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**THE RAMAYANA IN CONTEMPORARY THAILAND**

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## INTRODUCTION

The Ramayana is arguably one of the most important and influential cultural icons of Thailand. An epic that dwarfs the Iliad and the Odyssey in both length and depth, it has effectively permeated Thai traditions of art, literature and performing arts. Today the main representations of classical Thai culture can be readily identified by their association with the Ramayana: the literary masterpiece *Ramakien*, the refined dance form *khon*, and the intricate murals at Wat Phra Kaew, the Temple of the Emerald Buddha in Bangkok. Each of these are treasured by the Thai public in general, and the Thai Tourism Authority in particular, as shining examples of the best that classical Thai culture has to offer. The Ramayana has become, in effect, a national emblem. Why then does interest in it and its associated art forms appear to be perpetually on the decline?

Despite its close association with so many elements of classical Thai traditions, the Ramayana is by no means an indigenous phenomenon, but rather an ancient Hindu epic that was imported from the Indian subcontinent into Southeast Asian during what French historian George Coedes terms the period of Indianization.<sup>1</sup> At first glance it seems rather incongruous that such an unequivocally Indian and Hindu religious tradition would eventually develop into one of the central pillars of classical Thai culture. Once introduced to Thailand, however, the Ramayana was adopted fairly quickly by the local aristocracy and eventually benefited from the patronage of local rulers. Viewed as a conduit through which aspiring monarchs could establish political legitimacy, the Ramayana became an integral part of court-related ritual and performing arts. Adapted to suit Thai customs and cultural expectations, the Ramayana rapidly evolved from an imported Hindu religious text into a distinctly Thai-flavored narrative, rife with

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<sup>1</sup> Coedes 1968; 15-16

references to local geography, customs, beliefs, and aesthetics. By the time King Rama I of the Chakri dynasty commissioned the composition of the text *Ramakien* (lit. Glory of Rama) in 1797, the transformation was complete. This literary reinvention of the Ramayana was mirrored by the simultaneous evolution of royal court traditions around the narrative, including the development of the *khon* masked dance form, which exclusively dramatize episodes from the *Ramakien*, and the painting of the *Ramakien* murals at the royal temple of Wat Phra Kaew in Bangkok, which provide the most complete illustration of the narrative. This close evolutionary association between the Ramayana and the Thai monarchy cemented the narrative's political and cultural importance in Thailand, and is undeniably responsible for the continued survival of the Ramayana throughout the centuries.

Despite its importance to the Thai monarchy and its influence on classical art, literature, and performing arts, the Ramayana failed to significantly expand beyond the royal court. In order to strengthen its association with the monarchy and preserve its mystique, it was confined to the aristocracy. *Khon* performances took place exclusively within a court environment, and no troupes were allowed to be established without the permission or patronage of the royal family. Textual adaptations of the story were likewise composed and retained by the aristocracy. Some popular folk traditions did evolve to incorporate elements of the Ramayana, such as the southern *nang talung* shadow puppet performances and the burlesque musical comedy of *likay*, but the bulk of Ramayana-related art forms remained within the courts. As a result, most Thai were familiar with the Ramayana as a national emblem, but, lacking any significant or tangible interaction with it through the medium of folk traditions, could not relate to or identify

with it in the same manner as the aristocracy. This development is arguably responsible for the general lack of public interest in the Ramayana and its attendant art forms in contemporary Thai society.

Given its failure to expand beyond the narrow boundaries of the Thai aristocracy, it would seem logical to assume that the Ramayana in Thailand will inevitably become extinct, a cultural relic lacking any contemporary resonance. The classical traditions of Thailand, such as *khon*, have been steadily declining in popularity, unable to compete with the public interest in external cultural influences, such as Western movies and music, and Japanese animation and graphic novels. However, small pockets of cultural champions have recently been attempting to reinvent the Ramayana and its attendant art, performing art, and literary traditions in an effort to promote it to new generations of Thai audiences. Having inherited the responsibility of promoting the Ramayana from the monarch, which surrendered political power in 1932, the Thai government in general, and the Tourism Authority of Thailand in particular, have continued to patronize Ramayana-related art forms. The artistic depictions of the Ramayana at Wat Phra Kaew and its neighboring temple, Wat Phra Jetubon, are carefully preserved, restored, and promoted to both foreign tourists and locals alike, while the National Theater is able to continue training new *khon* performers as a result of government subsidies. However, not all proponents of contemporary Ramayana are affiliated with the Thai government. In recent years numerous independent local artists, authors, and performers have attempted to revive interest in the Ramayana by providing alternatives to the classical traditions preserved by the government, resulting in an eclectic and inventive body of work ranging from children's books to comic book serializations, to spectacular modern dance dramas.

It is unclear, however, how effective these attempts to market the Ramayana to Thai audiences have been. The comic book adaptation of the Ramayana appears to have been well-received, but is vastly outnumbered on bookshelves by volumes of imported Japanese graphic novels. Dance and puppetry performances of the Ramayana have generally met with enthusiastic approval and strong ticket sales, and yet are forced to augment their repertoire with contemporary material in order to survive financially. The results of these efforts at modernization are, in fact, inconclusive, neither failing dismally nor satisfactorily succeeding, but instead merely maintaining the tenuous status quo. This paper will address how the historical evolution of the Ramayana in Thailand has directly and indirectly contributed to its lack of popularity outside of the aristocracy, and examine the success and failure of contemporary efforts to both preserve the classical Ramayana tradition and simultaneously reinvent it for consumption by a new, globalized generation of Thai audiences.

### **HISTORICAL THAI RAMAYANA**

The importance of the Ramayana in contemporary Thailand has its roots in its historical development. While it is impossible to determine exactly when or how it first was introduced to Thailand, it seems probably that it arrived during the era of Indianization in the early centuries of the common. Loosely defined as the processes by which elements of Indian culture were transferred to and adopted by Southeast Asian nations, Indianization was in large part responsible for the rise of the classical empires of Angkor and Bagan, both of them based on concepts of the king as a divine figure, usually associated with the Hindu god Shiva or Vishnu. As the story of an incarnation of Vishnu

who ends up becoming the most righteous ruler in the world, the Ramayana provided an excellent template for many of these early Southeast Asian rulers, who subsequently integrated the epic into their national lore in an attempt to bolster their claims to power. This was almost certainly how the Ramayana first came to Thailand. Epigraphical evidence in the form of a stone inscription attributed to King Ramkamhaeng [lit. Rama the Strong] of the twelfth-century Sukhothai kingdom confirms that the narrative was already closely related to the local monarchy.<sup>2</sup> The kingdom of Ayudhaya, founded in 1350, further developed the Ramayana as a part of court traditions, partially in an attempt to reassert their right to divine rule by associating themselves with the figure of Rama. Ramayana-related performing arts such as the *nang yai* large leather puppet performances and the *khon* masked dance-drama were created, combining pre-existing iconography and textual elements with aspects of Khmer court dance that had been introduced to Thailand after the conquest of the declining Angkor empire by Thai forces in the eleventh century.<sup>3</sup> These performing art forms quickly became the exclusive property of the royal courts. It is highly probable that the first distinctly Thai version of the Ramayana narrative was composed at this time to be used in dramatic performances, but any evidence of it was lost during the sack of the city of Ayudhaya by a Burmese army in 1767.

