

## Thai Classics Go Pop: A Look at Three Traditional Stories That Appear in Contemporary Thai Popular Culture

ความเป็นไทยแบบดั้งเดิมได้รับความนิยมonganitanพื้นบ้านสามเรื่องซึ่งปรากฏใน  
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### Abstract

Although Thailand is greatly influenced by other cultures both historically and due to globalization, traditional aspects of Thai culture still remain today. Classic Thai literature, often stemming from folklore, continues to inspire fine artists, filmmakers, TV scriptwriters, comic book artists and producers of decorative objects in this kingdom once known as Siam. The literary texts are often reinterpreted and adapted for today's Thai audiences, and at times, individual characters appear outside their original contexts. Perhaps the most popular stories that continue to influence Thai popular culture are Sang Thong, Khun Chang Khun Phaen, and Phra Aphai Mani. By examining these works and how they are represented today, Thai values and attitudes can be better understood.

**Keywords:** *Thai Classics, Popular Culture, Traditional Stories, Contemporary Society*

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## บทคัดย่อ

ถึงแม้ว่า ประเทศไทย จะได้รับอิทธิพลอย่างมากจากวัฒนธรรมอื่นๆ ทั้งในอดีต และ ในยุคโลกาภิวัตน์ แต่วัฒนธรรมดั้งเดิมของไทยยังคงมีอิทธิพลอยู่ในปัจจุบัน วรรณคดีของไทยที่มาจากนิทานพื้นบ้าน ยังคงสร้างแรงบันดาลใจให้ศิลปินด้านจิตรศิลป์ ผู้สร้างภาพยนตร์ นักเขียนบทภาพยนตร์ นักเขียนการ์ตูน และผู้สร้างวัสดุตกแต่งในราชอาณาจักรแห่งนี้ ที่ครั้งหนึ่งเคยรู้จักกันในนามว่า ประเทศสยาม ข้อความทางวรรณกรรมมักได้รับการตีความซ้ำอยู่บ่อยครั้งและนำมาปรับให้เข้ากับผู้อ่านคนไทยในปัจจุบัน บางครั้ง อุปนิสัยของตัวละครแต่ละตัวจะปรากฏออกมาให้เห็นตามบริบทเดิม และเรื่องราวในวรรณคดีที่ได้รับความนิยมที่สุดอาจจะยังคงมีอิทธิพลต่อวัฒนธรรมไทยนิยม ได้แก่ เรื่อง สังข์ทอง ขุนช้างขุนแผน และพระอภัยมณี จากการตรวจสอบผลงานเหล่านี้ และวิธีการที่ตัวละครเหล่านั้นแสดงให้เห็นในปัจจุบันนั้น จะทำให้ท่านเข้าใจถึงคุณค่าและทัศนคติของคนไทยได้ดียิ่งขึ้น

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## Introduction

Thai culture is extremely rich in terms of its traditional art forms, including painting, sculpture, textiles, ceramics, architecture, music, dance, and literature. However, globalization and the Thai interest in cultures abroad has had an enormous impact on the stylistic preferences and tastes of its populace. For example, many younger Thais prefer to listen to American, British, Japanese, and Korean pop music (Ho, 2004). This penchant for all things foreign exists in part due to the belief among many Thais that ideas from abroad and imported goods from highly industrialized countries and East Asia are superior (Ahmed and d'Astous, 2007). Despite this, certain aspects of traditional culture are embraced among Thais, and as a result, remain prevalent within the popular culture of this Southeast Asian nation today.

In the case of classic Thai literature, storylines have been adapted for several present-day forms of entertainment, including animated movies, television series, including *Lakorn*<sup>1</sup>, as well as comics and illustrated books for children. In addition, individual characters from the stories are often depicted in artworks and decorative objects. Many of the original plots are based on folklore coming from the Thai tradition of oral storytelling. They reflect beliefs related to Buddhism, Hinduism, and Animism, and are indicative of Thai values and attitudes. Furthermore, these stories have a timeless appeal which is the reason the term 'classic' is applied when referring to this literature. Within these stories are scenarios relating to relationships and everyday life which can also explain their popularity and lasting worth.

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<sup>1</sup> *Lakorn* is a genre of Thai television similar to Soap Operas.

Adding to their allure is the fact that many of the narratives contain violence, sex, and certain behaviors that may normally be considered inappropriate among conservative Thais.

