

A comparative study of Thai and Indian cultures influenced by the Phra Rama stories

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ABSTRACT

The countries of Southeast Asia such as Cambodia, Thailand, Laos, Malaysia, Philippines, Indonesia and Sip Song Panna (สิบสองปันนา) in the south of China have been influenced by Indian culture since the early centuries of the Christian era. Tamil and Sanskrit languages (the Indian classical languages) have particularly got a significant impact on the languages of this region. There are some literary pieces of evidence such as the *folklore* (Mukha Patha: มุขปาฐะ), *the Yonok chronicle* in Northern Thailand (Bhongsavodarn Yonok: พงศาวดารโยนก), *the figure of Mahabharata and Ramayana* which are engraved on the stone ruins found in many historical places in Southeast Asia such as the Prambanan temple of Indonesia, the Angkor Wat and the Banteay Srei of Cambodia and the Pimay castle of Thailand.

In addition, scholars found the interesting story of Badal Loak (บาดาลโลก: Underworld) and remarked that, *King Mayiliravana* in the Tamil folklore has shaped the character of *Maiya Rab* (ไผ่ยราพณ์) in Thai Ramayana, as well as the character of *Mahiravana Asura* in Bengali Ramayana. It can be thus noted that Southeast Asian versions of Ramayana drew their origin from Sanskrit, Tamil and Pali languages.

Even though all cultural Rama stories that have been widely shared in ASEAN countries, have been influenced by Indian culture, their path to greatness involves many different narrative ways and techniques which are very peculiar to each Asian country's language and culture.

1. INTRODUCTION

The emergence of the Indian epic has disseminated elements of languages and Hinduism to Southeast Asia through the ancient trade route, from India to the seashores of Sumatra and Java [Sri Vijay kingdom]. It then also spread to the Dvāravadee [or Śarvā Dvāravatī in Sanskrit] — Kingdom of Khmer {old Cambodia} and the Srī Kashetra — Kingdom of Burma before A.D. 400

Scholars have detected that many Sanskrit inscriptions found in those kingdoms were already inscribed with the ancient Brahmi script of India, or were written in the Tamil Brahmi style which was used at that time, such as the inscriptions of King Purnavarman of Western Java in the 5th century A.D. and the Prambanam of Sailendra rulers which were all written in Sanskrit.

Around A.D. 657, the Sanskrit inscription of Veal Kantel [K.359] in Southern Cambodia mentioned one princess who was the daughter of King Sri Vira Varman and the sister of Sri Bhava Varman. According to her words of praise, her husband — Sri Soma Sarman — was well versed in Samaveda and was a clever Brahmin. He erected the Sri Buanesvara idol and offered the two complete texts — Mahabharata and Ramayana — to that sacred idol.¹ Therefore it is highly likely

¹ A. Barth, *Inscriptions Sanscrites du Cambodge: Extraits des metices et extraits des manuscrits de la bibliotheque nationale de Paris: Imprimerie nationale MDCCCLXXXV, 1885*, 29. Also see, Busaba Ruangsri,

that the Indian epics Mahabharata and Ramayana were already popular in Southeast Asia at that time. There are some literary pieces of evidence such as folklore [Mukha Patha] or the Yonok chronicle in Northern Thailand [Vaṅsāvātār Yonak]. It is said that their king was the successor of the Chandra Vongsa from Mahabharata but their king also represents Sri Ram—an incarnation of lord Vishnu. That is the reason why the pictures of Mahabharata and Ramayana are engraved in the stone ruins of many places in Southeast Asia such as the Prambanan temple of Indonesia, the Angkor Wat and the Banteay Srei of Cambodia, and the Pimāy castle of Thailand.

2. COMPARATIVE STUDY

2.1 The original Ramastories in India

The story of Sri Rama had an abiding influence on the entire Indian culture. The story of Rama was constantly retold in poetic and dramatic versions by many of India's greatest Sanskrit writers such as Bhasa, Kalidasa, Bhavabhuti and other writers over two millennia, who have moved to emulate Valmiki.

But for the ordinary peoples who are ignorant of Sanskrit language, Ramayana was composed in other Indian vernacular languages. The main regional Indian languages have their own classic versions, the most famous being the ones written by Tulsidas in Hindi [A.D.1574] and by Kampan in Tamil [12th century A.D.]