After a period of unrest, the kingdom of Bangkok was founded in 1782 by Rama I, the founder of the current Chakri dynasty. In an attempt to legitimize his reign, Rama I chose to pursue the sponsorship of traditional art and literature that had survived the fall of Ayudhaya. One aspect of this sponsorship included commissioning the composition of

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<sup>2</sup> Mattani, 29.

<sup>3</sup> Brandon, 26-27.

the *Ramakien* [lit. Glory of Rama], an epic poem that has since established itself as the definitive Thai Ramayana. As historian Oliver Wolters notes:

**The Thai *Ramakien*... unmistakably reflects local values such as reverence for the king; in this Thai version of the *Ramayana*, Rama's divine nature is stressed in a way not found in Valmiki's version.... The Thai version is a Buddhist text, and in it the Buddhist concept of *karma* binds all in a manner that distinguishes it from the Hindu text.**<sup>4</sup>

By commissioning the composition of a distinctly Thai adaptation of the Ramayana narrative, Rama I was consciously working to strengthen his association with his legendary namesake, thereby transferring Rama's inherent divinity and sovereign legitimacy to the ruling Chakri dynasty. This association was further promoted through a series of artistic reforms that established the newly-composed *Ramakien* as the canonical source for dramatic performance narratives. After Rama I's death, the subsequent Chakri monarch continued to promote the Ramayana in conjunction with court performing arts. Rama II personally composed a shorter version of the *Ramakien* whose verses were more suited to dramatic performances. Rama III commissioned the construction of Wat Phra Kaew, the famous Temple of the Emerald Buddha in Bangkok, and arranged for the external galleries of the vast temple complex to be decorated with 178 large, seamless panels of murals illustrating the entirety of the *Ramakien*. These murals drew upon *khon* conventions of costuming and staging for aesthetic inspiration. Even the famous modern and modernizing monarch, Rama IV and Rama V, the kings Mongkut and Chulalongkorn of *The King and I* fame, took steps to preserve the sacred nature of the epic in relation to the throne. Drastic changes of government likewise failed to disrupt the importance of the *Ramakien*. In 1932, a coup forced Rama VII to relinquish political control to a newly-created military regime. It would be reasonable to assume that with the removal of the

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<sup>4</sup> Wolters, *History, Culture, and Religion in Southeast Asian Perspectives*, 182-183.



monarchy as an influential political entity, the Ramayana narrative would rapidly lose its significance. However, by that time the *Ramakien* had irrevocably entrenched itself in Thai culture, due in large part to its close association with traditional Thai performing arts. The new military government recognized the inherently symbolic qualities of the narrative and took care to preserve it by placing all previously court-sponsored performing arts under the auspices of a newly-established Department of Fine Arts, which existed outside of the royal court system.

Today the *Ramakien* in Thailand maintains an aura of mysticism as a result of its long-standing association with the Thai monarchy and classical Thai art forms. It is considered a national epic, distinctly Thai in nature, and steeped in centuries of tradition. However, while the Ramayana managed to firmly establish itself as an integral part of court-related literature, art, and performing arts traditions, it failed to adequately permeate the folk traditions that existed outside of the Thai aristocracy to the same degree. There appears to be some indications that the Ramayana was more popular among the general population in the southern areas of Thailand, possibly as a result of increased interaction with Malays and Javanese, both of whom possessed strong Ramayana traditions. The *nang talung* popular shadow theatre performances certainly can trace their origins to the *wayang kulit* tradition of Java. These leather shadow puppets, while costumed and posed according to *khon* dance-drama conventions, are based in the same articulation principle as the articulated and rod-operated *wayang kulit* puppets. The classical *nang talung* narratives are generally drawn from the *Ramakien*, although in recent years contemporary topics have begun to dominate the scene. Another popular folk tradition that occasionally draws upon the *Ramakien* for subject matter is

*likay*, a comic musical theatre form that borders on burlesque. *Likay* performers often wear costumes similar to that of *khon* and *lakhon* dancers, and address some of the same subject matter, but the resemblance ends there. Instead of solemn masked pantomime, *likay* involves singing, jokes and all manner of humorous interactions, often employed to parody or lampoon classical court traditions, such as the *Ramakien*. However, *nang talung* never spread far beyond the southern provinces, and the overall emphasis on *likay* was not on the *Ramakien*, but rather on humorous entertainment. The long-term result of the failure of the *Ramakien* to effectively expand past the boundaries of the royal court and the aristocracy is that while the majority of Thai are aware of and respect the narrative as a national epic, they lack any sort of personal connection with it. Most Thai, especially those outside of the metropolitan Bangkok area, are not very familiar with either the story or its related art forms, and consequently are not in a position to help

### CONTEMPORARY THAI RAMAYANA

Despite lacking a significant presence among mainstream folk traditions, the Ramayana has somehow managed to remain an influential, if comparatively marginalized, part of the contemporary Thai entertainment scene. While this development capitalizes on the strong historical bond between the Ramayana and the Thai monarchy, its implementation is primarily due to the diverse efforts of individual artists, rather than to any concerted attempt on the part of the Thai government to promote new interpretations of the narrative. While there are occasional exceptions to the rule, the energies and resources of governmental agencies such as the Tourism Authority of Thailand are, for the most part, concentrated on the preservation and marketing of

classical traditions such as *khon*. Consequently, the survival of new interpretations of the Ramayana depends almost exclusively on the efforts of individual artists and the marketability of their work, rather than on government subsidies. This need to achieve independent economic success has, in turn, resulted in the necessary adaptation of classical, court-based Ramayana traditions into new and innovative forms that are more appealing to contemporary Thai audiences.

- **Joe Louis Puppet Theatre**

An excellent example of this phenomenon can be found in the unique performances at the Joe Louis Puppet Theatre, home to the only surviving *hun lakon lek* troupe. *Hun lakon lek*, or small puppet theatre, was first developed in the early twentieth century, during the reign of King Rama IV, by Krae Suppawanich, a government official who managed a theatre troupe based in Bangkok.<sup>5</sup> According to various sources, Suppawanich was inspired to create *hun lakon lek* after witnessing a performance of *hun luang*, the large, meter-tall marionettes that remained the exclusive property of the royal court. He proceeded to develop the *hun lakon lek* puppets, simplified versions of the *hun luang* puppets that relied on rod manipulation rather than on complex arrangements of strings. It is uncertain where Suppawanich got his inspiration from. There do not appear to be any traditions of large rod puppets in mainland Southeast Asia. The most similar puppetry form is that of *bunraku* in Japan. Unfortunately there does not appear to be any evidence as to whether or not Suppawanich ever had direct contact with *bunraku* artists. Professor Surapone Virulak of Chulalongkorn University, a recognized artist and scholar of Thai classical theatrical traditions, describes the intricacies of performing *hun lakon lek*:

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<sup>5</sup> Chandavij & Ramualratana, 1998; 84.