While there are numerous classic Thai stories with oral origins that were later written down, there are three that remain popular among Thais: *Sang Thong*, *Khun Chang Khun Phaen*, and *Phra Aphai Mani*. This paper involves taking a look at some of the various forms in which these stories, along with their characters, appear in contemporary Thai popular culture. The research also involves an analysis of certain Thai beliefs and attitudes that are revealed in the literature. The main objective is to better understand how these three stories have been adapted today as a way to better understand Thai culture.

Research methodology for this paper included studying reference materials at the Thai Film Archives, National Archives of Thailand, and the National Library of Thailand, as well as carrying out semi-structured interviews with faculty members at Mahidol University with backgrounds in Thai history and literature, Thai language, and Thai art. The interviews resulted in the awareness of multiple ways that these three stories have been applied and reinterpreted within Thai culture today. This study, however, is by no means exhaustive. Yet, by taking a look at some examples of the stories being applied in various forms today, this research resulted in a fuller understanding of these three classics and how they continue to reflect Thai beliefs and preferences.

## Background

*Sang Thong* is the Thai people's favorite story. Based on a traditional folktale that you can find throughout Southeast Asia, the Thai version of the story was written by King Rama II and poets of his court. The title, *Sang Thong*, refers to a golden conch shell, the symbolic vessel from which the main character, a Prince, was born. However, the conch shell in this tale is not actually gold. The word “gold” is included because the hero immerses himself in a pond of gold later in the story (Suwanpratest, 2016). As part of the plot, the Prince who is considered to be a hero, comes out of his shell, but hides by donning a magical costume that makes him look unattractive. He then falls in love with an aristocratic heroine, but faces opposition by the heroine's father. Fortunately for him, he eventually proves to everyone that he has good qualities, and they come to realize his physical beauty under the cloak of ugliness. In the end, the hero is accepted by everyone and he takes over the Kingdom.

*Khun Chang Khun Phaen* is another story that many Thais know. In fact, most children in Thai schools have to memorize and recite extracts from this classic story. It is an epic poem with 20,000 lines divided into 43 chapters that originates sometime before the

eighteenth century in the Ayutthaya Period. The standard Thai modern version was edited by Prince Damrong Rajanubhab and published in 1917 – 1918<sup>2</sup>, and the English translation is by renowned scholars and social critics, Dr. Chris Baker and Dr. Pasuk Phongpaichit. Unlike most historical Thai literature which focuses on tales relating to the gods and kings, the tale of *Khun Chang Khun Phaen* originated from local sources and most of the characters are relatively ordinary people. The story itself features a classic love triangle that ends in high tragedy. Themes of love and death are prevalent throughout. Khun Chang, who is bald, crass, and ugly, but rich, and Khun Phaen, who is handsome, clever, and brave, but poor, spend 50 years of their lives competing for a girl named Wanthong. Their contest involves two wars, several abductions, two court cases, and many other adventures and misadventures. But finally, as one might predict in a male dominated society, the female character, Wanthong, is blamed for everything. In the end, she is executed for failing to choose one of the men.

The other story that has made its way into the heart of Thais, and Thai popular culture, is *Phra Aphai Mani*. It was written by Sunthorn Phu (1786 - 1855), Thailand's best known royal poet. The epic poem is complex, and has 30,000 lines. *Phra Aphai Mani* is an Odyssey comprised of a series of adventures that involves a dragon, an ogress, a mermaid, a hermit, and flying horses. Basically, it's about two princes, Aphai, and his brother, Sisuwan, who get sent away by their father to study with the hope that they would return with new knowledge that would help them rule the country. While Sisuwan studies sword fighting, his brother Aphai learns to play a magical flute that can put others to sleep and even kill them. At one point in the story, Aphai is seduced by a beautiful woman who changes into a sea ogress. Then, he later falls in love with a mermaid and they have a son named Sudsakorn. The sea ogress becomes jealous, and goes after them. But his brother and a couple of warriors try to rescue him, and Aphai kills the ogress by playing his pipe. After that, the story gets more complicated when the queen asks Aphai to rule the country, but another princess tries to have him killed. There is yet another twist in the story when Aphai falls in the love with that princess.

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<sup>2</sup> This version has constantly been reprinted, and is available in one-, two-, and three-volume versions.