The great Rama's stories in India (Ramayanas)

<i>Dasharatha Jataka</i> พศรถ ชาตค 500 A.D.	
<i>Valmiki's Ramayana</i> วาฬมิกิรามายณะ 11th century A.D	
<i>Kamban in Tamil</i> กัฒพันรามายณะ 11th-12th century	
<i>Krittivasi Ramayan</i> กฤตติวาสีรามายณะ 15th Century	
<i>Ramacharitamanas</i> รามจักริตมนัส ของตูลสิทาส 16th century	

The Ramayana is also one of the staples of later dramatic traditions, as in the bharatanatyam and the Kathakali dance-dramas of Southern India, in puppet or shadow-puppet theatres, in the annual Ram-lilas or plays enacting Rama's deeds of Northern India. It forms an integral part of Indians' lives, religions and languages. Provided below is a brief account of the Rama stories in different vernaculars.

The literary art and the reflection of khmer culture in Ramakerti, L' Institut bouddhique vol.1-10, Thesis Major Khmer language, Silpkorn University, 2005.

But some scholars said that King Bhuvavarman—the first king of Chenla and successor of Mahendravarman—, who was formerly named Citrasena before his accession to the throne, had a strong military support and erected the lingga Cirīsa at Ba Phnom as a token of his victory over Funan. It can be thus possible that the Sri Buvaneshvara records include some traces of the erection of the lingga Tribhuvaneshvara and mention about Bhuvavarman—the first Chenla king.

In Tamil, the shadow plays are called *Tholu Bommalattam* (*Tholu* meaning “leather”), *Thol Pava Koothu* or *Thorpāvai nilarkūththu*. The themes are drawn from the Ramastory which is known as *Rāmāyaṇam Thorpāvai nilarkūththu*.

2.2 The emergence of Indianepics in Southeast Asian countries

It is presumed that the IndianepicMahabharata was the most popular story in Lannain A.D.1259-1938 and in Lan Xangin A.D.1353-1707 —their kings being admired as the hero of Mahabharata. Then people’s love for Mahabharata started to fade away. Instead they turned to the heroic character of Ramayana, and correlated their latest kings — such as the ones from the Thai kingdoms of Sukhodaya [A.D.1238-1448 A.D.] and Ayodhya[A.D.1351-1767] — to Sri Ram following the Buddhist concept of Dharma Raja which was holding an important place in the hearts of Southeastern Asians.

In 15th-16th centuries A.D., the Buddhist literary tale of Northeastern Thailand and Laos[Laan Xang]— Rama Jataka² — starts by mentioning the fact that the king of Indapat [Indrapattha] is the ancestor of Sri Ram, and that Tap Parmesvar — the son of the Indrapattha king — is the father of Dasaratha.

Therefore Southeast Asian Ramayana is influenced by versions in Sanskrit, Tamil, and Pali languages.

The original Ramayana of Valmiki is the oldest version that influenced the Yokiswar Ramayana of Indonesia [A.D.1094 in Kvi language] and the paintings of Ramayana in the Angkor Wat of Cambodia.

It also appears that the Tamil versions —Kamba Ramayana and Tamil Purana— andfolklore influenced the Thai Ramayana [Ramakien] and Khmer Ramayana [after the period of the Angkor Wat].

The Pali version is the original story from Dawaratha Jataka in Sutanta Pitaka[A.D.500 or before] that influenced Rama Jataka of Laan Xang , Brahma Chakra Jataka of Lanna and LanKaaSipHo of Yoonan [Southern China] and Northern Thailand. It might also have influenced Islamic Ramayana, —Hikayat Sri Ram — of Malaysia [in Malay language].

The Pali version has been modified or updated by other folklores of Southeast Asia but some chapters are similar to the Sanskrit version of Valmiki.

But there are many chapters and stories in Thai Ramakien of Rama I that also come from other versions of the Indian Ramayana whose main chapters come from Śrī Rāmacaritamānasa of Tulasidasa

2.3 The Ramayana in Thailand or Ramakien

² Scholars presume that the Rama Jataka was written during the reign of King Jay Jeshthaadhiraaj A.D.1548-1571.

Ratna Kosin period

Thailand was ruled by the Great former Kings, and Thai Ramakien was composed on their order at that time. The period covers the reign of King Rama I until King Rama VI's:

1. Ramakien of King Rama I
2. Ramakien of King Rama II
3. Ramakien of King Rama III
4. Ramakien of King Rama IV
5. Ramakien of King Rama V
6. Ramakien of King Rama VI

Thai Ramakien is more complete than the Kamba Ramayana and contains some extra chapters such as the First Maya Sita by Penchakaya, and Maiyarab which was influenced by Tamil folktale —Mayili rāvaṇa.

But as we can see in Yuddha Kanda, Thai Ramakien still follows the main plots of Kamba Ramayana stories.