[*Hun lakon lek*] figures have a central rod "spine" and rods attached to each hand. These papier-mâché figures are three feet tall, however, and manipulation possibilities are expanded by using two or three puppeteers for a single figure in contrast to the single manipulator of a *hun krabok*... one puppeteer may move the head and right hand, the second manipulates the left hand and side, and the third attends to the feet... The fingers, which bend delicately back in Thai dance style, are moved by a string trigger. Careful coordination between the three manipulators brings the figures to life in the poses of classical dance.<sup>6</sup>

In fact, the classical *khon* dance movements and conventions are so painstakingly recreated in one-third scale that the resulting illusion of life is remarkable. The expertly manipulated movements of the puppets painstakingly recreate the movements of live *khon* dancers.



Fig. 1 - Numerous *hun lakon lek* performers reenact one of the most iconic tableau scenes in the *Ramakien*, in which Rama, with the assistance of Hanuman, steps upon Ravana, symbolizing his defeat in battle.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Virulak, 2001; 83.

<sup>7</sup> *Hun Lakon Lek*, 1997; 112.



Fig. 2 – The same scene as performed by live *khon* dancers. Note the similarity of the dancers' posture and poses to the *hun lakon lek* version above.<sup>8</sup>

While not officially affiliated with the royal court system, Krae's *hun lakon lek* troupe was well-respected by members of the Thai aristocracy, including Prince Damrong Rahanubhab, a renowned patron of the arts for whom the first *hun lakon lek* drama was performed.<sup>9</sup> Having attained royal approval, Suppawanich expanded his troupe and arranged performances of the Ramayana and other dramatic narratives for the general public, often in conjunction with special occasions such as weddings or funerals. It is possible that *hun lakon lek* would have eventually developed into a popular form of entertainment, but in 1942 the newly implemented National Culture Policy called for the

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.thailandtourismus.de>

<sup>9</sup> Chandavij & Ramualratana, 1998; 84.

abandonment of all performing art forms with foreign origins.<sup>10</sup> The puppets themselves were preserved, but the art of their manipulation and performance was ultimately lost.

In 1975, *hun lakon lek* was revived at the hands of Sakorn Yangkeawsot, a *likay* artist who had been introduced to the puppets by Suppawanich's daughter.<sup>11</sup> Yangkeawsot, also known as Joe Louis, set about recreating and reinventing the extinct art form, drawing heavily upon his own background in classical and popular theatrical arts. One of his major innovations involved casting the puppeteers not as mere manipulators, but as physical extensions of the puppets. According to the Joe Louis website, 'The soul and spirit of the performance comes directly from the puppeteer. The elegance and dance movements of the puppet's actions flow entirely with each motion of the puppeteer. Each puppeteer must have the knowledge and training of *khon*.'<sup>12</sup> This connection between puppet and puppeteer is beautifully evident in every *hun lakon lek* performance, with every puppeteer copying the precise dance movements of his or her puppet, stamping their feet in unison and tilting their heads to look wherever the puppet is looking. The resulting unique performance is a mesmerizing synthesis of papier mache and living performer. While the early *nang yai* leather puppets also required the performer to dance in tandem with the puppet, a practice that undoubtedly influenced Yangkeawsot, the articulation of the *hun lakon lek* puppets themselves strengthens the connection between puppet and performer.

Shortly after its revival, *hun lakon lek* began to garner attention from both the national government and the Thai royal court. In 1985 the Tourism Authority of Thailand

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<sup>10</sup> Virulak, 2001; 83.

<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately I have not been able to find any more information about his daughter, or how she got in touch with Yangkeawsot. Given the tendency for children of performing artists to become involved in their parents' work, it is possible that she retained some knowledge of *hun lakon lek* manipulation.

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.joelouis-theater.com/>

included the Joe Louis troupe in its Celebration of Thai Tourism festival, while in 1987 the Crown Princess Sirindhorn requested a special performance of *hun lakon lek* at the Thai Cultural Center. Perhaps most surprising of all, given the gradual decline of general interest in the Ramayana and its associated performing arts, *hun lakon lek* has become increasingly popular among Thai audiences, including the younger generations. I visited the Joe Louis Puppet Theatre shortly after it relocated to the Suan Lum Night Bazaar in 2002. At that time there were only twenty or thirty people in the audiences, most of them foreign tourists. However, subsequent visits in 2003 and 2004 revealed increasingly numerous Thai-dominated audiences, with only twenty or thirty percent of the total ticket sales going to foreign tourists. The introductory video played before each performance, which extravagantly described the evolution of *hun lakon lek* from its classical inception to its current incarnation, was now entirely in Thai. Unlike the earlier performances, which concentrated almost exclusively on dance sequences, the more recent performances also incorporated traditional comedic scenes involving clown characters that traded insults in the vernacular, making it more accessible to Thai audiences. Each subsequent performance saw the introduction of large, elaborate sets and spectacular special effects, resulting in an almost cinematic experience that expertly played to the sensibilities of a contemporary audience heavily influenced by modern media. To round out the whole experience, each *hun lakon lek* performance was immediately followed by a twenty-minute segment in which two puppets, usually Hanuman and Nang Benyagai, Ravana's niece, wander out into the auditorium and engage in impromptu shenanigans with audience members. One memorable performance witnessed Hanuman stealing a woman's handbag, forcing her to come down to the stage to collect it, while another saw

the mischievous monkey collecting tips from generous patrons. This interactive element proved to be immensely popular, and was capitalized upon when the Joe Louis Theatre Troupe began renting out puppeteers to perform at special occasions, as Krae's *hun lakon lek* troupe had done several decades earlier. This served to both bring in additional revenue and advertise the otherwise esoteric puppet troupe throughout a large segment of the Bangkok population.

