab Thod Khwam* is the outcome of the joint effort by Luang Sri Amara Yan (Chaisri Sri-Amorn) and Phra Saraprasert (Tri Nagapradipa). The work has been in print twice, the first time in 2476 B.E., for free distribution in the cremation ceremony of Luang Sri Amara Yan’s mother, and the second time in 2507 B.E., for free distribution in the cremation ceremony of Luang Sri Amara Yan.

³ This document is a primary document. The original copy was typewritten, using very large typeface, on long sheets of paper. Each page contains about 30 lines. It is believed that the typing was done in 2475 B.E. It cannot be utilized nowadays as it is over 80 years old.

This *Phra Ram’s Account* was written as a *jataka*, entitled *Phra Ram Chadok*, for the purpose of being used as a preaching manual for monks. The story is 43 bundles long, divided into two parts, each part called “Ban.” The first *Ban* (*Ban-Ton*) is 20 bundles long and the latter *Ban* (*Ban Plai*) is 23 bundles long. The transition of the role of Phra Ram from being the hero of an epic to the status of a Bodhisattva whose career is found only in Theravada Buddhism has never been found in other versions of *Phra Ram’s Account* of any other nation. Therefore, Phra Ram, the hero of the story, is sometimes referred to as a Bodhisattva. It should be remarked, however, that the writer or the compiler of this *jataka* paid little attention to the necessary characteristics of a *jataka*, as is seen from the rebirth section,⁴ which deals with characters in the story of the past who were born as human beings contemporaneous with the Buddha, (as found in the section on the present or *Paccupanna Vatthu*) and which was crudely done and is not realistic and does not agree with accepted historical facts. For instance, Thao Phigphi (the elder brother of Thao Raphanasuan who came to side with Phra Ram in the latter part of the story) was born as Phraya Chomphubodi; Thao Chetthakuman (a son of Raphanasuan who in the latter part of the story came to side with Phra Ram also) was born as Phraya Sri Thammasokarat; and Phraya Pattalum (who in the Thai *Ramakian* is Maiyarap who put Phra Ram’s army to sleep and took Phra Ram to Mueang Badan underworld) was born as Phraya Thevanampiyatissa.

Of the three characters, Phraya Chomphubodi, who is to be met only in

⁴ The section on the rebirth is sometimes called *Samodhana* or *Prachumchadok*.

the legend “*Phraya Chomphu*”,⁵ is not a historical person. On the other hand, Phraya Sri Thammasokarat or Emperor Asoka the Great, and Phraya Thevanmpiya Tissa or King Devanampiya Tissa of Sri Lanka, were real and contemporaneous, living during more than 200 years after the Buddhist Mahaparinibbana. The reason why the story is called a *jataka*, it may be surmised, is merely to promote faith among the audience on the one hand, and to render the hero of the account to be more prominent on the other, without paying attention to the characteristics of the title *jataka* which it assumes.

The differences between *Phra Ram Chadok*’s motifs and those of *Ramakian* by King Rama I

The main story of the *Phra Ram Chadok* is divided into two sections. The first section deals with the founding of Mueang Inthapat. In this part of the story, Thao Thatarat and Nang Wisutthisopha left Thao Tab Paramesuan in order to build a new city Chanthaburi Sisattanak of their own. The story also gives an account of Thao Virunhok, who was the younger brother of Thao Thatarat. He had a son queer in appearance, with a short torso without arms or legs, named Thao Lunlu. The God Indra took Thao Lunlu up to heaven in order to reshape his physical body. Thao Lunlu was afterwards reborn to the same mother Nang Malika, this time with supernatural power. He went flying to King Thatarat and forced him to give Nang Chantha to him as his wife. Thao Raphanasuan’s action was an unpardonable violation of Laotian tradition on two accounts: he did not give the bath-money to the bride’s parents, and the bride was too close a relative of his. Thao Thatarat, offended by such an insult, performed a

revenge and was finally blessed with two powerful sons, Phra Ram and Phra Lak, who after growing up volunteered to bring back their elder sister. Indra gave them a supernatural horse Mani Kab. On their way to reclaim their sister, both Phra Ram and Phra Lak married many girls. They finally arrived in the city Inthapat, just at the time when Thao Raphanasuan was having a long sleep. The two brothers took Nang Chantha back. When Thao Raphanasuan woke up and did not find his wife, he immediately rushed after her. A series of fights broke out, both sides using supernatural weapons, and in the end Thao Raphanasuan surrendered and submitted to all of Phra Ram’s demands. Finally, Raphanasuan was allowed to take Nang Chantha back to his city.