## The Stories in Contemporary Contexts

All three stories have been adapted for today's audiences in a variety of media. There have been several television series and films based on these stories. One television series based on *Sang Thong* which aired in 2008 was so popular that they produced 431 episodes, and another series which recounted the exploits of Khun Phaen as governor of Kanchanaburi extended over 500 episodes. There has also been a TV series under the name *Phim Philalai* that focuses on the character Wanthong from *Khun Chang Khun Phaen*. In film, the story of Khun Chang Khun Phaen has inspired five full-length features, including the most recent version, *Khun Phaen*, released in 2002. Phra Aphai Mani has also been adapted for film, including an action fantasy movie entitled, *Legend of Sudsakorn* that combines live action and computer-generated imagery. There is also an animated version, *The Adventure of Sudsakorn* directed by Payut Ngaokrachang (Figure 1). In addition, there have been many theatrical performances, including *Likay*<sup>3</sup> shows adapted from these stories.

The classic literature has also been a source of inspiration for comic books. One of the more recent book-length cartoon versions featuring Khun Phaen was compiled by Sukrit Boonthong. There is also a Thai comics series known as *Aphaimanee Saga* (Figure 2). The fantasy comics series was written and illustrated by Supot Anawatkochakorn whose pen name is Supot A. They were produced between 2001 and 2006 and were published by NED Comics' magazine *Boom*. The Thai comic series was also distributed in Europe, including France.

In addition, these stories are a source of modern Thai language. There are several Thai sayings and vernacular expressions derived from *Sang Thong* and *Khun Chang Khun Phaen*. Thai casanovas are often referred to as “Khun Phaen” and the name of this character is also used as slang for large chopper motorcycles, as they are considered to represent male virility. There is even a Thai amulet with an image of Khun Phaen on it that macho men sometimes wear (Figure 3). On the other hand, no one in Thailand would dare name their daughter Wangthong considering the fate of this character. However, the term for an unfaithful woman is “Nangwanthong”.

Some of the characters and proper names from these three classic Thai stories are applied to the names of places in Thailand. In the towns of Suphanburi and Phichit, two places that are featured in *Khun Chang Khun Phaen*, the major streets have been named after characters in the story. There is even a temple in Saphanburi which has erected a house for the spirit of Khun Phaen. On the grounds there is also a tamarind tree which is associated with

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<sup>3</sup> A form of popular folk theater in Thailand involving colorful costumes and improvisation.

a passage in the poem involving Khun Phaen being taught how to transform tamarind leaves into wasps. In the former capital city of Ayutthaya, an old Thai house has been reassembled on the site of the jail where Khun Phaen was imprisoned in the story. The house is now known as “Khum Khun Phaen” and has become a major tourist attraction (Figure 4).

Throughout Thailand, images in the form of specific characters from the three stories appear as decoration. In Khon Kaen in the Northeastern region, for example, sculptural images of Sang Thong in his conch shell become ornamentation on street lamp poles (Figure 5). Another character that often appears as decoration is the black figure known as “Ngo Paa” or “Sakai” from Sang Thong. Today, statues and dolls of this character are displayed throughout Thailand in front of businesses and homes, as well as in various modes of transportation as a symbol of good luck. The character is based on a stereotyped image of people from the Meniq Southern Thai ethnic group (Porath, 2001). In the story, Prince Sang wears the magical costume of this character in order to re-visit the human world. However, in the story, the costume is considered to be an “ugly” disguise. Today, members of this tribe often perform traditional rituals in Southern Thailand and around the country for Thai audiences. Although the Meniqs do not traditionally dress in red, they succumb to wearing that color in performances to satisfy their audiences as red is the color the “Ngo Paa” character wears in Sang Thong (Porath, 2001).

The characters from the stories have also been inspiration for fine art. On Ko Samet, an island in the Gulf of Thailand, and at Cha-am, a seaside resort area in Phetchaburi Province, there are sculptures of characters from *Phra Aphai Manee*. In 2015, a new sculpture of the mermaid holding Sudsakorn from this story was added on Ko Samet. Entitled, “True Love”, it was created by the celebrated Thai sculptor, Haritorn Akarapat (Figure 6). Also, in Songkhla in Southern Thailand there is a sculpture of this same mermaid. In Bangkok, there is a large black and gold three-dimensional image of the sea ogress from this same story near the city's art and culture center. In Suphanburi, one of the temples, Wat Palelai, has a series of murals inspired by *Khun Chang Khun Phaen* around its main cloister. In 2011, the Jim Thompson Art Center in Bangkok held an exhibition called the “Re-reading of Khun Chang Khun Phaen” which featured the first full English translation of this epic poem completed in 2010, along with both historical and contemporary artworks inspired by the story (Exhibition 2011). Everything from rare early 20<sup>th</sup> century illustrations to illuminated paintings to digital photography and performance art was included in the exhibition, along with related cultural artifacts such as costumes films, and cartoons were displayed as part of the show.