However, despite garnering attention and praise at the national level, the Joe Louis Puppet Theatre is currently struggling for survival. According to *The Nation*, one of Bangkok's leading English language newspapers, "unlike other theatre troupes, Joe Louis has never received financial support from the government."<sup>13</sup> Moving to the Suan Lum Night Bazaar made the theatre more accessible to audiences, but the high rents drove down profits, putting the Joe Louis Puppet Theatre on the verge of bankruptcy. The Muang Thai Insurance Company recently set up a 1.5 million baht annual grant to help keep the theatre alive, but ticket sales are still not enough to make the theatre self-sufficient. A recent marketing experiment by the Joe Louis Puppet Theatre management saw a radical departure from the traditional *hun lakon lek* performances. Instead of using Ramayana-based dramatic narratives, which have formed the bulk of previous *hun lakon lek* performances, the most recent show is essentially an adaptation of *The Overture*, a critically-acclaimed Thai movie based on the true story of classical music legend Sorn Silpabanleng, released in 2003. Surin Yangkhiawsod, the son of Joe Louis and current producer of the Joe Louis Puppet Theatre, explains the rationale behind this departure from tradition:

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<sup>13</sup> The Nation, July 18, 2005.



It's a traditional story so it is in line with our goal of promoting Thai culture. At the same time, it's a new concept, so it should attract audiences enamored of the movie... I hope *The Overture* will attract more Thais to the show. They are still our major clients.<sup>14</sup>

Upon attending a performance of *The Overture* in 2005, I was struck by the stylistic differences between it and the previous Ramayana-based shows. Instead of being an energetic dance-drama performance, *The Overture* was little more than a static recreation of the movie. The puppeteers no longer danced in unison with the puppets, but were relegated to the roles of mere manipulators, losing the physical connection that gives *hun lakon lek* its irresistible charm. However, the predominantly Thai audience, which almost filled the theatre to capacity, seemed to thoroughly enjoy the movie adaptation. As of now it is uncertain whether or not Surin's gambit will succeed, but the fact that he is turning towards contemporary drama suggests that the classical dramatic narratives of the Ramayana can no longer be relied upon to attract local audiences.

- **Children's Books**

Not all contemporary attempts to revive and promote the Ramayana have been confined to the Bangkok performing arts scene. Recent years have seen the publication of numerous Ramayana-themed children's books, ranging from simplistic retellings of the narratives accompanied by cartoon illustrations to more complex educational volumes based on the Wat Phra Kaew murals. Despite this diversity of style and execution, the motivation behind these publications is unwaveringly consistent, with a majority of authors recognizing voicing a desire to introduce new generations of Thai children to the Ramayana while simultaneously recognizing the inherent inaccessibility of the classical *Ramakien* text, the formality and complicated verse forms of which make it

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<sup>14</sup> The Nation, July 18, 2005.

incomprehensible to those not familiar with its literary conventions. It is important to remember that the *Ramakien*'s extreme length and formal, stylized language make it virtually incomprehensible to all but a select, scholarly portion of the population. Such an unwieldy and complex narrative would seem not to make good material for children's books, but every passing year sees more of them on the shelves. An analysis of three specific Thai adaptations of the Ramayana for children reveals the cultural and marketing logic behind such publications.

One of the most creative and entertaining adaptations of the Ramayana is Jantanee Pongbrayoon's work entitled *Mom's Thai Stories: Ramakien*. Part of an ongoing series featuring a long-suffering mother who tells stripped-down versions of classical Thai stories to her two hyperactive children, this adaptation selects the most well-known and iconic scenes from the Thai *Ramakien*, including several scenes not present in Indian versions of the Ramayana, and narrates them in a very straightforward, simple manner. In the introduction to her book, addressed specifically to the children in her audience, Pongbrayoon briefly explains why she adapted the Ramayana and why Thai children should either read it, or have it read to them.

The *Ramakien* was a big hit in the old times, as popular as Harry Potter or Pokemon are today. The story is well-known in countries all across the Asian continent. We Thai have told this story to our children since the Ayudhaya period more than 200 years ago. This story was edited and formalized during the reign of King Rama I of the Ratanakosin period. The story has very beautiful verses and is more than 100 books in length. I think that our story is as fun as Western or Japanese stories that you kids watch on TV everyday. In addition, the story gives us various positive viewpoints to think about. If you listen to the story, I am quite certain that you will enjoy it. However, the language used in the story may be too difficult for children to understand. I therefore will select only the parts that are important, and narrate them in simple language. As a result, you will know the rough story, and you will be able to read and understand the

real thing when you grow up. Let us call this the first step into Thai literature.<sup>15</sup>

Pongbrayoon makes two major points in her introduction. The first is a fairly straightforward promotion of the Ramayana as an integral part of classical Thai culture, based upon its historical origins and close association with the Thai monarchy. Essentially, adaptations of the *Ramakien* such as this one are worth reading because the narrative is full of cultural significance and moral lessons. However, Pongbrayoon openly acknowledges the inaccessibility to children of the classical *Ramakien* text, due to its archaic language and complex verse patterns. Many Thai students feel that the classical *Ramakien* text is excessively difficult to read, and feel the same resentment towards it that Western students might feel towards the works of Homer or Shakespeare. Obviously the first hurdle of any author wanting to adapt the *Ramakien* is to simplify the text and the plot so that it doesn't overwhelm young readers. Instead of adhering to formal literary conventions, Pongbrayoon uses familiar colloquialisms and expressions that simulate the patterns of spoken language, making it an easy text to read out loud to children. She also utilizes a clever framing device that serves to make the story more engaging. Instead of simply narrating the Ramayana from beginning to end, Pongbrayoon chooses to begin and end each scene with the adventures of a mother and her two children in the real world. The book follows the mother as she struggles to come up with new stories from the Ramayana to entertain her children and keep them from getting into trouble. These short, humorous scenes celebrate the joys of storytelling, and serve to enhance the reader's own enjoyment of the Ramayana narrative.

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<sup>15</sup> Pongbrayoon, 2001; 3.

The second, and perhaps most compelling point that Pongbrayoon makes in her introduction is that the *Ramakien*, a distinctly Thai narrative, is potentially as fun and as exciting as are popular imports such as Harry Potter, a record-breaking British series of novels and movies, and Pokemon, a Japanese franchise extremely popular among children and teenagers around the world, encompassing video games, TV shows, collectible cards, and comic books. By making this comparison, Pongbrayoon is directly confronting the most obvious threat to the *Ramakien*'s survival: external cultural influences. As is the case in many modern Asian countries, Thai children are increasingly exposed to Western popular culture through music and movie imports, while Japanese popular culture dominates television and comic books. The inevitable result is that Thai children have become more interested and invested in phenomena that have no basis in Thai history or tradition. Many Thai see this as an alarming deterioration of Thai culture. In directly comparing the *Ramakien* with Harry Potter and Pokemon, Pongbrayoon is attempting to provide a Thai alternative to external cultural influences in the form of a literary challenge that will hopefully restore Thai children's interest in their own heritage.