The continuity plots of Ramayana Stories [A]

Thai Ramakien	Kamba version	Valmiki version
[First Maya Sita]		
Ramasetu	Ramsetu	Ramsetu
[Mahi Ravana died]		
Kumbhakarna's war	Kumbhakarna's war	Nagapasa's war
Makarakan's war	Kamban's death	Sita sees battle
Nagapasa's war	Nagapasa's war	Kumbhakarna's war
Kampan's death	Makarakanan's war	Brahmasatra's war
Brahmasatra's war	Brahmasatra's war	medicinal Moutain
Sita sees battle	Sita sees battle	Kumba's death
medicinal Moutain	medicinal Moutain	Makaraksha's war
Second Maya Sita	Maya Sita	Maya Sita
Yoga at Nikumbalai	Yoga at Nikumbalai	Yoga at Nikumbalai
Indrajit's death	Indrajit's death	Indrajit's death
Mulabalam Asura	Mulabalam army	Ravana's army
Ravana shoots spear	Ravana shoots spear	
Ravana died	Ravana died	Ravana died

The continuity plots of Ramayana Stories [B]

Thai Ramakien	Krittivasa version	Valmiki version
[First Maya Sita]		
Ramasetu	Ramsetu	Ramsetu
Mahi Ravana died		
Kumbhakarna's war	Nagapasa's war	Nagapasa's war
Makarakan's war	Sita sees battle	Sita sees battle
Nagapasa's war	Kumbhakarna's war	Kumbhakarna's war
Kampan's death	Brahmasatra's war	Brahmasatra's war
Brahmasatra's war	Medicinal Moutain	medicinal Moutain
Sita sees battle	Kumba's death	Kumba's death
medicinal Moutain	Makaraksha's war	Makaraksha's war
Second Maya Sita	Maya Sita	Maya Sita
Yoga at Nikumbalai	Yoga at Nikumbalai	Yoga at Nikumbalai
Indrajit's death	Indrajit's death	Indrajit's death
	Mahi Rāvaṇa died Kali worship by Rama	
Ravana died	Ravana died	Ravana died

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study reveal the following elements:

Ramastories in Thai culture

1. Thai beliefs and customs had a strong impact on Ramakien —Thai Ramayana— as can be seen for the duties of government officers which appear in the Bhalī Son Nong (พาลีสนนึ่ง) and the Ethics of the king, in the Thodsa-Rod Son Raam (ทศรถสอนราม)

2. Thai myths and folktales have also influenced Ramakien. An example of that would be Thao Kok-khanaak (ท้าวกกขนาก) —the Demon of Lopburi province. Ramakien is the Thai literature that reflects the best images of the real lifestyle of Thai people during the early Rattanakosin period.

Ramayana in Indian culture

3. The story of Sri Rama had an abiding influence on the entire Indian culture. The story of Rama was constantly retold in poetic and dramatic versions by many of India's greatest Sanskrit writers such as Bhasa, Kalidasa, Bhavabhuti and other writers over two millennia, who have moved to emulate Valmiki.

Hindi language in Thailand

4. The Hindi cultures in Thailand

There are literary pieces of evidence in the early Rattanakosin period that show that Thailand knew about Sanskrit and Hindi literature, and that Thai people had been nurturing a lasting friendship with Indian people for a very long time already.

Now, Thai language uses many Hindi words, such as

1. words which can always be found in Thai language:

कुली (Kuli) คนส่งของ coolie, जीरा (Jira) ยี่หร่า Cumin, थाल (thal) ถาด tray, साबुन (sabun) สบู่ soap, सूत्र सूत्र (สารวิชาสาร) formula, अंगूर (Anggul) องุ่น grape, अचार (acar) แดงดอง vegetable pickle.

2. identical words with similar pronunciation and meaning:

गला (Gala) คอ neck, चाय (Cay) ชา tea, दादा (Dada) ตวดปู่ grandfather, भाई (bha-i) พี่ชาย elder brother, मां (Mang) แม่ mother.

3. famous words which can be understood by Hindi students in Thailand

गोभी (Gobhi) กะหล่ำปลี cabbage, चटनी (Catani) ซอส sauce, चावल (Caval) ข้าว rice, मसाला (masala) เครื่องเทศ spices, आलू (Alu) มันฝรั่ง potato.

There are cultural vernacular pieces of evidence of friendship between India and Thailand. Even though all cultural Rama stories that have been widely shared in ASEAN countries, have been influenced by Indian culture, their path to greatness involves many different narrative ways and techniques which are very peculiar to each Asian country's language and culture.

That can be reflected by literary works such as the *folklore* (Mukha Patha: มุขปาฐะ), the *Yonok chronicle* in Northern Thailand (Bhongsavodarn Yonok: พงศาวดารโยนก), the *painting of Mahabharata and Ramayana* which are engraved on the stone ruins found in many historical places in Southeast Asia such as the Prambanan temple of Indonesia, the Angkor Wat and the Banteay Srei of Cambodia and the Pimay castle of Thailand.

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