Furthermore, the stories are sources of inspiration in various other mediums. In music, there are several songs that make reference to *Khun Chang Khun Phaen*, and since *Sang Thong* is a dance drama, it has its own music that is still performed. Recently, two composers have even written a score for clarinet ensembles based on the story of *Phra Aphai Mani*. There are also games based on these stories, including a video game inspired by *Phra Aphai Mani* and a sliding block puzzle that is named after *Khun Chang Khun Phaen*. In the game, Khun Phaen is imprisoned and must escape by getting past nine guards.

### Thai Beliefs as Understood Through Classic Thai Literature

Although *Sang Thong*, *Khun Chang Khun Phaen*, and *Phra Aphai Mani* were written in the past, many of the beliefs from these stories still exist in present day Thailand. Perhaps one of the reasons these stories are still popular has something to do with this. Not only do they reveal certain ways of thinking among Thais in history, but these stories also bring to light ideologies and attitudes that are still prevalent in Thai culture. By reading these stories, one can come to a better understanding of Thai religious and superstitious beliefs, as well as certain values in terms of the individual and towards the community. It should also be noted that since these stories have both connections to Thai folk culture and aristocracy this literature can offer insight into different social groups within this nation.

As Theravada Buddhism is the prevailing religion in Thailand, the inclusion of Buddhist beliefs and values inevitably appears in all three stories. The story of *Sang Thong*, however, is most directly connected to Buddhist ideology because it originates in the Jataka Tales, the stories that focus on the previous births of Gautama Buddha. As a result of this connection, the story makes references to the Buddhist belief in karma, the spiritual principle of cause and effect (Suwanpratest, 2016). In *Sang Thong*, the prince who was born in a conch shell is accused by the King's minor wife of bringing bad luck. Consequently, the prince and his mother are exiled from the kingdom. However, an old farmer couple comes to their aid and gives them a new place to live.

In *Phra Aphai Mani*, the Buddhist teaching of peace and non-violence are important elements in the story. In fact, the name of the hero in this epic poem, which is the same as the title, means Jewel of Forgiveness. In the story, Aphai decides to study music instead of learning martial arts, a skill perhaps more useful for a future king. He believes that playing his pipe can pacify others and lead to peace, and in the story he often demonstrates this. At one point, Aphai explains the way he uses music to three Brahmins. He says,

“The worth of music, it includes all things  
Of untold value, like a priceless gem.  
Humans, garudas, heavenly beings,  
Four-legged beasts that roam the jungle wild,  
Upon hearing the music from my pipe,  
All lose their rage and wildness.  
Calm they become, and sleep unknowingly.  
An art of such great merit music is.” (Chay, 1986)

In *Khun Chang Khun Phaen*, there are also references to Buddhism, including a passage where Khun Chang ordains as a monk in order to make merit after Wangthong is cremated. In this part, Khun Chang struggles with the initiation rites, getting tangled in his robe as the abbot of the temple attempts to use a giant machete to shave the little bit of hair left on his balding head. In addition to this humorous account related to Buddhist rituals, the original version of the story before it was edited by Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, contained more humor involving Buddhist monks (Baker and Phongphaichit, 2009).

In addition to Buddhist convictions, the Thai belief in the supernatural also appears in all three stories. In the case of *Sang Thong*, the fact that the prince is born in a conch shell, in itself, relates to paranormal activities. *Phra Aphai Mani* also includes characters from other worlds, including a folkloric mermaid and ogre. In addition, *Phra Aphai Mani*'s pipe contains magical powers. When he plays the pipe, it causes his enemies to fall asleep or to die, and as a result, brings peace. In *Khun Chang Khun Phaen*, references are made to an age-old Thai belief in acquiring power from still-born fetuses known as *Guman Thong*, or golden child. In the story, Khun Phaen keeps the corpse of his own son which he believes protects him against enemy spirits and helps transport him at a faster speed.