This concept of the Ramayana as contemporary entertainment, rather than as a stuffy national tradition, is evident in the style of the illustrations accompanying the text of *Mom's Thai Stories: Ramakien*. The illustrations are a strange blend of Thai and Western aesthetic conventions. The characters themselves are very much based on Disney cartoon characters, with wide eyes, expressive faces, bright colors and smooth lines. Sita in particular looks suspiciously Caucasian, with pale skin and wavy brown hair. However, the Thai aesthetic influence is very apparent in the costumes and color schemes. Rama retains his traditional green skin color, as does Ravana. Both wear the

iconic pointed crowns of *khon* headdresses, and wield weapons identical to those found in the murals of Wat Phra Kaew. This stylistic connection with classical Thai images of the *Ramakien* reinforces the idea that the story is part of a greater Thai tradition, while the updated, eye-catching illustrations are designed to appeal to younger generations who respond better to Western-style imagery.



Fig. 3 – Rama, Laksmana and Hanuman lead their army into battle in *Mom’s Thai Stories: Ramakien*. Note that while the facial features and overall style of the illustrations is more than a little reminiscent of Disney cartoons, the general costuming details and the design of the chariot adhere to *khon* standards.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Pongbrayoon, 2001; 52.



Fig. 4 – A similar marching scene from the murals of Wat Phra Keaw. Note how the composition is very closely mirrored by the illustration above, down to the royal umbrellas on the chariot and the alignment of the moneys beside it.<sup>17</sup>

In stark contrast to Pongbrayoon's attempt to make the Ramayana more appealing to younger generations by giving it a contemporary context and augmenting it with Western-style illustrations is Kampera Wongnikom's *Portraits and Histories of the Characters of the Ramakien*. Printed in black and white, with only a few color plates in the beginning, Wongnikom's volume appears to be more educational than entertaining. Unlike Pongbrayoon, who tries to associate the *Ramakien* with contemporary pop culture

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<sup>17</sup> *The Story of Ramakien*, 2002; 73.

icons such as Harry Potter and Pokemon, Wongnikom chooses to reaffirm the historical and national importance of the narrative in the introduction.

Thai people have been familiar with the *Ramakien* for a very long time, ever since the Ayudhaya period. The story is fun, and makes you want to read more. It also teaches its readers moral lessons, and reflects the art, tradition, culture, and way of life of the Thai people. For this reason, the *Ramakien* must be treasured, preserved, and supported so that it will remain an important part of Thai literature.

Because the *Ramakien* is a long story, divided into many parts and featuring a large number of characters, I have decided to publish this book, *Portraits and Histories of the Characters of the Ramakien*, with the intention of making the story less confusing for those interested in reading the *Ramakien*. This book can also be used by students for research purposes, or writing reports about the story. The Ministry of Education has incorporated several parts of the story in textbooks for high-elementary and beginning-middle school levels.

I have selected pictures of those characters that play essential roles in the story. I have also included characters whose pictures are hard to find, unless you visit the murals at Wat Phra Kaew, where all of them can be seen. The pictures have been aesthetically redrawn following the old conventions, in both full color and line drawings. Brief histories of each character are also included. It is my hope that you will be able to reap the full benefits from this book as it is intended by us, the publisher.<sup>18</sup>

The emphasis of this introduction is clearly on education and preservation, a protective and reverential attitude reminiscent of the feelings of the Thai intellectual elite towards the *Ramakien*. The brief endorsement of the entertainment value of the narrative in the first paragraph is quickly abandoned in favor of a formulaic discussion on its historical significance and cultural importance. This emphasis on education and the preservation of classical Thai culture is readily apparent throughout the book.

Unlike *Mom's Thai Stories: Ramakien*, which employs a very dynamic and colloquial method of storytelling, Wongnikom's *Portraits and Histories of the Characters of the Ramakien* is starkly clinical in nature. The first few pages contain a few

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<sup>18</sup> Wongnikom, 2001; 4.

dry academic passages on the history of the Ramayana in Thailand, and several extensive family tree tables, such as one might expect to find in a textbook. The fact that Wongnikom mentions that sections of the *Ramakien* have been incorporated into a curriculum approved by the Ministry of Education implies that he put his volume together specifically as supplementary material. As the title suggests, the focus of *Portraits and Histories of the Characters of the Ramakien* is not to simply present an adaptation of the story, but to provide individual profiles of each specific character. The overall effect is that of an encyclopedia-like listing of the various major and minor characters that populate the *Ramakien*, a *Who's Who* of monkeys, demons, and gods. The actual story of the *Ramakien* is only related through the character's biographies and descriptions. The format is itself very rigid, with each character allotted only two pages, with the exception of Rama, Sita, Ravana, Vibishana, Indrajit, and Hanuman.<sup>19</sup> One page features a large, black-and-white line drawing of the character that adheres to the classical Thai artistic conventions seen in the murals of Wat Phra Kaew. The other page features a physical description of the character, a segment of the original poem in which the character appears, and a bullet-point summary of the *Ramakien* episodes in which the character has played an important role. The overall effect is that of an abridge *Ramakien* study guide. While this makes for unexciting reading, it is nonetheless a useful educational resource, fulfilling one of the goals stated in Wongnikom's introduction.

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<sup>19</sup> Hanuman has the most pages devoted to him, a total of six, which is indicative of his popularity in Thailand, and the great affection that Thai people have towards him.





Fig. 5 – A simple black-and-white illustration of Ongkot, crown prince of the monkey kingdom, from *Portraits and Histories of the Characters of the Ramakien*. The pose and artistic detail adhere to the aesthetic standards set by the Wat Phra Kaew murals.<sup>20</sup>

Along with education, Wongnikom also stresses the need to preserve the *Ramakien*. However, unlike Pongbrayoon, who openly addresses the threats that external cultural influences pose to the popularity and continued survival of the narrative, Wongnikom neglects to discuss why preservation is necessary. He concedes that the *Ramakien* in its original form is a daunting and inaccessible text that could prove too confusing for potential readers, but doesn't explore the other factors behind its gradual

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<sup>20</sup> Wongnikom, 2001; 64.

decline in popularity. Given the strong, nationalistic tone of the introduction, and the very traditional way in which the *Ramakien*-related material is presented, it is possible that Wongnikom is reluctant to raise some of the inherent shortcomings of the *Ramakien* tradition, such as its failure to expand beyond the insular environments of the Thai royal court and aristocracy. Wongnikom may be expressing a general reluctance to confront the disadvantages of the *Ramakien*'s cultural sanctity.

Wongnikom obviously intended *Portraits and Histories of the Characters of the Ramakien* to be a serious educational and informative volume. However, the way in which it has been executed suggests a possible alternative use as a classical Thai coloring book. The black-and-white portraits are very compelling, with fine details that just beg to be colored in, while the descriptive text very conveniently informs the reader what color the skin and costume should be. Practically speaking, this would be an excellent way to educate Thai children about the intricacies not only of the *Ramakien* story, but also of *khon* costuming and mask conventions, but it is uncertain and even doubtful if this was Wongnikom's intention.