The story as represented in this first part is an addition to the original story. It is believed that the writer was influenced by the story of Phraya Yak in another piece of popular Laotian literature entitled *Sang Sinchai*⁶ who abducted Nang Keson Sumontha by force and kept her as his wife at his residence. It was Sang Sinchai who volunteered to bring her, who was actually his aunt, back. The addition of the story to the *Phra Ram Chadok* was probably the desire of the author to extol the power and bravery of Phra Ram. In addition to this, as the story was intended to be used for preaching, it is natural that the story could be extended and the plot made more complicated to suit the purpose. This first part is not found in any of the *Phra Ram’s Accounts* of any other lands. It is genuinely Laotian and reflects the characteristics of the Laotian people.

The second part, or *Ban Song*, agrees with the general theme common to most other versions of Rama’s accounts, namely, the war between the righteous Phra Ram and the unrighteous Thao Raphanasuan, which

⁵See the article “*Chomphubodi*: From Mahayana Sutras to *Sang Sin Chai*” by the researcher in “*Phinit Wannakam*”.

⁶ *Sang Sinchai* is a literary work very popular in the Northeast of Thailand.

started from the personal conflict between the two rivals to own Nang Sida, the rightful wife of Phra Ram. The difference is in general in the details of the numerous battles. Of special interest in this part is the episode in which Phra Ram was turned into a monkey as a consequence of his ingestion of a *Nigrodha* fruit, during which period, the monkey Phra Ram had a son, Hullaman, with Nang Phaeng Si, (who was originally a human). It is this Hullaman who later became the most important general of Phra Ram in the great war against Thao Raphanasuan.

The smooth blending of the first half with the second half was possible because of the role of Nang Chantha, Thao Raphanasuan's first wife, and the elder sister of Phra Ram. The role played by Nang Chantha is, on the whole, on a level with that of Nang Suttho (or Nang Montho in the Thai *Ramakian*). They were equally honored and loved by their husband Thao Raphanasuan. As a whole, the partisans on the side of Raphanasuan are mostly his relatives, with only a few friends; this is one of the differences between the Laotian version of *Phra Ram's Account* and that of the Thai.

Some of the Laotian episodes are interesting when comparison is made with the corresponding parts of the Thai *Ramakian*. Three examples will be mentioned. The first one is the Nang Plaeng (Disguised Lady) episode which describes the Laotian Nonthi Yak (Nonthok in the Thai *Ramakian*) who, with his fateful forefinger, had killed a large number of the attendants of the God Siva. Nang Thipphasot volunteered to get rid of him with her dancing ruse, and Nonthi Yak, unintentionally pointing his fateful finger at his own head, killed himself. In the Thai version Narayana God assumes the form of a divine nymph (Apsaras) and performs a dance depicting various attitudes. When she comes to the part depicting "The Naga Serpent Coiling her Tail," Nonthok's diamond finger

automatically pointed at his own lap, costing him his life.⁷

Although the two episodes are not much different, the incidents which follow are. Thao Aisuan, who was the grand sire of Phra Ram and Thao Raphanasuan, expressed the desire to see that dancing stratagem. When the dance was performed for him, he discharged his seed, which Nang Thipphasot put in the mouth of Nang Kotarat, the wife of Thao Sangkhip. In the Thai *Ramakian*, the episode is important as it is the cause of the God Narayana's descent to the world of men as Ramavatara to kill Nonthok who was reborn there.

The Thai episode is performed with much more beauty and complexity than the Laotian one. The explanation is that in the time of Bangkok as the capital city of Thailand, Phra Bat Somdet Phra Phuttha Yodfa Chula Lok Maharat (King Rama I) restored the Thai literature which had for the most part been lost when Ayutthaya was sacked the second time. The Dancing Text is one of the texts which was restored and edited in the same way as the *Ramakian* drama. Additional dancing attitudes were created and were found to be so beautiful in practice that they continue to be popular today.