The stories also bring to light beliefs related to the traditional roles of men and women in Thai society. In *Sang Thong*, male dominance is unmistakable. In this story the protagonist is a man as the tale reflects Theravada Buddhist teachings which advocate male supremacy in society (Suwanpratest, 2016). In the Jataka, Bodhisattvas must be male as they are associated with the former births of the Buddha (Suwanpratest, 2016). In the original version of *Khun Chang Khun Phaen*, on the other hand, the female character of Wangthong was in the leading role as her death provided the tragic ending. When the story was modified later, the two male characters take the spotlight while Wangthong becomes a helpless victim, a storyline which complies with the court ideal of female submissiveness (Baker and Phongphaichit, 2009). Today, many feminists criticize the story for this. Certainly, the way

Wangthong is portrayed does not provide a positive example for young women in Thai society.

Besides views on women, the stories also reveal certain attitudes toward particular groups within Thai society. For example, in *Sang Thong*, the main character with the same name hides under an “ugly” Negrito mask when he goes into hiding, but then reveals his “beautiful” noble self later in the story. The Negritos have long been viewed by Thais as “primitive” and are considered to be a novelty for those more interested in sensationalism than in seeing the real Meniq (Nathan). Linked to this attitude is the way many Thais feel about anyone with dark skin. According to Newley Purcell in his article in *The New Yorker* about racism in Thailand, “As many people of color who have lived in Thailand can attest, problematic racial attitudes are commonplace in the country. Black people frequently face discrimination in the workplace and scrutiny from police; many Thais have an aversion to dark skin” (Purcell, 2013).

The stories of *Sang Thong* and *Phra Aphai Mani* also relay ideas related to respecting the monarchy in Thailand. Considering that *Sang Thong* was written by King Rama II and *Phra Aphai Mani* by the royal poet, Sunthorn Phu, this makes perfect sense. In *Sang Thong*, views are expressed concerning the responsibility of kingship and the respect that the king deserves. In *Phra Aphai Mani*, the part of the plot that involves the main character, Aphai being rewarded with the Kingdom along with the love of Nang Laweng who had inherited the throne, symbolizes the true honor and admiration that the monarchy provides.

## Conclusion

It is evident that these three classic Thai stories are full of inspirational material that can be continually adapted to fit with contemporary popular culture. Even if most Thais aren't reading every phrase and line of this literature, the stories can live on in so many other forms today. Although these literary texts have been of interest to academics, without the presence of these tales being retold in contemporary mediums, they might possibly disappear from the Thai consciousness. This is especially true in an age where Thailand continues to be highly influenced by other cultures. If producers of new media and art continue to adapt these stories, there is a better chance that future generations will continue to appreciate this traditional literature. It will be exciting to see new art forms and emerging mediums reinterpreting these stories in the future. As long as this happens, Thai beliefs and ways of thinking will continue to flourish. While some of the underlying messages in this literature may be questionable in a contemporary context, the stories themselves provide interesting storylines that can continue to spark the imagination, even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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Figure 1 - Adventure of Sudsakorn poster  
(Payut Ngaokrachang, 1979)

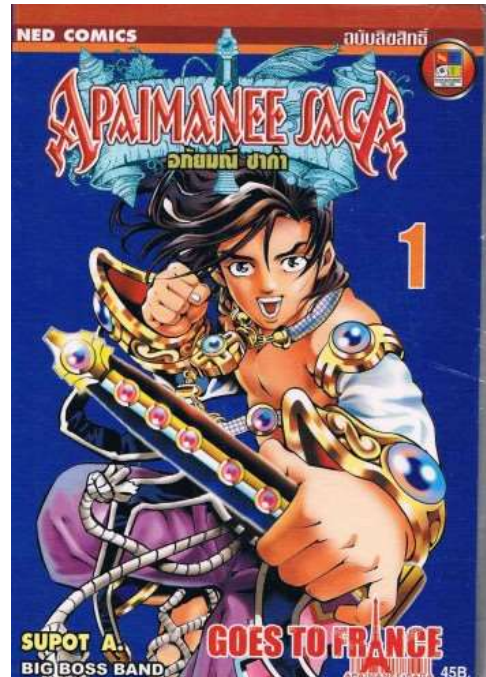


Figure 2 - Apaimanee Saga comic book  
(Ned Comics, 2001)



*Figure 3 – Khun Phaen amulet*  
(Dale Konstanz, 2017)



*Figure 4 – Khum Khun Phaen house*  
(Dale Konstanz, 2016)



*Figure 5 – Sang Thong street lamp*  
(Dale Konstanz, 2017)



*Figure 6 – True Love by Haritorn Akarapat*  
(Dale Konstanz, 2016)