In contrast to the professional and serious tone of *Portraits and Histories of the Characters of the Ramakien*, Supharoek Boonkong's *Ramakien: Cartoon Edition* is a colorful and action-packed adaptation perfectly suited to younger children. In his introduction, Boonkong candidly addresses some of the problems facing the survival of the *Ramakien* in contemporary Thailand.

*Ramakien* has been well-known in Thailand for a long time for its amazingly imaginative story and moral teachings. At present, in this modern world, its popularity seems to decline. It is perhaps because of its great length and innumerable characters.... Cartoon *Ramakien* is created and simplified for young generation to easily understand. For avid young

readers, it may arouse their interest to go to the original *Ramakien* written by King Rama I.<sup>21</sup>

Once again, the length and complexity of the original *Ramakien* is highlighted as the chief reason for its declining popularity. Like Pongbrayoon and Wongnikom, Boonkong expresses a hope that his simplified adaptation will both introduce children to the general story and inspire them to study the original text sometime in the future. This repeated desire for children to actively study the *Ramakien* is, in many respects, a bid to ensure the survival of the narrative. If new generations of Thai students choose to study the *Ramakien*, it would greatly help to delay, or even alleviate the threat of extinction that looms as older generations of *Ramakien* scholars being to die out. However, it seems unlikely that many children would be willing to make the leap from Boonkong's colorful picture book to the difficult formal verse of the original text.

Unlike *Mom's Thai Stories: Ramakien*, which strips the story down to the bare minimum, this version manages to include many iconic scenes that are not integral to the main plot. The text itself is fairly simplistic, using short sentences and easy vocabulary words that, while lacking the elegance of Pongbrayoon's story or the formality of Wongnikom's treatise, are very approachable and easy to understand. The illustrations are likewise unrefined but eye-catching, based in part on Japanese animation aesthetics. The monkeys in particular resemble Japanese *anime* characters, with shocks of spiky hair and bulging eyes. This was very possibly a conscious decision on the part of the author, as translated Japanese comics and animated cartoons have become increasingly popular among Thai children in recent years. While the costumes and general aesthetic conventions are basically Thai, the overall look is similar enough to Japanese cartoons to

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<sup>21</sup> Boonkong, 2005; 3.

attract a juvenile Thai readership. Another attractive feature of *Ramakien: Cartoon Editions* is that both Thai and English translations were published, which gives it the added potential of being an English language instruction aid. It seems fairly obvious that the English translation, which is somewhat unwieldy, with numerous awkward phrases and occasional grammatical errors, was intended primarily for consumption by Thai, rather than by tourists. The publishing house, Skybook, almost exclusively produces Thai books, and the English version is difficult to find in internationally-oriented bookstores. It is reasonable, then, to assume that the English translation was published primarily as a resource for Thai children who are studying English.

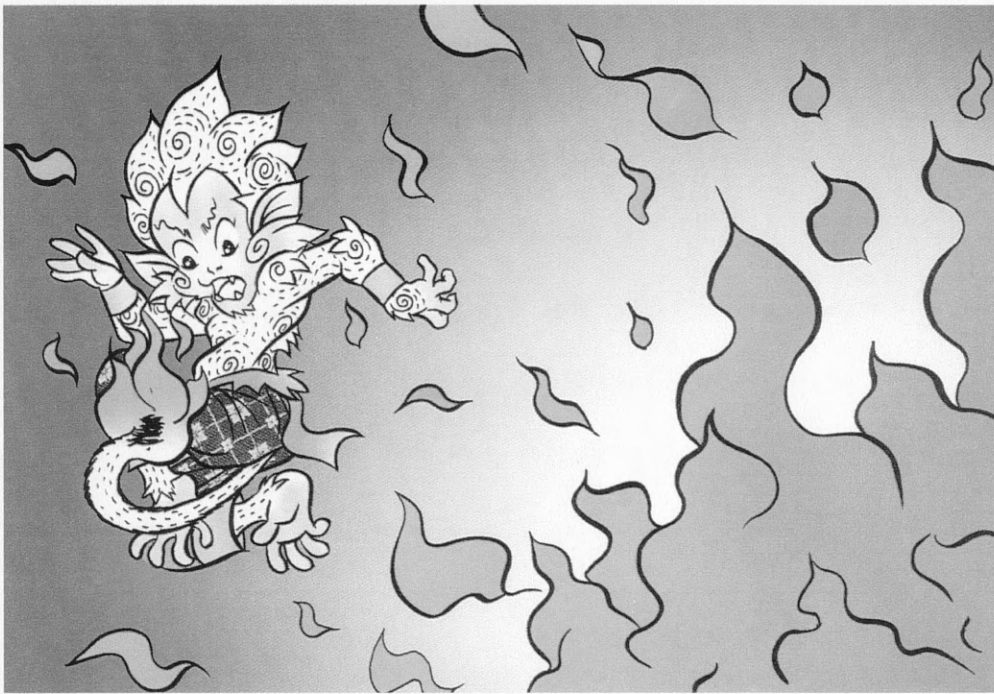


Fig. 6 – An illustration from *Ramakien: Cartoon Edition* depicting the burning of Lanka. While the composition does not parallel that of the Wat Phra Kaew murals, the appearance of Hanuman is recognizably Thai in its origin, although his spiky fur, wide eyes and animated posture are more typical of Japanese comics than Thai art.<sup>22</sup>

It is important to recognize that the subgenre of Ramayana-related publications is by no means limited to the three volumes researched for this paper. Pongbrayoon,

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<sup>22</sup> Boonkong; 2005; 75.

Wongnikom, and Boonkong's works are merely the most professional and widely-distributed publications I have encountered. In addition to these, one can find a whole host of other abridgements and adaptations of the Ramayana, ranging from a series of thin booklets, each one capturing a short scene from the narrative, to larger tomes obviously intended for older readers, painstakingly explaining each stanza of the original *Ramakien* poem. The major difference between these texts and the ones examined above lies in the illustrations. Whereas Pongbrayoon, and Boonkong's texts are accompanied with original illustrations that only partially adhere to classical Thai artistic conventions, the majority of other Ramayana-related books simply use stock images of the murals at Wat Phra Kaew. While the murals themselves are beautiful works of classical Thai art, their inclusion in volumes intended for younger generations of Thai is potentially counter-productive, as it reinforces the general perception of the *Ramakien* as a static part of Thai cultural heritage, rather than an entertaining story. By using original illustrations based on Western and Japanese aesthetics, Pongbrayoon and Boonkong are reinventing the *Ramakien* as a truly contemporary story, accompanied by contemporary artwork that Thai children find visually appealing. This flexibility and willingness to depart from traditional artistic conventions undoubtedly makes these particular adaptations much more accessible to younger generations of Thai.