Nang Loy (The Floating Damsel) is another episode in which the Thai and Laotian versions are different. In the Laotian version, Thao Mueang Chan created a likeness of Nang Sida from a banana tree by magic art and let it float away in the current, whereas in the Thai version, Thotsakantha ordered Nang Benyakai (who was the daughter of Phiphek) to assume the lifeless form of Nang Sida and to float away against the

⁷ Phra Bat Somdet Phra Buddha Yodfa Chulalok Maharat (King Rama I), *Ramakian*, vol. 1, (Bangkok, Khlang Vitthaya, 25 p.), p. 60

current upstream to that part of the river just in front of Phra Ram's camp. Hanuman, the general of Phra Ram's army, suspected that it was the enemy's trick and put the floating "corpse" to a test. He was successful and found that it was Nang Benyakai, who became another wife of Hanuman in the end. The episode is added to emphasize the role and behavior of Hanuman towards women.

In the Laotian version of the war between Thao Raphanasuan and Phra Ram, Phra Ram, in order to avert the effects of an evil omen, deliberately extended his feet to receive the piercing wounds from the arrows of Thao Raphanasuan. He was in extreme agony, however, because of the wound. Thao Hullaman had to rush to collect drugs at the Khanthamant mountain and to acquire bull dung by squeezing it out of the stomach of the cattle king. The sun had almost set at the moment, and Thao Hullaman got hold of the rear of the sun's car and threw it away in another direction. The sun was enraged by such an act and refused to rise the next morning. Phra Ram had to send his Kai Kaew (rooster) to summon all the roosters and hens in Chomphu Thavip to chant a plea to the Sun to come up. The chant was as follows:

O Glorious Sun, when thou art away, sickness abounds. In the dark we have become blind and we are afraid. We are starving. When thou art away, all things go haywire. O Glorious Sun, do come up soon.

The fowl in the Thai *Ramakian* had no such role, and the wounded warrior was Phra Lak, who suffered a deep wound by Kabinlaphat spear of Kumphakan.

However, the chant inviting the Sun to rise and shine is beautiful. Simple in tone and fascinating in effect, it reflects the close ties between mankind and nature.

Place names in the *Phra Ram Chadok*

The story of Phra Ram Chadok is long. Apart from the battles which took place day after day, and the use of different supernatural weapons to demolish each other's army, the description and history of geographical places add much to the length of the story. Some instances are, when Thao Thatarat took Nang Wisutthisopha to start a new city, or when the inhabitants of Inthapat, flying away from their old homeland to escape from the power of the old ruler, took their beloved wives and dear friends to build another city, or when Phra Ram let go his powerful arrow to set the boundary of new towns for members of his retinue. Examples of the history of places are as follows:

Don Khi Khwai

Phra Ram, after vanquishing Thao Raphanasuan, returned to the city of Chanthaburi Sisattanak together with Phra Lak, Nang Chantha, and the horse Mani Kap. They were all in a large vessel built and given to them by Thao Raphanasuan. The vessel once stopped at an island in the middle of a river. The island was once visited by a supernatural buffalo which left its excreta there. It is because of this legend that the island got the name Don Khi Khwai (meaning the Island of the Buffalo's Dung).

Don Ma Lai

In his travels after that, Phra Ram came to another island, where he heard the howling of a jackal. The island was thus named Don Ma Lai (meaning the Island of the Jackal's Howling).

Nong Bua Lamphu

This is the name of a lake in which there are a large number of lotus flowers. In *Phra Ram Chadok*, a number of followers of Khun Chong, who took care of Thao Raphanasuan and Nang Chantha on their journey back to Inthapat, escaped from him and settled down near this lake.

Rohini River

There was a river as reddish as lac or as a concoction of the red Fang wood. *Rohini* is a Sanskrit term meaning “red,” and is also the name of a red star in the sky. The river is, therefore, called the Rohini.

Mueang Attapue

A long time ago, a man who had a red birthmark on one shoulder and a black one on the other, and his wife Nang Sakda, settled down on the eastern bank of a river. The place later grew up into a town, and the town was named Basak because *Ba* referred to the shoulder (of the man) and *Sak* was a part of the girl’s name.