I have not been able to obtain sales records of these books, but my own observations reveal that Pongbrayoon's book has maintained a fairly constant presence in Thai bookstores over the past three years. Boonkong's book, published recently in 2005, was also remarkably prevalent. Wongnikom's rather more academic publication, however, appears to have vanished from circulation. This is perhaps indicative of the

evolving tastes of Thai children, and should inform the decisions of authors hoping to publish their own children's versions of the *Ramakien* in the future. Instead of clinging to traditional Thai sensibilities, authors should recognize and accommodate the increasingly globalized tastes of the younger generations. While using Western or Japanese imagery to illustrate such a fundamentally Thai narrative as the *Ramakien* might be perceived as blasphemy by some literary purists, such a compromise is necessary for the continued survival of the *Ramakien* tradition.

- **Comic Books**

While there is apparently a suitable market for Thai children's books, it is safe to say that the majority of young Thai prefer other sources of entertainment. Recent years have seen the rising popularity of *manga*, explosively illustrated Japanese comic books that encompass all manner of subjects and genres, from chick lit and horror to science fiction and romance. Translated into Thai and sold in practically every department store, with new issues appearing approximately once every two months, these ubiquitous volumes are rapidly becoming the reading material of choice for preteen and teenage Thai, as well as for many adults. In response to this phenomenon, several Thai companies started publishing their own comic books. Like *manga*, these Thai comics explore various genres, ranging from comedy to high adventure. As arguably one of the greatest fantasy stories in the world, the Ramayana's inclusion in this new publishing venture was inevitable. The publishing house Fan Studio, however, apparently thought it necessary to differentiate between their new series of Ramayana comic books and the epic that inspired them. Instead of referring to itself as the *Ramakien*, a name which is closely associated with the classical poetic composition of King Rama I, the comic book series

distinguishes itself by adopting the name “Ramawatan” [the Story of Rama]. This undoubtedly conscious decision distances the cartoon version from the classical text, something which the publishers most likely hope will attract readers who would otherwise have been discouraged by the potentially intimidating *Ramakien* title. However, the introduction to the inaugural issue quickly raises the subject of the *Ramakien*. Author Witid Usahajit writes:

Greetings! We Thai know the *Ramakien* quite well. In textbooks for students of various levels, you will find different parts of the story included for them to read. However, there are not many people who get the chance to read the story from beginning to end. For this reason, Fan Studio will present the *Ramakien* in the form of a cartoon, drawing upon the original text and many textbooks related to the narrative. The story presented here is the complete story, with each episode and character covered in great detail in order to make it easier to read and understand. Comical parts, an essential ingredient of any cartoon, have also been added in order to increase the entertainment value. It is our hope that this version of the Ramayana will touch the hearts of readers of all ages, and will be a series that each family will come to treasure.<sup>23</sup>

Usahajit does not appear to follow the general pattern of the children’s books’ introductions presented above. Unlike his fellow authors, he does not immediately proclaim the importance of the *Ramakien* as a part of Thailand’s cultural heritage, nor does he imply that the survival of the narrative depends on his potential readers going on to study the original text. There is no account of the history of the *Ramakien*, nor any direct reference to its complexity and inaccessibility. Instead, Usahajit presents a rather prosaic preamble that broadly outlines the format of the series and the motivation behind it, that is, his desire to present a complete adaptation of the Ramayana in an entertaining manner. This very straightforward and unpretentious introduction deliberately does not emphasize the historical and cultural implications of the Ramayana, to prevent people

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<sup>23</sup> Usahajit; YEAR, 2.

associating the series with education rather than entertainment, which would undoubtedly hurt their sales. Usahajit does take the opportunity to explore other facets of the Ramayana in his introductions to subsequent issues, including some of the moral implications of the narrative. However, the overwhelming emphasis remains on the comic series' entertainment value, with Usahajit consistently ending by reiterating how much fun the story is.

The Ramawatan comic book series maintains a distinctive Thai flavor throughout each issue, while simultaneously catering to the contemporary tastes of its intended readers. The storyline itself is very clearly based on the *Ramakien*, and includes many iconic episodes that do not appear in any other version of the Ramayana outside of mainland Southeast Asia, such as the killing of Nontuk, a previous incarnation of Ravana, at the hands of Vishnu or Hanuman's seduction of the mermaid princess and his eventual confrontation with his half-fish, half-monkey son. Everything is presented with a liberal pinch of salt, with characters occasionally referencing the absurdity of the situations they find themselves in. The humor is broad and fairly unrefined, comprised of a blend of slapstick physical comedy, witty exchanges of insults, and bad puns that have been judiciously applied to Ramayana narrative in an attempt to enliven the otherwise serious story. While taking such liberties with a respected text such as the *Ramakien* would in all probability fail dismally in any other medium, it perfectly fits the relaxed and tongue-in-cheek spirit of the comic book series. The artwork reflects this spirit. Unlike the illustrations in *Mom's Thai Stories: Ramakien* and *Ramakien: Cartoon Edition*, which are based loosely on Western and Japanese animation conventions, the art of the Ramawatan comics is comparatively neutral, eschewing the hyper-realistic illustrations of Western



graphic novels and the stylized and exaggerated *manga* graphics in favor of a cartoonish style whose clean lines and bright colors, while artistically unremarkable, are visually appealing and effective in illustrating the action of the narrative. There is an unmistakable Thai influence to the artwork, with the majority of characters adhering loosely to the iconic standards set by the *khon* dance-drama. The crowns and costumes are recognizable as simplified versions of their elaborate traditional counterparts, and the composition of many scenes, such as Hanuman using his tail as a bridge for Rama's army to cross on the way to Lanka, are direct parallels of the more visually spectacular Wat Phra Kaew murals. However, that is not to say that the comics slavishly adhere to traditional conventions. Many of the illustrations are marvelously anachronistic. For example, Kumbakarna and Indrajit ride animals that look suspiciously like mutant dinosaurs into battle, while early on in the series a demon assumes an Elvis disguise and slips into a ludicrous dance routine. The end result is a publication that is attractive both to young children, who might be encountering the Ramayana narrative for the first time, and people already familiar with the *Ramakien*, who want to experience a new, contemporary adaptation.



Fig. 7 – A panel from the Ramawatan comic strip in which Hanuman enlarges himself and uses his tail to create a bridge for Rama’s army.<sup>24</sup>

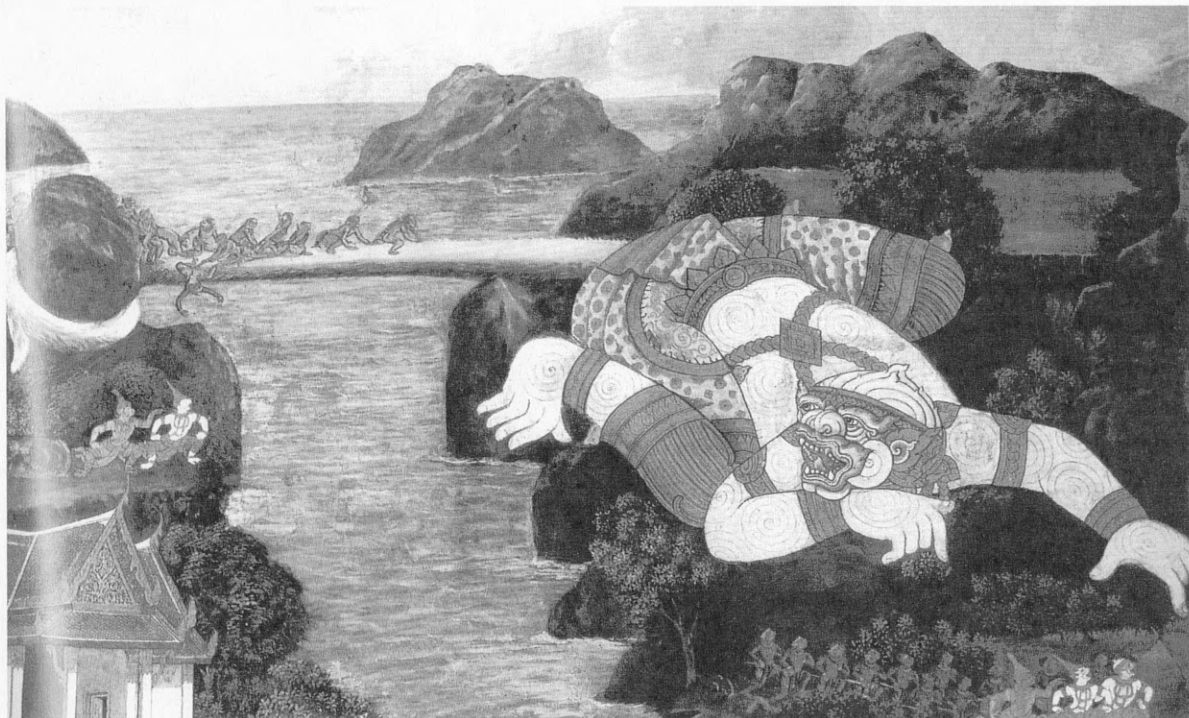


Fig. 8 – The same scene as depicted in the Wat Phra Kaew murals.

<sup>24</sup> Ramawatan, Issue #12; 28.



Fig. 8 – In this scene, a previous incarnation of Ravana called Nontuk eschews the traditional form of Thai dance in favor of some decidedly Western steps that recall Asian-favorite Elvis.



Fig. 9 – The traditional dance of Nontuk, here shown in the Wat Phra Kaew murals.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>25</sup> *The Story of Ramakien*, 2002; 11.

Given the increasing popularity of external cultural influences among Thai youth, one wonders why Fan Studio did not choose to produce a *manga*-like comic series that would automatically appeal to that particular segment of the population. However, several factors support the wisdom of publishing a title like the Ramawatan series. First of all, it is similar enough in format to popular non-Thai comic books to ensure at least moderate consumer interest. Secondly, its uniquely Thai flavor and source material makes it an attractive alternative for those Thai who are either not interested in reading Japanese imports, or want to return to their cultural origins. Finally, by retelling the Ramayana in a straightforward yet surprisingly comprehensive manner that is both engaging for children and entertaining for adults, it spreads, revives and preserves general knowledge of the narrative, despite a waning interest in the classical forms of the *Ramakien*. Without access to Fan Studio's sales records it is impossible to determine whether or not the Ramawatan comic series has been financially successful. The fact that it continues to be published after eighteen issues, and is widely distributed by prominent Thai bookstore chains and ubiquitous 7-11 outlets across the country suggests that there is a sustainable market for it. However, it seems highly unlikely that sales of the Ramawatan comic series could possibly rival those of the Japanese *manga* translations, which continue to dominate both the market and the interest of Thai youth.

## CONCLUSION

The motivations behind these recent attempts to adapt and interpret the Ramayana narrative for a contemporary audience are fairly obvious. The Thai people are extremely nationalistic, a trait that can be traced in part to the fact that they alone of the Southeast

Asian nations were never colonized by any European power. This nationalism invariably manifests itself in an overweening pride in indigenous Thai traditions, including food, art, and music. As a literary masterpiece and a staple of many classical performance and art traditions, the *Ramakien* is an extremely effective icon of national pride. Contemporary adaptations of the narrative are therefore a means by which Thai authors and artists are able to express and disseminate that pride. The rise of a middle class as a result of Thailand increased economic growth and development has likewise helped to revive general interest in the Ramayana. Many upwardly mobile Thai have started to adopt the traditions and practices of the aristocracy in an attempt to raise their social status. One of the more striking examples is that of the classical *khon* and *lakhon* dance styles. Once the exclusive property of the courts and the aristocracy, they are now taught to numerous middle-class children, often as a result of their parents wanting them to receive a traditional, elite cultural education. The *Ramakien*, as an important part of court traditions, has undoubtedly benefited from this phenomenon, as more and more schools include the original text in their curriculum. Despite this, the future of the Ramayana in Thailand remains uncertain, due in large part to the influx of external cultural influences and the lack of any strong folk tradition of the narrative.

The survival of the Ramayana in Thailand depends in large part on the Thai monarchy, which continues to play an important role in the preservation and propagation of the Ramayana, simply through its long-standing association with so many of the institutions responsible for disseminating the narrative, such as the National Theatre or Wat Phra Kaew. The present king, Bhumibol Adulyadej or Rama IX, is an extremely popular public figure, inspiring love, loyalty, obedience, admiration and devotion in the

vast majority of his subjects. For that reason, many of the old traditions of the Thai royal court continued to be revered by the public, despite their practical obsolescence following the demise of the absolute monarchy. However, this reverence is focused very clearly on the person of the king, rather than on the concept of kingship itself. When the present king dies, he will almost certainly be succeeded by his only son, Maha Vajiralongkorn. Unlike his father, the crown prince has not been able to win any great measure of respect or love from the general public, due in part to his overall unpleasant attitude and reputation for being something of a troublemaker. Most Thai, although they will never admit it publicly, have no emotional connection with the crown prince, and many of them would prefer that his sister, Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, who is renowned for her charitable acts and gentle nature, be crowned instead. If and when he ascends to the throne of Thailand, there is a good chance that it will precipitate the rapid decline of the monarchy. Should the monarchy decline, it is possible, and even probable that the importance of the royal court traditions will likewise fade into obscurity, including the *Ramakien* and its associated art forms. If that should happen, the survival of the Thai Ramayana might very well depend on the efforts of those authors and artists who are attempting to preserve interest in the Ramayana through the production of contemporary adaptations. Whether or not they will be successful is something that only time can reveal.

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#### ***Untranslated Thai Language References***

- *Hun Lakhon Lek*
- *The Story of Ramakien*