The legends and names attached to places as related above are mostly found in the part of the text when Khun Chong, who was ordered to take a group of people from the town of Chanthaburi Sisattanak, to accompany Thao Raphanasuan and Nang Chantha to the city of Inthapat, and to take them back to Chanthaburi Sisattanak. It happened that these men and women, who after a long journey had become lovers by choice, were unwilling to make a long journey back, and decided to break away from Khun Chong and settle down and establish a town. A similar event occurred when Thao Raphanasuan took his people to settle on Lanka Island, and the people who did not like Thao Raphanasuan escaped from him and settled in several mountainous regions as well as on islands and other places.

Sometimes, the place name was coined by combining a part of the husband’s name and a part of the wife’s name. Sometimes the name is the name of a weapon, or of some events which occurred at the time when they made the decision to settle down. This kind of information is valuable for finding the meaning of place names and other hearsay legends which have disappeared from the memory of later generations and of which only certain data remain in such works as the *Phra Ram Chadok*. We may say that this literary work is valuable in this regard.

The legends on the establishment of a village or town are of value not only for the explanation of place names in Laos and in certain parts of Thailand, but also for drawing up the long history of Laos after such legends, be it very vaguely. The Lao, as well as the Thai, and other peoples had a long history before they became unified into a nation. Legends which explain place names can be strung together to form a crude picture of the slow formation of the Laotian nation. The finished data may, however, be too haphazard to draw up a chronological chart. In connection with *Phra Ram Chadok*, the author probably gave a description of various scenes from the vivid memory of legends he once heard without trying to verify them with actual facts.

The migration of the Laotian people and their settling down in various locations are substantiated in the history of the Laotian people. Following is an excerpt from the *Chronicles of Mueang Champasak*:

At one time, more than 200 years ago, before Lan Chang and the City of Vieng Chan became the vassal state of Krung Thep Maha Nakhon..., the city of Vieng Chan was still independent, and was ruled by a line of its own kings. At one time, a king of Vieng Chan, whose name cannot be

remembered, died, and there was such fighting among his royal children and his ministers that the inhabitants of the city could not live in peace...After some years, a large number of families of the common people were of the opinion that a peaceful life in the vicinity of Mueang Lan Chang and Mueang Vieng Chan was impossible...they therefore put their belongings onto boats and rafts, and started their journey down the river...passing Li Phi mountain and continuing their flight until they arrived at Phanom Phen, a town in the land of the Khmer people. There they settled down and lived for a long time. After some time, the Khmer rulers realized that these immigrants were foreigners who came to settle down under their rule. Although at one time these immigrants were welcome, the rulers at later times levied higher taxes on their farm land and forced excessive labor from these immigrants. These Laotian people could not bear such oppressive treatment and together with Phra Khru Phon Samet, a well respected monk, secretly escaped from Phanom Phen and traveled north, crossing Li Phi mountain into their original country once more. These people were, however, not very optimistic about the reception they would get from the new ruler of Mueang Vieng Chan if they returned there—to their former homeland in the north. They finally decided to settle down and established such towns as Chieng Taeng, Khong, Attapue, Kham Thongnoi and Kham Thongyai, and others⁸.

⁸ *Prachum Phongsavadan*, 70th part, Nakhon Champasak, p.50.

The passage quoted above is from the *Chronicles of Mueang Champasak* (a history of the city of Mueang Champasak). It gives a rough picture of the migration of the Laotian people to other lands, and should have some bearing, both directly and historically, on the migration of the Laotians towards the land of the Khmer people referred to in Bundle 2 of *Ban 2* of the *Phra Ram Chadok*. It is likely that some of the townspeople who were directed to migrate from Mueang Inthapat to Mueang Lanka by the order of Thao Raphanasuan should have in the same way broken away from the main party and headed for Muang Pakai instead. In this connection, the name Mueang Inthapat should be an indication that the author of the *Phra Ram Chadok* directly referred to Kampuchea or Khmer.

Another group of place names which should be specially mentioned is the cities in Bundle 22 of the latter *Ban*. According to the passage, Phra Ram, the undisputed hero of the Laotian people, shot his arrows in several directions, and cities, by his superior power recognized everywhere, were established within the limits where his arrows fell, and these cities should naturally be under the sovereignty of the King who was named Ram Rat. These cities are Phitsanulok, Nakhon Sawan, Chai Nat, Phimai, and Krung Thep Maha Nakhon.⁹ As a matter of fact, the cities named above, with the exception of Phimai, have been, in the past as well as the present, under Thai sovereignty. As for Phimai, the town was under the sovereignty of the Khmer Kingdom during the 15th and 16th Buddhist centuries, but

⁹The name of the city Krung Thep Maha Nakhon has been found in use from the time of Ayutthaya. See *Kotmai Tra Sam Duang* (the Law of the Three Seals), *Phra Aiyakan Atya Luang*, proclaimed in 1895 B.E., "...Which exists in the boundary of Krung Thep Maha Nakhon Boworn Thawarawadi Sri Ayutthaya Mahadilokphop Noppharat Ratchathani Burirom" p. 473.

since that period, the town has been a part of Thailand.

In connection with the four cities which the author of *Phra Ram Chadok* claims as being within the sovereignty of Laos, Sachchidanand Sahai, who once conducted research on this “*Phra Ram Chadok*,” gave his opinion: “It was the dream of his political Utopia”.¹⁰

The historical significance of the story

In the opinion of the present researcher, the case of the extension of the sovereign power of “Ram Rat” into the land which is now Phitsanulok, Nakhon Sawan, Chai Nat, Phimai and Krung Thep Maha Nakhon, should have certain backgrounds. According to the long history of Laos, one of her national heroes is King Chai Chetthathirat (2093-2115 B.E.). He was the son of King Phothisarat, while his mother was a daughter of the King of Chiang Mai. As the grandson of the King of Chiang Mai, he became king of that city from an early age. He became king of Luang Phra Bang when his father died. During his reign, there were several wars with Burma. He later established Vieng Chan as the capital city of the Laos

kingdom. The relationship between Krung Si Ayutthaya and Laos during the reign of King Chai Chetthathirat was pleasant, as one of his queens was Phra Thepkasattri, the daughter of King Mahachakraphat and Queen Sri Suriyothai of Ayutthaya. Thus, he was a relative of King Mahintharacha.

Somdet Phra Chai Chetthathirat conducted a war against Phitsanulok twice, as requested by King Mahintharacha. The first time was in 2098 B.E., when King Mahintharacha was angry with Phra Mahathammaracha, who was the husband of Queen Visutthakasatri, another daughter of King Chakraphat. His displeasure arose from Phra Mahathammaracha’s friendly relations with Burma. King Chai Chetthathirat led his army to Phitsanulok and attempted a siege of the city, but soon realized that his army was not powerful enough for such a campaign, and withdrew. His army could defeat the Burmese army which attacked him at the time of his withdrawal.

King Chai Chetthathirat intended to attack Phitsanulok for a second time in 2112 B.E., when Phra Mahintharacha requested his help to fight against the army of the Burmese King of Hongsavadi, who was planning to capture Ayutthaya. Phra Mahathammaracha, the king of Phitsanulok, and the King of Hongsavadi, however, set up a joint stratagem and enticed him to attack Saraburi and Lop Buri. His army met with success initially, but when it was moving down to Ayutthaya, it met with a strong counterattack by the superior Burmese forces, and the Loatian king was forced to retreat along the Pa Sak river and return to Laos.

Thus, under the leadership of King Chai Chetthathirat, the Laotian army invaded Thailand twice, the first time when he was attacking the southern border of the northern part of Thailand, and the second time when his army was advancing towards Ayutthaya, the capital of Thailand

¹⁰ “Thus the political picture which represents Phra Lam as a mighty king, whose commands were obeyed from Vientiane to Inthapathanakhon, the capital of the Khmer kingdom, and whose sons and nephews ruled not only northeastern Thailand, but also Ayuthaya, Pisanuloke and Nakhon Savan, does not correspond to any historical reality. Rather, it is the literary expression of a nationalist political utopia. The mention of Ayuthaya, therefore, cannot be seen as providing any sure index to the antiquity of the text. Even after the fall of Ayuthaya, the Phra Lak Phra Lam’s author might have included the name of this famous kingdom to enhance the prestige of a utopian Lan-Xang.” (The Phra Lak Phra Lam and the Laotian Cultural Tradition, by Sachchidanand Sahai, p.79)

at that time. The outcome of both his expeditions did not make much difference psychologically to the Laotian people, but what did really matter was that King Chai Chetthathirat, the great king and powerful hero of the Laotian people, could somehow move his army into Thailand, by the request of the King of Thailand at that time.

Thus, this beautiful memory has remained deep in the minds of the Laotian people, and eventually it has successfully transformed itself into the Laotian *Rama Jataka* as we see it today.

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